



The Endurance to Observe, by Paul Fleischman

There is little I have heard from others -- and it is my daily business to listen -- that I have not seen in myself as I sit. But I also know the necessity of work, training and restraint. Dependence, loneliness, sensuality, exhaustion, hunger, petulance, perversion, miserliness, yearning and inflation are my old friends. I can greet them openly and warmly in people close to me, because I know them from the inside and therefore cannot condemn them without condemning myself. I also have been learning to harness and ride their energy.

Sitting pushes me to the limit of my self-directed effort; it mobilizes my willed, committed direction, yet it also shatters my self-protective, self-defining maneuvers and my simple self-definition. It both builds and dismantles "me." Every memory, every hope, every yearning, every fear floods in. I no longer can pretend to be one selected set of my memories or traits.

If observed, but not reacted upon, all these psychic contents become acceptable, obviously part of myself (for there they are, in my own mind, right in front of me); yet also impersonal, causally-linked, objective phenomena-in-the-world that move ceaselessly, relentlessly, across the screen of my existence, without my effort, without my control, without me. I can see more, tolerate more, in my inner life, at the same time that I am less driven by these forces. Like storms and doves, they are the persona of nature, crossing one's inner sky. Psychic complexity swirls up from the dust of cosmetic self-definition. At the same time, the determination and endurance I have to muster to just observe, grow like muscles with exercise. Naturally the repetition of this mixture of tolerance and firmness extrapolates beyond its source in sitting, out to relationships.

I sit because knowing that I will die enriches and exorciates my life, so I have to go out of my way to seek the discipline and stability that is necessary for me to really face it. Sitting rivets me on the psychological fact that death is life's door. No power can save me. Because I am aware of death, and afraid, I lean my shoulder into living; not reactively, but with conscious choice and decision of what will constitute each fleeting moment of my life. To embrace life I must shake hands with death. For this, I need practice. Each act of sitting is a dying to outward activity, a relinquishment of distraction, a cessation of anticipatory gratification. It is life now, as it is.

