

About 25 years ago I took my first in-depth personal growth course called "The Wall". "The Wall" referred to the fears in our life that prevent us from moving forward, taking that next step, that next risk.

At the beginning of the class the instructor established the ground rules that everyone was to follow for the next 5 days. I didn't think much of it until she said that we were not to talk to one another during class breaks.

The facilitator went on to say that she wanted us to talk as little as possible to anyone else including family members and work associates during that week. And moreover, not watch TV, listen to the radio, or read.

When I heard that expectation I immediately went into a panic. I thrive on talking with and getting to know others. I process my thoughts out loud. Not being able to talk to others was like ripping a vital part of my life away. So, I told the instructor that I didn't think I could follow that rule. That it was too much to require. And then I asked, "Why in the world don't you want us to talk to one another?"

She looked at me with compassion in her eyes and said, " Because I want you to get to know you. I want you to listen to yourself, to plumb the depths of your thoughts, your feelings, your inner chatter. I want you to think about your life - the good and the not so good. I want you to discover your inner world and your wisdom."

I took a deep breath, thought about what she said, and then replied, "But what if I find out I don't like me? What if I don't have any wisdom?" She replied, "No time like the present to find out!"

Needless to say, in the first half hour of the class she managed to touch upon one of my fears that I never even knew I had until then. What happens if I don't like me? Can you imagine the horror of finding that out? I had the image of walking out to a steep cliff and looking out into a deep abyss of darkness. And I don't like heights.

She then asked me if I would at least try being silent that evening to see how I felt. And I told her I would, but that I still didn't like the idea.

Amazingly what I found out is that I had a big inner landscape to explore. I couldn't wait for our class breaks so that I could go off in a corner and write in my journal. I grew to love sitting in stillness – feeling the air touching my skin, listening to my inner dialogue, my fears and heartache, my dreams and joys.

Through that process I began to practice opening my heart in tenderness for myself and then others. When I get still, a sense of deep knowing comes upon me whose foundation is love. This is the voice of wisdom – the divine within.

But I think practicing self-reflection is a lost art. I certainly didn't learn it in my family of origin. It may be that we fear that we won't like what we discover about ourselves. It may be that we are too distracted with the rush of the world. It could be that we might find uncomfortable emotions that we are afraid to feel.

I can understand Eli in this story who has grown blind to God's vision. Who, for whatever reasons, has stopped listening to that divine voice within. Who lives in a world where wickedness is wrapped around his ears, and indifference is caked upon his eyes.

Eli, a rabbi, a very holy man, and keeper of the ark of God was living in a time of corruption. He was a father of rebellious sons and priest of a rebellious people. They, too, became distracted from the holy practices in their lives. Eli, tried to keep the faith and longed to hear a word from God, a word of direction, a word of healing, any word. But his heart was closed, his eyes were so weak that he could barely see in front of him, let alone see God's visions.

And by his side was his young apprentice, Samuel, who was about 12 years old and had lived with Eli a good nine years. Eli was like a father to Samuel, and Samuel admired him, and took care of him with love and affection.

And the story goes that it was night, a time for rest. Samuel was lying right next to the ark of God, which was a box-shaped throne of the invisible king, Yahweh, God. And where the ark was, there the Lord was believed to be, and it is from this throne that a voice called out, "Samuel!" And Samuel roused from his sleep as if it were routine and dutifully ran to Eli's side and said, "Here I am, you called me."

Eli wakes up and says, "I didn't call you, go back and lie down." It must have been a dream.

But again, the Lord calls, "Samuel" and just like breathing, without even thinking about it, Samuel again gets up and eagerly runs to Eli and says, "Here I am, you called me." And Eli says, "My son, I did not call go back and lie down."

And then it happened again.

Finally, Eli begins to catch on, it had been so long since he had heard the word of the God that he had almost forgotten the possibility of divine love calling and speaking through a young boy who did not know the God.

So, the next time that little Samuel comes running up to Eli, Eli instructs the boy, "Go and lie down and if God calls you say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

So, Samuel goes back to his mat beside the ark of God and the voice of love stands right beside him saying, "Samuel, Samuel!"

And with eagerness and trembling heart Samuel responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening." "Speak, for your servant is listening."

And then the bomb is dropped. God is not happy with Eli, Samuel's mentor. And since Eli no longer has the capacity to listen, it is up to Samuel to convey the bad news.

Ouch...

A 12-year-old boy is asked to speak truth to power. A 12-year-old boy is asked to trust in the voice that he hears – to trust that it is of love even though the message is bad news.

We are told that Samuel could not go back to sleep. He laid there probably in fear of what to do – What would happen to him if he told the truth?

Was it the truth? And to top it off Samuel loved Eli.

What a moral mess.

It is the kind of mess we find ourselves in today as well. What is the truth? Who claims it? And can we trust it?

I'd like to think that the truth is like hot chocolate – it is sweet and feels good going down. I'd like to think that I am the one who holds it. I'd like to think that it is the kind of truth that you can believe.

But in our world we have different kinds of truth claims and lots of them are polar opposite of each other. Those truth claims are based on our history, our race, our gender, our age, personalities, our trauma's, our sexual orientations, our culture. My truth may be different from your truth.

Some would say there is no such thing as truth anymore. And all belief is simply a construct of assumptions and preferences.

Like Samuel it is easy to be confused. Voices shout, whisper, grumble at us from all sides. At the shouting we tremble, at the whispering we shiver, at the grumbling we shrink. Which do we follow, which do we ignore?

But somehow, Samuel tapped into something more than our own personal truths. He listened deeply to the capital T truth. The kind of truth that is rooted in love and justice rather than fear. The kind of truth that is much bigger than our political affiliations and culture.

It is the kind of truth that comes when we quiet the mind and open our hearts. The kind that feels like a download from beyond.

It comes when we let go of our need to be right or control the outcome.

There is a reason why a 12-year-old boy could listen when an elderly man who had grown jaded by it all could not.

Like Eli, it is easy to be skeptical. In our lifetimes maybe we have seen too much, maybe our hearts have been broken way too many times. Maybe we have given up on hope.

We stumble upon barriers of our own assumptions and limiting beliefs about ourselves and others. We point our fingers outward in blame instead of tending to what holds us back from within. Our sight dims to the point we can't see a better future for ourselves and our community.

The twist in this story is that Eli still remembered what it was like to be able to hear the voice of wisdom and to see the possibilities of new life.

Somehow the lamp of God had not yet gone out. God's light and hope seeped through the darkness and gave Eli enough sight to help Samuel realize who was calling and to help him respond to that call.

Eli remembers that the truth sets us free – even when it tastes bitter.

In giving permission to Samuel to speak the truth of his divine encounter, he helps to shape and form a young boy into a man of honor – one that could be trusted and respected.

The Lamp of God has not yet gone out for us either. And at times God seeps through our blindness and unclogs our ears. I see this happening in small ways when we open our hearts and follow our curiosity.

Elaine Heath – a dear friend and theologian offers a particular way to keep our eyes on that lamp of God.

She calls it having a contemplative stance in the world.

Samuel embodies this stance in this story. It is a way of being that we are embodying with our community dinners.

Show up – to God, ourselves, our neighbors, and our world.

Pay attention – to what is there, what is going on inside ourselves and outside ourselves.

Cooperate – with God as God invites, instructs, corrects, or encourages in the situation at hand.

Release – the outcome of cooperation with God. Consciously letting go of the outcome, recognizing that God is God and we are not.

We have showed up in this community with the love of God in our hearts.

We have paid attention to the needs of our community and the gifts and passions that we have.

We are cooperating with God. We are listening to love beyond our capacities and that love is captivating the entire community. We now have 18 community partners involved.

The hardest part of this stance is releasing the outcome. Samuel did this as he told the hard truth to Eli, not knowing what his fate would be.

We are releasing the outcome with a sense of curiosity about what might happen next.

- Who knows where these dinners will lead us?
- Who knows what goodness may follow?

We only need to listen and trust that God is with us – standing beside us and offering support and wisdom to us.

Amen