

At a dinner party of friends in their thirties, the talk turned to the problem of anxiety: how it is consuming everyone; how the very technologies we have developed to save time and make life easier have only increased the speed at which we live; how we all need to “give ourselves a break” before we implode.

Everyone had some means of relief—tennis, yoga, a massage every Thursday—but these very activities as breaks from regular life reveal the temporary nature of the relief. Some of the friends admitted that their recreational activities mimicked the same simmering, near-obsessive panic of the rest of their lives. (That is why I count fun shots rather than keep score when I play golf.)

It may be, as some think, that our anxiety arises from an unconscious fear of death. We know we cannot outrun death but that doesn’t stop us from racing, as our minds do, from one thing to the next.

The welter of impressions our minds suffer is like a storm we cannot still. How much cruelty is occasioned simply because of the noise that is within us. Thus a whole country can be organized toward some collective insanity because there is no space in individuals to think.

Christian Wiman has another idea. It is as if each of us is hearing some strange, complicated music in the background of our lives, music that, so long as it remains in the background, is not simply distracting but manifestly unpleasant, *because it demands the attention we are giving to other things*. It is not hard to hear this music, but it is very difficult to learn to hear it as music.

The story of Mary and Martha has long been read as a conflict between the spiritual and the worldly, between contemplative life and active life, between being and doing. Read this way, what does Jesus’ declaration that Mary has chosen the better part mean?

I don’t hear Jesus saying contemplation is more important than action. This story follows the parable of the Good Samaritan who is good, not because he assures the wounded man of his thoughts and prayers, but because he tends to his wounds. The problem is not with doing, but that in her doing Martha is *anxious and distracted by many things*.

Jesus is in Martha’s house. It was very unusual for a woman to own a home in first century Palestine. The mortgage, maintenance, taxes, lawn care—all her responsibility. Did Martha work outside the home? Run a business from her home? Martha houses her sister and her brother. Is she supporting them as well?

Martha has worked all day. Jesus shows up (unexpectedly?) for dinner, and her work continues into the evening while Mary sits at Jesus' feet. Who wouldn't feel resentment?

Why does Luke tell us Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet? Because this is the position of a disciple. Women didn't own homes and women were not allowed to be disciples. These two sisters are exceptional in their time and place.

So what is the better part Mary has chosen? While Martha is anxious and distracted by many things, Mary is *listening*. It is not better to be contemplative than active; it is better to listen than to be so anxious and distracted you can only hear the background music of your life as something manifestly unpleasant.

We do not live in first century Palestine, but in a time when, as Fanny Howe observes, "the self has replaced the soul." The word "soul" has become embarrassing for many contemporary people unless it is completely stripped of its religious meaning. We are no longer souls before God; we are selves adrift in a cold and indifferent universe.

The soul knows God as ultimate concern; the self knows only itself as ultimate concern. Anxiety arises because the self cannot bear this weight: it buckles and wavers under the strain, and eventually, inevitably, it breaks. Such a self craves distractions to avoid facing its inadequacy.

To hear the music of the spheres as music, to know ourselves as souls, requires a deep and patient listening—listening to our life, listening to one another, listening to God. Such listening is like returning to the ground of one's being. It is the better part.