

Navel Gazing and Bird Song: Musings on Meditation

By Arah Gould, MA LPC

We meditators are sometimes accused of being navel-gazers, which seems to suggest useless time spent peering down a hall of mirrors or into a lonely wind tunnel or getting lost in repeating loops of narcissistic drivel. The way it is described, gazing at one's navel is rather futile, like staring at a "dead end" sign and expecting a path to open up. Sure, stuck and uncomfortable places exist in meditation, but they don't last forever and can often teach us something about ourselves, if we can bring some curiosity and patience to the process. Fruitful explorations that help us cultivate more of the life-affirming qualities we seek are indeed possible and a real gift of meditation. Experiences may occur that expand our perception of self, give us a fresh perspective, and fill us with wonder.

If I were to actually engage in some navel-gazing in meditation, what might I really see and what might I learn about myself? Perhaps if I took a look at my navel, really took a look at it, I'd see a monument to my origins. Perhaps I'd recognize my belly button as a physical reminder of my connection to my mother, and her connection to her mother, and so on: a navel monument, marking the place where I was once joined to my mother, my lifeline. It very well could then lead me to consider my beginnings as an utterly dependent being, a self whose whole world was bound to another's by a cord, linking me to my life source and all the generations that came before.

How funny that in turning toward myself and gazing into my navel, rather than collapsing into a nihilistic black hole of self-absorption, it's possible I might instead become more aware of my inextricable link to others. I might be hit with the wonder of how I am but one small moment in the larger torrent of life. Gazing inward, it might be that I discover the most expansive world of all. And if that were the case, then my navel would be like a telescope, offering a glimpse of the cosmos and my humble, yet precious place in it. Meditation can take us from the micro to the macro, from a small, petty self fixated on a narrow view to a more fluid self embedded in a complex and ever-changing landscape, sustained by forces seen and unseen.

Just this morning in meditation, I opened myself, as is my custom, to the familiar parade of emotions, thoughts, images, body sensations, and memories that made up this me of the moment. I've learned to listen and attend to my inner world. This time, amidst a thought--perhaps it was the most mundane of thoughts--my attention abruptly shifted to the sudden and insistent chirping of birds out the window, and with it the unexpected sensation of something vital and brimming with life on this most bleak of January mornings. I can't recall ever before having noticed the abundant cheerfulness of bird

song quite in this way. I too for a moment shared in this riotous energy of bird chatter and it filled me with a momentary buoyancy. Just after, the bell rang, marking the end of the meditation. Call it navel-gazing if you will, but I emerged from this meditation with senses sharpened, my spirits lifted, a tender kinship with the world, and a readiness to meet my day.