

6. Threshold of the soul

If we are to hear the silent music beneath the noisy traffic of our thinking, we need to learn how to leave the mind and focus on the senses. The distractions of modern life prevent us picking up the rhythm of grace.

At a Metro station in Washington DC a man started to play the violin. It was a cold January morning. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that rush hour it was calculated that thousands of people went through the station.

After three minutes, a middle-aged man stopped for a few seconds and then hurried on. A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip – tossed in the box by a woman without slowing her stride. A few minutes later someone leaned against the wall to listen, but after looking at his watch began to walk quickly on his way.

The one who paid most attention was a three-year-old boy. His mother hurried him along but the child stopped in front of the violinist. Reluctantly the boy was dragged away, looking back all the time.

During the 45 minutes that the musician played, only six people stopped and stayed for a while. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one applauded him or showed any sign of recognition.

The violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the world's finest musicians. He had played some of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth \$3.5 million.

The event was organised by The Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and the priorities of people. The inherent questions were: in a commonplace environment at an inappropriate hour, do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognise talent in an unexpected context?

One of the possible conclusions to be drawn from this bit of research might be put in another question: if we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world playing the best music ever written, how many other things are we missing in the course of our normal day? Do we forget that our senses are “the threshold of our soul”? “Listen, my child,” St Benedict wrote at the beginning of his Rule, “with the ear of your heart.”

Another railway station; another musician; another busy mother and small son. This time in Leeds where a wintry wind was wailing down the empty platform. Linda suddenly realised that Iain had let go of her arm. In panic she retraced her steps. And there he was, hunkered down in rapt attention, listening to a scruffy, broken-down old man playing a lonely mouth organ in the cold rain.

Iain was offering the last 10p of his pocket money to his new hero, oblivious to the man's appearance. “How lucky he is,” he said to his Mum, his eyes shining, “to be able to play such beautiful music.” Unlike people in Washington, Iain was listening with the ear of his heart.

Awareness is always about presence. But how often are we present to ourselves and to our environment in a distracted world where electronic multi-tasking rules, even while we're having a meal with a friend? From both within and without, that inner sacred place is continually invaded. Without this grace of space there will be no stillness for catching the cadences of the unfinished symphony beneath the surface of what happens.