Universal Resonance

Several months ago, astrophysicists detected conclusive evidence of gravitational waves from the dawn of time. Hailed as the story of the century, because, as one physicist put it, ‘this was like looking for a needle in a haystack and instead finding a crowbar’ (O’Neill 2014), the evidence was embedded in ancient cosmic microwave background radiation, a relic glow or ‘echo’ imprinted in the heavens, reaching back some 13.8 billion years to when the universe spontaneously Big-Banged itself into existence:

‘Fractions of a second later, space ripped apart, expanding exponentially in an episode known as (cosmic) inflation … (when) small, quantum fluctuations were amplified to enormous sizes by the inflationary expansion of the universe. This process created density waves that make small differences in temperature across the sky where the universe was denser, eventually condensing into galaxies and clusters of galaxies’ (Eller 2014).

Finally, sophisticated technology and the clear skies of the South Pole had combined to provide the scientific community with the analytical data it required to prove a theory which had already been around for fifty years – that inflation produces gravitational waves which ripple the fabric of space-time as shown in this image from NASA, accessed from public domain.

When I read the news, I was as excited as the astrophysicists. It was as if, once more, science had harnessed a way of investigating cosmic phenomena, which, while affording different labels, had arrived at a similar understanding to millennia-old spiritual knowing – knowing which, in this case, had concentrated its investigations on the realm of sound, the detection of cosmic energy as vibration, which operates at a frequency with the potential to resonate with our own sensory faculties.

Om as Sacred Sound

The syllable Om has a long and sacred heritage. Referenced first in the Upanishads, ‘it is composed of the sounds A, U, M and a humming nasalisation … to represent the three oldest Vedas and the triad of gods: Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma. … (It is) the basic sound on which the universe depends’ (Carmody 1996, p.43). Om represents ‘the fire of creativity from which the universe issues’ (Carmody 1996, p.44), the primordial fire of our physicists’ Big Bang, the sound of the rippling fabric of space-time, the connective thread between the All of creation and the One eternal Ground: ‘The deep, resonant Om is all sound and silence throughout time, the roar of eternity and also the great stillness of pure being; when intoned with the prescribed vibrations, it invokes the All that is otherwise inexpressible’ (Matthiessen 1998, p.83).

Traditionally, in Eastern faith traditions, Om is repeated steadily, sonorously, so that the reverberations within one’s own body facilitate a harmonic resonance between self and universe, between ‘sound and meaning, breath and being. … (Such) words still possess sacred, numinous power because … they are the stuff of the universe, the atoms of being’ (Carmody 1996, p.92). A fork or gong tuned to 136.10Hz resonates with this primal frequency of existence, the eternal base note underlying the musica universalis, or Harmony of the Spheres, first proposed by Pythagoras (in our Western tradition) which holds that each member of the solar system produces its own unique hum, or orbital resonance, as it spins through time and space (Hall 1928, p.81). Reported as saying ‘the highest goal of music is to connect one’s soul to their divine nature’, Pythagoras expounded wisdom of which other spiritual masters were equally aware. The writers of the Vedic scriptures, for example, had arrived at the tone through meditation itself, receiving it intuitively as they opened to the cosmos through the heart (Anahata) chakra, the centre of love, and to which the Vedic concept of Anahata Nad – unstruck or celestial sound – refers.
Meanwhile, in the Abrahamic traditions, Moses was alerted to God’s presence by the selfsame sound on Mt Sinai, Christ when absorbed during his forty days in the wilderness, and Mohammed while in the cave of Gare-Hira. Sufis call the sound *Saute Surmad*, the sound of the abstract, the vibrations of which ‘are too fine to be either audible or visible to the material ears or eyes’ (Inayat Khan 1972, p.86). Christian mystics such as Thomas Aquinas held that it announced ‘divine silence. For it is clear that a conception of the heart or of the intellect that is without voice is with silence’ (Fox & Sheldrake 1996, p.94). For John Climacus, ‘hesychia is pregnant silence, not mere muteness. It is a stillness within which lies the divine Word itself’ (Chryssavgis 2004, p.212), the one which brought the All into being: ‘And God said: Let there be …’ (Exodus 1:3). The resulting ‘sound’ of Creation is therefore no more or less than the vocalisation of primal energy, the life force to be.

Mystics across faiths speak of this sound as ‘the source of all revelation … revealed from within’ (Inayat Khan, ibid.), a divine silence which is not silent at all. In point of fact, the srti (sacred Vedic) note can actually be ‘heard’ without the intervention of tuning fork, gong or temple chanting; this has been my personal experience since first becoming aware of a resonant hum with no earthly source more than fifteen years past. Yet several years ago I attempted to write myself toward some sort of understanding of how such sound could be perceived. In Kisha’s first intermezzo, for example, I explore how the chorus of dead invite her story’s readers to ‘listen closely, with a different ear, not the ear of the senses but the ear of the heart’ (p.319). Composing the text, I became cognisant of an inner ear, or consciousness, which is available to each of us sensorily through the locus of ‘an awakened and purified heart’ (Helminksi 2000, p.29). It seems my intuition was commensurate to attunement via the heart chakra attested by Vedic tradition. The idea that the heart operates as a trans-sensory organ of perception and knowledge, acting as both border and mediator between sensual and spiritual knowing, is common across faiths (Underhill 1995, p.71).

The Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan explains how the sound relates to corporeal existence: ‘All space is filled with Saute Surmad … Space is within the body as well as around it; in other words the body is in the space and the space is in the body. This being the case, the sound of the abstract is always going on within, around and about man. Man does not hear it as a rule, because his consciousness is entirely centred in his material existence. Man becomes so absorbed in his experiences in the external world through the medium of the physical body that space, with all its wonders of light and sound, appears to him blank. … The limited volume of earthly sounds is so concrete, that it dims the effect of the sound of the abstract to the sense of hearing although in comparison to it the sounds of the earth are like that of a whistle to a drum’ (Inayat Khan 1972, p.86-88).

Inayat Khan’s notion of the sound inhabiting all space is what particularly helped to flesh out my understanding. In longer-than-experiences of crossing to the Otherworld, it has always constellated in my Active Imagination (AI) as a November-fog landscape. When everything is enveloped in mist, there is much less the felt-sense of where I end and the rest of the world begins, an intuition which arises as a natural matter-of-course, leading logically to the conclusion that the world and everything in it are simply membranes of varying porosity existing in shared space. Thus do I feel myself (and each other presence) as interpenetrable, permeable. And in such a state of consciousness, I feel the hum, that ‘drum’ of Inayat Khan’s, that *Om* on which the universe depends, at work within and beyond me as a sonorous whole, as if my whole body reverberates in tune with All-That-Is.

**Soul Presence**

*It was the silence she loved most. The sounds of the silence not man-made. The sounds instead of bird calls and the wind rustling leaves in trees, the sound so quiet that it drummed and buzzed in her ears and behind it, another sound, a low hum, the hum she heard above and behind the noise her feet made tramping through the forest, or the noise her hands made pushing away branches which marred her passage through. Another sound, this hum, deep and resonant within her, audible only if she made no interruption herself with words, with laughter, with song. The hum still there, the hum that came best and fastest and loudest when her mouth was closed. The hum a sound from deep inside. Ah, she thought, now I understand. This is the sound of silence. This is the sound of my soul breathing.*
I scribbled the above text many years ago, sitting on the verandah of a simple ten-foot-square hut in the middle of a cicada-chirred forest, half a world and lifetime away from the November-fog of my now. My thought at that time, that the low sound I perceived – a deep and resonant hum beyond, yet within, a seeming ‘foundation-breath’ beneath all other sound – was actually my soul’s presence, I can only describe as unconscious heart-knowing. I had no knowledge base on which to graft my experience and the hum itself waxed and waned dependent on my own stillness or silence, as well as sporadic attempts to centre myself in an inner space from which such resonance could be heart-sensed.

Inayat Khan writes: ‘Some train themselves to hear the Saute Surmad in the solitude on the sea shore, on the river bank, and in the hills and dales; others accomplish it while sitting in the caves of the mountains, or when wandering constantly through forests and deserts, keeping themselves in the wilderness apart from the haunts of men … The sound develops … until it finally becomes Hu the most sacred of sounds … the beginning and end of all sounds; be they from man, bird, beast, or thing … the spirit of all sounds and of all words, … hidden under them all, as the spirit in the body’ (Inayat Khan 1972, p.88-89).

Digesting such enlightened works of scholarship, I began to understand that the sound serves as our connection to the sacred much as breath is our connection to corporeal life; it connects us to ‘the “ground” of our soul … a “ground” which is not only entitative but enlightened and aware, because it is in immediate contact with God’ (Merton 1978, p.16). The sound is Thomas Aquinas’ divine silence ‘announced’, a state of oneness we can experience in consciously still states such as contemplative prayer or meditation but also actively engage when immersed in the belly of nature, our ‘ear of the heart’ tuned to this ‘foundation-breath’ underlying, indeed flooding all creation. Such was my initial intuition but now I saw how soul presence expanded seamlessly into Inayat Khan’s mergent sound-soaked spaces. In, out and all roundabout, we vibrate together – whether consciously attuned to the ‘annunciation’ of such resonance or not.

We will never know if Pythagoras literally heard the celestial music of the spheres he plotted on his monochord, but the concept certainly inspired Shakespeare’s pen. Here, from The Merchant of Venice: ‘There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st but in his motion like an angel sings.’ Yet to behold’st surely means to bear witness internally as well, for it is within ourselves that we will find our own resonating soul presence’s fulsome contribution to the universal symphony.

For his part, Peter Matthiessen finds that ‘the emptiness and silence of snow mountains quickly bring about those states of consciousness that occur in the mind-emptying of meditation … the earth twitches and the mountains shimmer, as if all molecules had been set free: the blue sky rings. Perhaps what I hear is the “music of the spheres”, what Hindus call the breathing of the Creator and astrophysicists the “sighing” of the sun’ (Matthiessen 1998, p.84). Describing his thoughts on meditative practice, he also finds that ‘soon all sounds, and all one sees and feels, take on imminence, an immanence, as if the universe were coming to attention, a universe of which one is the centre, a universe that is not the same and yet not different from oneself, even from a scientific point of view: within man as within mountains there are many parts of hydrogen and oxygen, of calcium, phosphorous, potassium, and other elements … (and) an instinct comes to open outward by letting all life in, just as a flower fills with sun’ (Matthiessen 1998, p.94-5).

This ‘opening outward to let all life in’ is our mergence with, in and of space which Inayat Khan describes as the signal-state to consciously resonating the Saute Surmad. Such mergence frees the soul ‘from captivity in the senses and in the physical body. The soul of the listener becomes the all-pervading consciousness, and his Spirit becomes the battery which keeps the whole universe in
motion’ (Inayat Khan 1972, p.88). This description fits my experience like a glove, for when I first intuited that the resonant hum I heard was my soul’s breath, it simultaneously ‘clicked’ that this was a sound shared by all sentient, including the soul of the world, Gaia herself, as well as beyond to all cosmic realms. My felt-sense of the permeability or porosity of my self with all other ‘selves’ clarified the source of the sound as the foundation-breath of all life. And the feeling of blessing, of grace, which accompanied my consciousness in the moment was profound, one for which, in all humility, I again appropriate Inayat Khan’s simple yet elegant text: ‘Sound gives to the consciousness an evidence of its existence … The knower … becomes known to himself … the consciousness bears witness to its own voice … All things being derived from and formed of vibrations have sound hidden within them … and each atom of the universe confesses by its tone “My sole origin is but sound”’ (Inayat Khan 1972, p.11). It is a vision of the one life lived which I contemplate from another perspective in this essay, and I can only relate how calming, settling, and centring it is to have this knowledge of my (indeed all our!) connection to the One uplifted to consciousness – a pathway to peace in and of itself.

Community of Consciousness

The great Indian guru, Sri Ramana Maharshi, remains a perpetual fount of wisdom courtesy of his openness to share the sheer depths of his understanding of the numinous. In relating his death experience as a teenager, his contemplation proceeded thus: ‘But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body ‘I’? It is silent … but I feel the full force of … the voice of the ‘I’ within me … So I am Spirit transcending the body … it cannot be touched by death. … All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought-process. ‘I’ was something very real, the only real thing about my present state … From that moment onwards the ‘I’ or Self focussed attention on itself … Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time on. Other thoughts might come and go like the various notes of music, but the ‘I’ continued like the fundamental sruti note that underlies and blends with all the other notes’ (Sri Ramana 1896).

While I may have had my initial experience of soul presence, the ‘I’ or Self in Sri Ramana’s lexicon, many years past, my perception of the resonant hum, the ‘fundamental sruti note’ of that selfsame lexicon, waxed and waned and was even at times completely absorbed into the limited material range of ‘concrete’ tones Inayat Khan describes. Occasionally in dream or waking vision, divine silence would ‘announce’ itself as a sort-of ‘Hey, wake up! This is something you really should take notice of!’ – reverberations rising up through my body to eventually settle in the cave of my skull, before gradually subsiding, sound ‘fading’, after the vision had completed itself. An occasional phenomenon, nought more. Yet, a few years ago, a singular event had the contributory, coincidental and/or complementary effect (I really can’t be sure) of turning the resonant hum, my own personal Om, into an everyday constant.

It is actually impossible to describe in meaningful text what seemingly precipitated this outcome, suffice it to say that it involved a meeting with Presence – and yes, the capital P is intentional. The event had awe written all over it and the adrenalin-charged lucidity and buzziness that preceded it was reminiscent of the unrecognised first stage of labour, when the body is readying itself for childbirth but any associated pain remains unregistered by surface consciousness.

A meeting of much light, filling my vision, it was accompanied by an unending sound-filled space. Begun as a fulsome base note, the resonant hum I already knew as the ‘announcer’ rose in pitch and strength till my whole body was strung like a Pythagorean monochord. A bell-like chorus ensued, but of a single note, pervading each cell, permeating each pore. My conscious thought was ‘Dolby surround-sound’ (a bit lame I agree), yet the only thing my (limited) intellect could hook into in the moment. Not a wisp of November-fog mist in sight, I felt completely merged with the soundscape. A plane of consistency I had become, at one with the entire universe, the ‘vibration’ one-and-the-same.

It was as if my body had been inducted into a ‘community of consciousness’, all cells singing with the chi of shared circuitry. David Spangler calls this phenomenon ‘the inner spirit of community that can live in one person … each part unique and honoured, yet inwardly contiguous and accessible, through
love, to every other part. This is also the image of the mystical body of Christ and of the all-embracingness of the Buddha nature, in which all creation is one’ (Spangler 1984, p.128). Indeed, I felt absorbed in love, held by love, a phenomenon I can only describe as being essence-loved – a felt-sense which has remained ever since, the constancy of the resonant hum sub-texting every moment. Reminiscent of Rilke’s ‘pure unsuperintended element one breathes, endlessly knows, and never craves’ (from his 8th Duino Elegy, Merton 1978, p.244), it has the effect, at any time, of sending me down deep to the centre of being it/myself, to the infinitude of Presence that it is my responsibility to hold within my material being, I simply one of the countless resonant ‘batteries’ at play in the cosmos.

Eight hundred years ago, Zen master Dogen called this sense of universal oneness ‘cosmic resonance’: ‘When I am enlightened, at that moment the mountains and rivers are enlightened, and vice versa … as I practice, everything is practicing. To realise this invests each moment of our life with great significance. This moment is not just for us, just right now, but for all space and time. When we really perceive that, we can feel the trees and rocks doing their enlightened practice’ (Matthiessen 1998, p.193). My resonant hum, a perpetual sensory burble like a gently flowing brook, is the connective thread by which I experience everything just as it is, nothing special, true nature pure. It is the feeling-wren experience which Gary Snyder intuits from Dogen’s many teachings: ‘To see a wren in a bush, call it “wren”, and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel “wren” – that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world’ (Snyder 1995, p.179).

Enjoining these ‘larger moments’ is a natural extension of our community of consciousness as far and as wide as the becoming landscapes we choose to explore. I observe how the tuning fork of my own hum seems to spontaneously reach out and ‘connect’ to the hums resonant in all other forms of sentience. In certain places, at certain times, my apprehension of the hum is keener, and I can feel the veritable roar of shared community, a feeling of density to the love circulating in a particular genius loci or sacred space created by pure intention. It is as if my personal hum becomes a conduit of reciprocal recognition, a connective thread interwoven with all others to mirror the divine here, now. In a spirit of co-creation, universal resonance floods the space as a humming, thrumming, drumming choir of consciousness percolating up from the bedrock to work in concert with heavenly hosts:

*Your energy manifests
as sound to sing
the world into being.*

Thus do I engage as a participant in the ‘implicate order’ of physicist David Bohm, immerse myself in the ‘pattern that connects’ of systems-thinker Gregory Bateson, live the holistic vision of theologian Thomas Berry: ‘Every atomic particle is present to every other atomic particle in an inseparable unity, a unity that enables us to say that the volume of each atom is the volume of the universe’ (Spangler 1984, p.42). I understand that it is my consciousness of divine Presence, my conscious connection to the soul-generated hum, which is the foundation on which all else is built. Ebbing and flowing like waves upon a shore, the sound may be more audible or ‘strong’ at times, but my staying-conscious is the constant, the tie-that-binds. As Mr1300BC once counselled: *You can still have a lit candle in a place where you can’t see it and still know it is lit.* It is the same principle with the hum. As the noise of the world’s human-induced frenzy continues, there will always remain a space to commune with divine silence – within the core of our very self, knowingly. Each of us has the potential to be a hesychast ‘who has returned to himself’ (Ware 1982, p.51); ‘as soon as man is fully disposed to be alone with God, he is alone with God no matter where he may be – in the country, the monastery, the woods or the city’ (Merton 2008, p.118).
Constant practice

Your resonant hum
stays with me always, even
when I cannot hear.

A small haiku offered during a day spent in silence, in meditation, reconnecting to that which never leaves, which is never non-existent, and never has been. The hum accompanies our birth into this world, guides our leaving, and remains our soul’s inheritance everlasting. Carrying the ‘foundation-breath’ of Presence within us, we are ripples in the fabric of space-time as surely as any of the tiny quantum fluctuations physicists have discovered to prove that which existed all along.

Like a research scientist, I have conducted a literature review and collected hard data – in this case the hard data of my own experience. Hence I know that at times I feel the hum to be more fulsome and ‘present’ than at others, the connection especially ‘charged’ in spaces devoted to sacred purpose, or simply infilled with love. But that is to miss the point – my sense of nearness or otherwise is a function of my consciousness or awareness rather than the source (ever) being out to lunch (!). If the concrete sounds of the everyday serve to dull, dim, or completely mask Inayat Khan’s abstract sound, it is because my consciousness is lacking.

Constancy, therefore, the pervasive knowing which underpins spiritual practice even when we cannot ‘hear’, is the singular fact on which to focus attention. It alone is responsible for the inner sense of calm, the limitless sense of tranquillity and peace which holds us steady in the vast and endless ocean, which helps us heed the Taoist wisdom to let wind enter, keep mountain still, wu wei our contemplative response to whatever storm-swept events and experiences occasion upon our shore.

Our connective thread to the source has always been, will ever be, continuing ‘unbroken’, as Sri Ramana insists. Once opened to Presence, there is a responsibility which goes hand-in-hand with our consciousness of same. It is as Inayat Khan writes – whoever hears the sacred Om becomes a part of the ‘battery’ of cosmic resonance, just as those who intone the sound in temple ceremonies work tirelessly to keep the universe in motion. It is a task I am honoured and humbled to participate in, holding Presence, a most precious jewel, consciously in my heart each and every moment – loving the world, singing its praise, as we ourselves are loved and sung into existence. Each speaks the language of love in its own tongue, and, as chalices of sacred Presence, each and every one of us becomes a heliotrope with a hymn on our lips, tuning fork held fast before harp-strung hearts. Still, the last, the only divine Word, is reserved for the Sacred Mystery itself. Thus I know:

You have so many
voices in this world but what
stays is Your silence …