Spending Time with Rilke

Darryl Bailey, © copyright 2026, all rights reserved

Rainer Maria Rilke was an Austrian poet and novelist who lived from 1875 to 1926. He was critically acclaimed in his time, for his works written in German.

I first heard of him when I was quite young and exploring the life of the sculptor, Auguste Rodin. At one point, Rilke was Rodin's secretary. From the very first moment that I heard of him, it was obvious that Rilke had a reputation for being a profound mystic, someone considered very awakened spiritually.

Even though I've always had an interest in spiritual teachings, I haven't had a strong interest in poetry. I enjoy some of it very much, but I'm inclined to prefer a type of prose that can reduce a thousand bits of different information down to the most essential bits. Poetry generally works the other way round, offering one bit of information and letting it unfold into a thousand different nuances.

So, even though I knew Rilke had a reputation as a mystic, I never read his poetry and I wasn't aware of his prose work. Until recently.

A number of months ago, a friend sent me a Rilke poem that she felt I would connect with strongly, and I was very moved by

it. This got me interested in looking at some of his other works and very quickly, I discovered his “Letters to a Young Poet”.

This was a series of ten letters that Rilke sent over time to a young man asking for advice and guidance in becoming a published poet.

I was drawn to find the most literal translation of those “Letters” from German to English. Fortunately, that literal translation is by A.S. Kline and is readily available online.

I found the letters intriguing. On their surface, they are a lengthy piece of advice covering many different aspects of life, detailed and poetic in their presentation, and at times very dense and complex. All of it is very direct advice from Rilke on what to do to develop as a poet and live life fully.

At the same time, in the midst of all that detailed and complex advice, Rilke was slipping in some essential points regarding existence itself and everyone’s life journey. Those essential bits were saying that no one needed any advice and that the words of others really aren’t of any use to our own unique expression.

It was absolutely brilliant. I had to live with this work for some time before that subtle message came shining through the greater mass of information.

What I would like to do in this article is present those essential points and then follow them with a short commentary. Keep in mind that this is an extremely condensed version of the original work and I have revised some words in the Kline translation,

but anyone who reads the complete work in Kline's translation will find the following points.

Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke

You ask me for advice and have asked others as well. Unfortunately, you are looking outwards where no one can help you. We are each unique in who we are and nothing can touch you less than the words of another.

Instead, go inward. Draw closer to Nature. Go into yourself. Find everything there within, and the one movement that it is. Thereafter, your life will find its own way.

What is required is this: solitude, and simply feeling your immediate, vibrant occurrence for hours … regarding it as something completely mysterious.

Do not be fooled by the surface appearance of many forms. In the depths, everything is movement, the mysterious movement of Nature.

Everything perfects in this unknowable flow, ripening like a tree which does not force its growth, but stands serene, trusting Nature, trusting what is inherent within Nature.

All creatures and plants move to an inner necessity greater than pleasure or pain and more powerful than willing or resisting.

Always trust your deepest feelings, urges, and intuitions. If they prove to be wrong, the natural growth of your inner life will lead you to other insights.

Focus on the deepest law. When someone looks up into the night sky, full of stars, and really feels what is happening there, they feel that law, the law of Nature, the cosmos.

Your expanse is already the vastness of the heavens.

Everything in Nature grows according to Nature, each in its own unique way. We are transforming into the unique expression that we must be.

This is not something one can choose or abandon.

Why torment yourself with the question of where all this comes from and where it is going? You are transforming and want to be transformed.

Don't observe yourself too closely. Just let it happen.

Allow life to happen. Life is always in the right, in every situation.

One is closer to it in the immediate, vibrant feeling of its occurrence than in any description found in thoughts and writings.

Feeling this movement will transform the sense of love.

Love is not the youthful, romantic notion of two expressions uniting and merging as one.

Love is the mature meeting of solitudes, unique expressions, respecting each other, protecting each other, and relating to each other.

My Commentary

Our life always feels like something is happening now. It is always this immediate sensation of occurrence right now.

If we simply sit somewhere quietly, alone, and rest as this happening, without trying to control it or make it different, it will reveal everything that we need to know about it.

If we simply feel this happening, happening: what we call breath coming and going, body sensations rising and passing, thoughts and mental activities running along, running along.

If we simply feel the sensations of this occurring, instead of focusing on stories and descriptions, if we simply rest, there is only a vibrant, moving, shifting, dancing occurrence, occurring on its own.

Breath moving, thoughts rising, sounds shifting, moods altering, tactile sensations tingling, mental activities fluctuating, decisions manifesting, urges to act pushing forward.

Everything is moving on its own, without anyone causing it.

When we simply feel this happening, really feel this vibrant occurrence moving on its own, then we truly learn.

There is no one “doing” it.

There is no “doer”.

The more we simply rest as this vibrant occurrence functioning on its own, the more obvious it becomes.

Sitting quietly, doing nothing, everything simply occurs.

Whatever you’re doing in life, you have an urge to do it but you haven’t created that urge.

You might be doing things you want to do, but you haven’t created that want.

You might be doing things you feel a need to do, but you haven’t created that need.

You might be doing things you feel compelled to do, but you haven’t created that compulsion.

You might be doing things you feel circumstances are forcing you to do, but you haven’t created those circumstances.

You might be refusing to do something, but you haven’t created that urge to refuse.

Simply resting.

I feel this happening

happening.

I don’t know what it is.

A happening
simply happening.
I
am this
happening too.

Words cannot contain,
or offer,
this immediate
sensation
of occurrence.

It can only be felt.

What Actually Is?

What actually is?
Occurrence.
Nature’s urge.

What actually is?

Feel it flowing,

sights, sounds, touches,

tastes, smells and thoughts.

Flowing,

always flowing.

What actually is?

Ever fresh

occurrence.

What actually is?

Movement

moving

to its own

inherent urge,

a moving inclination

in the fiber

of

a stream.

What actually is?

Expressions of flow,

endlessly diverse.

Your unique

expression

occurring,

simply occurring.



(My thanks to Link Phillips and Marcus Fellowes for their feedback on this piece. And my thanks to Lynn Minnick for thinking that Rilke and I might get along.)