My essay on the essay (from *Beyond Walls*)

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This summer I am going to be teaching at a Kenyon College writing workshop designed for clergy who want to hone their writing skills for conversations beyond their congregations and denominations. The program, Beyond Walls, is envisioned as an interfaith conversation with writers and clergy from both Jewish and Christian traditions. I will be teaching essay writing along with Rodger Kamenetz, and he and I each have an essay in this month's *Beyond Walls* e-mag. Mine—an attempt to say what I think essay writing is—is reposted below.

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In 1983, a geneticist named Barbara McClintock won the Nobel Prize for medicine for her discovery of principles of genetic transposition, the way that genes communicate between organisms. McClintock had begun her research fifty years earlier, and she chose as her subject for observation corn—ordinary field corn. Cheap, plentiful, relatively easy to grow, and largely uninteresting to other geneticists of her time.

McClintock planted corn at her lab in New York City and then spent enormous hours paying attention to it. She became so attached to her corn that she had a hard time leaving it to do other things, like attend conferences and tell other scientists about her work.

Her practice of attending to corn became something that her obituary writer described as a form of mysticism, attention to another being so complete that it begins to know "where the mysteries lie." Through this careful attention, McClintock entered into a relationship with her corn. She observed it, paying less attention to what she hoped to prove and more to what the corn, unbidden, might tell her as she contemplated each generation's variety. Through this patient process over half a century, McClintock produced the first genetic map of a chromosome for corn and theorized genetic transference, something that other scientists could only

demonstrate much later using computer modeling.

McClintock's biographer, Evelyn Fox Keller, asked McClintock how she went about doing her science, about her unorthodox methods of observation. McClintock was a highly accomplished scientist, after all, and this breakthrough must have required a disciplined set of experiments. Keller records McClintock's difficulty in finding words for it. "About all I can tell you is that you somehow have to have a feeling for the organism."

Keller pressed, and McClintock tried again. "Really all I can tell you about doing great science is that you somehow have to learn to lean in to the kernel."

*Lean in*. *Have a feeling for.* McClintock is searching for a vocabulary to explain her relation to the corn. Bringing everything she knows and is trained to observe and understands, McClintock "sees into" the corn, allowing it to tell her its secrets. It is a kind of empathy for the "organism" that crosses a boundary between the scientist and the corn without collapsing the difference between them.

Martin Buber called this the I/Thou—a relation so fundamental that I and Thou cannot be broken apart, but neither are they one and the same. Keller attempted her own vocabulary for McClintock's accomplishment. She writes, "Barbara McClintock, in her relation with ears of corn, practiced the highest form of love, which is intimacy that does not annihilate difference."

What McClintock does with corn, the essayist does with language. To pay enough attention to, to lean in to, to feel the weight of each word, to have a feeling for the kernel—that's the aim. The essayist shows up day after day in the cornfield and leans in, waiting for the words to reveal themselves. And the essay, at its best, is the work of going beyond oneself, finding oneself in relation, in an intimacy with the subject that "does not annihilate difference," and so perhaps can be said to be a practice of love.