

Can You Hear Me Now?

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Nearly everyone knows how annoying it is to be around a child who is persistently calling their parent, you know, like this: Mom (several times). Now unless they are just trying to be annoying, chances are that they are asking to be heard, to have their parent acknowledge that they are here and that they are important. I think that adults are really not that different from children. I would suggest that much of what we see around us that we experience as mean, rude, selfish or just plain odd behavior is just the adult version of saying Mom (several times). These adults are just asking to be listened to and really heard, to be acknowledged as a valuable person in a world that is increasingly creating more and more noise, but in which very little real listening is going on. Many of us are people whose souls are starving to be heard.

I am on Facebook. For those of you who don't have any idea what that is, it's a social networking site on the web that is mostly silliness. But its amazing growth says something to me about our yearning to reach out and to touch people, to share our lives, even if it's in this virtual way. Someone is there to witness that I am here, to hear my joys and sorrows and to be touched by them. It is a little like gathering at the water cooler.

Listening to each other. It seems a little simplistic. We have been taught to mistrust that which sounds too good to be true, because it probably is. We listen to things all the time, music, television, radio and yes, other people and we don't feel some radical effect on our lives because we listened. This is true, we do listen to lots of things, but I would ask you to think about this: Is listening the same as hearing? When we just listen, we are using only our ears. But when we hear, our hearts and souls come out to play. We make space for someone to be when we listen. We give their thoughts and feelings air, water and sunlight and allow them to know that they have life and meaning AND to believe that someone else knows this. When people feel heard, amazing and wondrous things can happen. Understanding of one another can come about, people change and grow, healing occurs. Who knows, if real listening became an epidemic, peace might even break out!!

About five years ago my wife, son and I went on a Christmas cruise through the Panama Canal. It was a long anticipated trip, so I was a bit disconcerted when we went to the dining room the first night and our tablemates were a Mormon couple, and their teenage son. Let me be clear, my concern was that once they realized the unconventional nature of my family, they might be uncomfortable sharing a table with us. I certainly did not feel that our two families had much to offer each other.

At dinner on the second night, they told us that there was a member missing from their family, their daughter had died in mid November at age 11, after a long battle with a horrifying

childhood cancer. We expressed our condolences for their loss and over the course of the trip we heard much more about this cherished and lost child. We also found them changing their planned tours to be with us on ours, asking to meet for breakfast, wanting to do activities together after dinner. We were a little befuddled, but found them fine companions, so we were happy to share much of the cruise with them. As we were leaving, we exchanged email addresses and the mother offered the address of her blog.

Curious, I logged onto her blog and read the entry she made after our trip. She spoke of the places they had been, but went on much longer speaking of us, her tablemates. She declared us the best part of the trip.

As my partner Nancy and I talked about what on earth we did to earn that distinction, we realized that this family had suffered an unspeakable loss and yet, yearned to speak of it. They wanted someone to listen to their stories of their daughter and to know that they were heard, to acknowledge that their daughter had existed, and was real even to those of us who had never known her. The simple act of our listening, our not looking away from this families pain or changing the subject, our bearing witness to their love for this child, their joy in her life their profound sorrow at her loss, became transformative for them. Our willingness to hear of her, to speak her name, was a small part of the long process of healing that continues for that family until this day.

What unlikely agents of healing we were for them and what an amazing lesson they had for us: we have to listen to and hear each other because it is the way that we can come to love each other, even when we believe the chasm between us is too wide. When hearts connect, there are no longer any strangers.

So, what is it that keeps us from listening to and hearing each other? It doesn't seem like it ought to be all that hard. The problem seems to be that many of us have never learned the art of listening to hear. We have been formally trained in reading and writing and arithmetic, but not in the skills such as listening, hearing or contemplation. We begin our encounters with each other burdened with many pre-judgments and ideas about what the other person wants from us: we need to solve their dilemmas and ease their pain. We come into the conversation not in a mode of listening, but with our minds racing ahead, cluttered with an accumulation of bad habits and assumptions about what it means to be in conversation with others. We often miss the actual conversation because we are holding a whole other conversation inside our heads. We stop listening when we think we know what the person will say next, our mind is busily forming our next sentence. We never really hear what the person has said, especially if it is outside our expectations of them or if it's hard for us to hear. It really is no wonder that human relationships are fraught with misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Alan Alda says this: *"Deep in our hearts we know that the best things said come last. People will talk for hours saying nothing*

much and then linger at the door with words that come with a rush from the heart. Doorways, it seems, are where the truth is told.” And by then, by the time that doorway truth is spoken, so often we are no longer hearing; our preconceived ideas have already told us how the conversation would turn out.

The word dialogue comes from the Greek *dia*, which means through and *logos*, which means word or meaning. So dialogue is about letting meaning flow through our words. In a true dialogue, we hear each other's words to gain new understanding and find shared meaning. What most of us do is discuss, which comes from the same root as concussion and percussion, we try to shake things up and find the answer. In searching for that answer we often talk right past each other, jumping in, naming solutions, failing to leave the silence spaces that are needed to allow the meaning of what the other person has said seep into our heart, before we begin to form a response.

I love this verse, found in the book of Isaiah:

*Incline your ear and come to Me
Listen, that you may live;
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you,*

It promises an enduring covenant for those who listen carefully to each other. I hear in it a promise that we can find each others very souls if we hear each other. But we cannot bully or cross examine the soul it into revealing itself to us, we must make the space for it to emerge. Perhaps to do so, we might put our ear to another person's soul and listen to its urgent whisperings. Listening to find: Who are you? What do you feel? What do you think? What means the most to you?"

So, you may ask, how is this done? I hear and understand, but the way I listen is, well, the way I listen.... How can I change something so ingrained in me? I am here with good news, we can all learn to listen and hear in this way. All we need to do is recall and practice a few skills that have been all but lost in the midst of the turned-up, fast paced, answer oriented world in which we live.

In her book "Kitchen Table Wisdom", Rachel Naomi Remen tells this story about Carl Rogers, an influential psychologist, described how he prepared himself for a session with someone. "Before every session I take a moment to remember my humanity. There is no experience that this person has that I cannot share with him, no fear that I cannot understand, no suffering that I cannot care about, because I too am human. No matter how deep his wound, he does not need to be ashamed in front of me. I too am vulnerable. And because of this, I am enough. Whatever his story, he no longer needs to be alone with it. This is what will allow healing to begin."

So, how do we begin? I began by cultivating a practice of contemplation or meditation.

Find a space each day to access your soul or source or the divine, whatever name works for you. Access that place that is not about knowing, solving or thinking. Just be present for yourself as a gift to yourself. Practice being in silence. Silence provides time for our souls to come into our consciousness, for us to be present in our hearts, rather than our heads. It is interesting to note the the words SILENT and LISTEN contain all of the same letters, just rearranged. Being able to be comfortably silent, sometimes for long periods of time, will allow us to be better listeners, and will include better listening to our own deep yearnings. Fran Lebowitz said these wise words: The opposite of talking is not listening. The opposite of talking is waiting.

Cultivate a practice of mindfulness in listening, the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh teaches all those who work at his retreat center to take two deep breaths before answering the phone. On the 1st breath, he tells them, detach yourself from whatever tasks you were doing.

On the 2nd breath, center yourself into being present with the person on the other end. It is a practice I strive to do each time I am switching gears from doing anything, to talking to a person. I am a task oriented person and it serves to remind me that I am connecting with another human, not trying to get through another task.

Begin to practice good listening and really hearing. Start by giving yourself permission to mess it up, this really does take practice. Perhaps you can visualize that you are listening not with your ears, but your heart. I enter into the conversation by resolving the following: I do not know what this person is going to say to me; I do not have to solve any of their problems; I do not have to correct any of their assumptions; long periods of silence are just fine; rather than receiving their words into my head, I am going to receive them into my heart. I will notice what wants to be said, rather than what I think should be said. Most importantly, I remind myself of this: What this person really needs is a good listening to..... a good listening to.

As we engage with others in this way, it begins to change our understanding of ourselves as well. This type of listening becomes so much more than hearing, it gives way to relationship, to two hearts and souls receiving each other fully, accepting each other in all their diversity and discovering, despite these differences, just how many experiences they have in common. And we cannot help but be changed when someone says to us: “I have told you my deepest fears and poured out my grief, which seemed never ending. You have listened with great love and have heard that which I feared was unknowable about me, and that which made me utterly unlovable. You have looked it in the face and you stand here yet.

When we listen to someone deeply or when someone really hears us we enter into the realm of the sacred. Quaker Douglas Steere explains it like this: “Listening with such clarity and depth of feeling that the other person feels “heard” is a kind of holy listening.

Holy listening –to listen another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery, may be the greatest service that any human being ever performed for another”

Think just for a moment of what is inside of you that is yearning to be heard, what is too tender to be spoken, too frightening to be shared. What might it mean to you to share that burden? Just imagine for a moment what this world could be like, if we all heard each other. Think of the possibilities. What if the Israelis and Palestinians heard each other’s pain? What if the religious fundamentalists all around the globe saw each other’s points of view? What if the left and the right in American politics stopped talking and began listening? How might our world benefit, in what ways might we heal?

Just listening. Just asking. Just receiving the story of another. This is the magic we can offer to one another...listening each other into wholeness. When you listen generously to people, they can hear themselves, often for the first time. And in the silence of listening, you can know yourself in everyone.

When people are heard they can begin to heal, to gain courage, to leave the past behind, to take needed action or just feel better. And here’s the thing: once we are heard, we tend to be more willing to listen to and hear others. It has exponential possibilities.

Many of us despair of making any meaningful difference in a world so wounded and in pain. Perhaps just in our listening, in our hearing each other, in our finding and sharing that which gives our lives meaning, we can make more difference than we ever could have imagined. Just in our listening.

These words that we heard earlier bear repeating: When someone deeply listens to you, it is like holding out a dented cup you’ve had since childhood and watching it fill up with cold, fresh water. When it balances on top of the brim, you are understood. When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved. When someone deeply listens to you, your bare feet are on the earth and a beloved land that seemed distant is now at home within you.

May it be So

Amen

Sources and Inspirations

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