

“How to Listen”
November 1st, 2020
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It's hard to listen when the wind is howling, when our foundation is shaking
It's hard to listen when our fear takes over
It's hard to listen when we don't want to know, or to be known

How fitting that rearranging our service schedule so we could participate in the UU the Vote service has meant that today, on this Sunday before the election, when the winds are surely howling, today, we are sitting with the question of how to listen. And yet what is there to say, when it feels like the whole country is holding its breath?

When I'm stuck, when I can't find the right words, or settle into the place inside myself that knows something of wisdom and meaning, when I find myself in that place of disconnect, searching for that still, small voice but hearing only the storm, like Elijah, I listen to a poem by Andrea Gibson called “Say Yes” It begins like this:

When two violins are placed in a room
if a chord on one violin is struck
the other violin will sound that same note
If this is your definition of hope
This is for you
For the ones who know how powerful we are
Who know we can sound the music in the people around us
simply by playing our own strings

It doesn't matter what I'm trying to write about, listening to this poem compels my still small voice, it cuts through the noise, because it is born of the place of truth and honesty. And it gets me to listen. It brings me back to holy ground.

I can tell you, as your minister, it is a profound honor when you ask me to listen to you, when you offer your stories born of the deep, your questions and your doubt, that still, small voice within that tells the truth.

As part of our training as ministers, we're required to do a chaplain residency, typically at a hospital - I'll be sharing more stories about my experience on a heart transplant unit in a few weeks. It's a bit like basic training for ministers, a crash

course in learning how to listen. And it's a thing approached with a certain amount of angst and fear. Because we know that we will have to watch people die, have to stand in the eye of the crisis and listen, that we will be the ones called when nothing more can be done but grieve.

Unsurprisingly, doing this kind of work, being asked to bring grace to complicated family dynamics, to care for people whose beliefs might be completely at odds with our own, to face tragedy and mortality, it brings up all of our own shit. So every week during this residency, we spend hours sitting with our fellow chaplains, processing our experiences as a group. Learning our own edges and building our capacity to stay present amidst the storms of human frailty and our own desire to run from them.

Listening is hard. And it takes practice.

Listening can be healing. And it can be profoundly uncomfortable. For to form a bridge between another person's story and our own listening heart, we have to be willing to accept their experience as true, as possible. But when we're faced with stories of extraordinary suffering, of the randomness and pain of life, or even of profound courage, we so often duck out. We stop listening. We start fixing or consoling or changing the subject. Maybe we get angry, or we start blaming. We refuse to hear, because we sense pain and power and we run.

The Quaker author and activist Parker Palmer writes this about those sacred moments when people did listen to him: "I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed their faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek -- quietly bolstering my faltering faith."

I remember reading an article in grad school, one which I now can't find despite all my digging, that spoke of the challenge of listening to stories of pain. It said, essentially, that when faced with stories of suffering, we instinctively want to create psychological distance from the experience of the other's pain. And often do this by blaming the person or minimizing their experience, because we don't want to imagine that what happened to them could happen to us. So we stop listening.

In a country where so many people are yelling past each other, I wonder if this is part of the root of the problem. I quoted James Baldwin a few weeks ago - he said "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

Listening is hard. It can be healing. And it can be profoundly uncomfortable.

It seems that one of the most unifying things right now, no matter who you did or plan to vote for, is that people are scared. And there's a lot of yelling, a lot of blaming, and very little listening. Like in the story of Elijah, we are in the midst of a contest, not between gods, but between leaders. And on both sides people are holding on to the hope that their leader will ease their pain, make their lives better. No matter how profoundly we disagree with their assessment of which candidate will help, the people on the other side of the aisle are still human.

Parker Palmer goes on to write this:

“Hearing each other’s stories, which are often stories of heartbreak, can create an unexpected bond [between those with opposing political views]. When two people discover that parallel experiences led them to contrary conclusions, they are more likely to hold their differences respectfully, knowing that they have experienced similar forms of grief. The more you know about another person’s story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy.”

And so I'd like to tell you a story of listening to someone whose beliefs were very different from my own. It was during that summer I spent as a hospital chaplain that I came to know that I was a minister from the most unexpected of teachers.

It was sometime between dawn and early morning, and I had been awake the better part of the night. I was on-call and, after somehow going weeks without a page to a deathbed, this was my third one of the shift.

I had been called to the patient's room the evening before, as his family started to gather and grieve, processing the change in his health and the reality of his dying. He was in his mid-70s and had been healthy, aside from chronic nerve pain. He had come to the hospital to have his pain treated with a routine brain surgery done by a highly skilled surgeon. It was supposed to be simple. And yet, despite all expectations for an easy surgery and quick recovery, he had two brainstem bleeds during the operation and was declared brain dead before the procedure was finished.

When I had arrived that evening, the family told me they were waiting to remove the patient from life support until his son had arrived from Tennessee. And so they waited, and I waited with them. It wasn't until I returned to the room at dawn that I met the man's son, a man who was himself old enough to be my father.

I had come to bring his mother a prayer shawl to keep her warm as she sat with her husband and he rested between worlds. The mother had told me that her son needed to speak to me when I had sat with her alone during the night, but I didn't know why. I didn't know what he could possibly need from me.

As I passed the shawl to his mother, he rose quickly, introducing himself and asking to speak to me in the hallway. And so we left the room and stood beyond earshot – he said he needed to ask me something and he couldn't bear to have his mother hear it. As we stood facing each other and the early morning light began to rise, he told me that they were waiting to remove his father's life support until he had gotten to speak to me, the pastor.

"I'm pro-life," he said "and I need to know if I'm killing my father. I need to know what happens to your soul when you die. I believe that every life is sacred and I need to know if we're killing him. I just can't live with myself if we are."

And it was in that moment that I understood the gravity and the grace of what he was calling out of me. It was a thing outside of my control, a thing of extraordinary power and tenderness. And in that moment something happened to both of us. He was absolved of the fear that he was killing his father and I came to know in my body that I was a minister.

I don't remember exactly what I said. I think it was the fact of my listening, my not turning away, that mattered.

On all accounts this was a man with whom I had profound disagreements. I am pro-choice. I believe, as is the public stance of our Unitarian Universalist association that abortion is healthcare, not a sin.

But if I had gotten stuck in that place, gotten caught on the disagreement, or the religious terminology, I would've missed the honesty, the humility, and the healing, the grace that comes when someone tells the truth and we listen.

Because what he was actually saying was this: "I don't have enough faith for this moment, to believe that I can face this horror and carry on. I need to borrow yours." And in that place of holy honesty, I could lend him my faith. I could absolve his fear. And, in that moment, amidst our differences, that man made me a minister.

And so we moved forward into the mourning, aware of how much our lives were

changing. I performed the Lutheran commendation of the dying, standing at the foot of the bed, as his family circled around us, and his father released his final breath. And, as I turned to leave, that man turned towards me and said, "Thank you."

That place of transcendence and transformation is profoundly uncomfortable, but it is also a gift.

When two violins are placed in a room if a chord on one violin is struck
the other violin will sound that same note
If this is your definition of hope, this is for you

It is not an easy thing to listen. We must accept that what we hear might change us. But I have found in life that grace lives in the space between people, no matter how different. That, as David Isay said, "When you hear those kinds of stories, you're walking on holy ground."

Amen.