

The Practice of Deep Listening

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*“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile,
a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment,
or the smallest act of caring,
all of which have the potential to turn a life around.*

— Leo Buscaglia

First Reading

from *The Art of Racing in the Rain*
Garth Stein

Enzo the narrator dog:

“Here’s why I will be a good person. Because I listen. I cannot speak, so I listen very well. I never interrupt, I never deflect the course of the conversation with a comment of my own.

People, if you pay attention to them, change the direction of one another’s conversations constantly. It’s like having a passenger in your car who suddenly grabs the steering wheel and turns you down a side street.



For instance, if we

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met at a party and I wanted to tell you a story about the time I needed to get a soccer ball in my neighbor's yard but his dog chased me and I had to jump into a swimming pool to escape, and I began telling the story, you, hearing the words "soccer" and "neighbor" in the same sentence, might interrupt and mention that your childhood neighbor was Pelé, the famous soccer player, and I might be courteous and say, Didn't he play for the Cosmos of New York? Did you grow up in New York? And you might reply that, no, you grew up in Brazil on the streets of Três Corações with Pelé, and I might say, I thought you were from Tennessee, and you might say not originally, and then go on to outline your genealogy at length.

So my initial conversational gambit — that I had a funny story about being chased by my neighbor's dog-would be totally lost, and only because you had to tell me all about Pelé.

Learn to *listen!* I beg of you. Pretend you are a dog like me and listen to other people rather than steal their stories."

Second Reading

from *The Journey is Home*

Nellie Morton

"I first met David when he was nine years old. He had been diagnosed as a retarded child when one doctor discovered his deafness. He had not learned to speak a word for he had never heard words. He could communicate only through facial expressions and touch and embrace.

David was placed in a school for the deaf — one of those schools that taught children to speak words they had never heard spoken. I was in David's home when he returned for his first holiday.

In a broken but understandable fashion he began to tell his parents things he had never been able to tell them before —

could never communicate to anyone before. He was able to share his own history. He opened up the innermost pan of his life to those hearing most deeply and most anxiously the new knowledge never spoken before.

The family, perhaps far more than the teachers, brought David to speech. The silence that had stifled him now yielded his own story. Almost overnight David's entire personality changed from the quiet wistful boy to a shiny-eyed, vibrant new kind of family member."

Sermon²

Duane Fickeisen

Nelle Morton was a very important feminist theologian and social activist in the mid-20th Century. She was trained in religious education and worked in Congregational and Presbyterian churches, then became active in the civil rights movement before working with children who were severely mentally challenged. Later in life, she taught in the Theological School at Drew University and was a visiting professor at many other liberal seminaries.

Through her teaching, she grew increasingly concerned and angry at the treatment of women in our culture and particularly at the church's role in discriminating against women's leadership. Her writings and lectures began to address what she called "the woman movement." She believed that an important element in the struggle for gender equality was for women to claim their voices and express themselves. What was required for that, she said, was for women to "hear each other into speech."

In the story about the deaf child, David, that she related in

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her book, *The Journey is Home*, his faltering words were embraced with loving attention by his family. They “heard David into speech” by listening, encouraging, and we imagine, loving him unconditionally.

And the result, she reports, was a vital development of his personality, as he grew from being quiet and wistful to being a vibrant child and to participate more fully in the world around him.

Even if we are not profoundly deaf, many of us have a deep need to be heard without judgement. It’s one way for us to know that we are valued and to grow into our full agency as engaged, active, contributing people. When we dig down into our souls, finding profound, tender, and perhaps scary stuff, we may speak about it in a halting voice like David. Our ideas may be less than fully formed and reflect the serious weightiness of what matters most to us. We may struggle to express them, so we seek a listener who can hear us into speech.

Alas, receiving someone’s full attention is, unfortunately a rare experience for most of us.

And it is one that many of us long for. With the interconnections that technology has made possible and the proliferation of social media, we can be, if we want, in touch with dozens or even hundreds of “friends” around the world through 140-character instantaneous messages. We can learn where our friends are at any moment and follow them from afar.

You can broadcast updates on your status and maybe one of your friends will respond, or perhaps several will, or maybe no one will. But that’s not at all the same thing as having someone give your their full, undivided attention with the intent of truly hearing you.

There is an irony in being so connected across the globe and at the same time being so distracted by all of the connections that it is difficult to relate on more than a superficial level.

Consequently many of us long to be heard, long to have more than superficial conversations, long for connection and for relationship, for an exceptional friendship. And thus the need to be heard.

The benefits of deep listening are not just to the person who has been heard, but also to the listener. Only rarely do most of us actually pay full attention to another person without considering a response, analyzing the content of what the other person is saying, or giving at least a part of our attention to distractions or fleeting thoughts that likely have almost nothing to do with the conversation at hand. We grab the conversational steering wheel and turn down one side street after another.

In fact, we *really* listen with care and attention so seldom that we may not even now how to do it. It can be hard work to focus with that intensity, to put aside the need to respond, and to simply hear another person fully, with unconditional love and our undivided awareness.

Learning and practicing simply listening without an agenda and with full concentration creates increased intimacy and strengthens relationships. It permits us to encounter the other as a whole person in the present moment. To learn about and from her or him.

Deep listening — with undivided attention and without need to respond — is a spiritual practice. It requires concentration. To do it well, we must set aside ego and its need to respond or to tell its own story. It is a means of quieting the monkey mind; of not becoming attached to any of the stream-

ing thoughts that almost constantly appear. It is about hearing without judgement, listening for content and feeling. It can lead to insight and an embrace of the other. It is an intensely relational practice.

It is a spiritual practice because it is about connecting, focusing, and valuing relationship. Like other spiritual practices, deep listening becomes more effective with skill building and repetition.

Let me say a little more about what deep listening isn't. It isn't about solving a problem or analyzing a series of events. It isn't about determining whether the other person is right or wrong, or whether or not you agree with her or him. It isn't about inquisition, where you might seek to draw out details and probe for causes or patterns. And it isn't about debate or staking a position on an issue, either in agreement or disagreement.

What that means to the practice of deep listening is that you can let go of considering a response. If you are really practicing deep listening, you won't respond with a story of a similar encounter or something that you were reminded happened to you or something you once read about or heard about from another source. And you won't respond with a probing question or a challenge to the facts or conclusions presented. You won't ask probing questions or conduct an inquiry.

You will simply listen, focusing on the feelings and the content expressed, and at most inviting more. You will let there be silence between words, without need to fill the pause with more words.

I think this kind of listening can be especially difficult for men. We are so used to interactions where we think we're supposed to solve a problem, find flaws in an argument, or support our own position on an issue that it is difficult for us

to just listen without planning our response.

Furthermore, most of us are not used to being listened to, so we may be guarded and struggle to find what it is we want to say. We may have learned to hide our feelings in order to protect ourselves from vulnerability or ridicule and project strength and competence. Or we may have learned to avoid talking about what matters most to us by filling the conversation space with trivia, reports of others, bad jokes, or other chatter.

We must be heard into speech.

I suspect that at least for some women in particular there may be a reluctance to speak out of the deepest experience and longing because you can't be sure how that information might be used and whether you can trust someone else to hold it with tenderness and respect.

And so you, too must be heard into speech.

Over the last year or more the leadership team for our Small Group Ministry program has been training and encouraging the facilitators of our covenant groups to encourage deep listening within their groups, emphasizing that these are not intended to be support groups, friendship groups, or therapy groups. They are not meant to be places for problem solving nor to conduct the business of the congregation, but rather for personal spiritual development through facilitated deep listening.

This is not easy, partly because so very few of us have experience with this kind of listening, and partly because we bring so many different expectations to the groups.

Of course the covenant group experience will likely lead to developing relationships among the participants, to caring for each other, and often to sharing resources and reaching out at

a time of need. But the primary purpose of gathering is to hear each other into speech, through the practice of deep listening. It is in the struggle to get in touch with and express our longings, our celebrations, our doubts and wonderings, our gratitude and joys, and our sorrows and griefs that our spiritual work can be accomplished.

I chose the cover image representing the Annunciation — depicting Mary listening to the news brought by the angel Gabriel that she would become *theotokos* (God-bearer). The sculptor shows Mary giving her full attention to Gabriel.

While we don't expect to suddenly hear that we will bear the son of God, any encounter with another person can be an encounter with the divine, with the sacred and holy nature that is present in every person. To the extent that we hear each other and are heard in a way that encourages us to express what matters most to us, we become bearers of good news and carriers of the divine spark that resides within every person.

While deep listening to another person isn't at all the same thing as simply being silent in a state of meditation, or attuning to the world around us with awareness of its sounds, or taking in a wonderful piece of music, those can help us develop the ability to focus and to receive without need to respond. As summer unfolds there will no doubt be opportunities to experience listening — to nature, to music, to the sounds of your own heart beating and the tidal rhythms of your breath. Stake your claim on time to simply listen, for the practices that enable you to be a better listeners. And create opportunities to hear each other into speech.

In Enzo's words, "I beg of you. Pretend you are a dog like me and listen to other people rather than steal their stories."

May it be so. Amen.

Benediction

You Do Not Need to Leave Your Room
from *Aphorisms* by Franz Kafka

“You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quiet still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.”

Image: The Annunciation. Stone. c. 1225. Cathedral at Amiens. Believed to be in the public domain.