

Listening for a Change

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“Turn on your listening ears!” This was what I used to say as a preschool teacher to get the attention of my class. It was amazing to see how a bunch of squirmy chatty three year olds would suddenly sit still and pretend to turn on their ears. In case you’re wondering, the ON-switch is found on the earlobes—just give them a gentle twist. On a particularly noisy day, I might ask them to zip their lips and then turn on their listening ears.

Now that’s something I just cannot get away with outside of a preschool classroom. However the need to turn on our listening ears is widespread. Listening is a skill that needs to be developed not only among preschoolers. I firmly believe that many of the world’s problems would be solved if we increased our ability to listen to one another with an open mind and a compassionate heart.

As you know, there is a difference between hearing and listening. Many of us have had the experience of asking someone “Are you listening to me?” only to have our words repeated back verbatim. Teenagers are particularly proud of this skill. However, when someone asks, “Are you listening?” the question is deeper than “Did you hear what I said?” It is possible for someone to hear another person without giving their full attention or truly understanding. As children move up in school, they learn how to appear to be listening. Even as adults, it is possible in a group gathering to appear to be listening to one person while at the same time following another conversation across the room.

Why is it that we have difficulty listening to one another? One reason may be that there is actually a time difference between the speed of speech and the speed of thought. The average person can listen to about 200 words per minute. The speed of thought is ten times that! This means on average we can listen to 200 words per minute but think about 2000 words per minute.ⁱ

Kay Lindahl who has written several books and leads workshops on “The Sacred Art of Listening” cites some more interesting statistics. “Most of us spend about 45

percent of our waking hours listening, yet we are distracted, preoccupied or forgetful about 75 percent of that time. Marketing studies indicate that the average attention span for adults is 22 seconds. (Think about the average television commercials, which usually last 15 to 30 seconds.) When someone has finished speaking, we remember about half of what we heard. Within a few hours we can recall only about 20 percent.”ⁱⁱ I certainly hope that you will remember more than half of what was said this morning. However, I know that I have felt uplifted and inspired by a worship service and then struggled to tell a friend exactly what it was about the following day. Given that we think at a faster rate than we listen, it takes intention on our part to give our full attention without being “distracted, preoccupied or forgetful.”

Listening is an important skill for learning and knowledge. However, it is much more than a tool for education. Listening is an important means for relating with other people. Someone who is considered a good listener is generally a person who is receptive to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of other people. Think about who you turn to when you have a problem. Generally I feel most comfortable with people who I feel understand and appreciate what I have to say. When someone truly listens, he or she offers the gift of attention, the gift of his or her presence. Listening is a form of love in that truly listening to another person demonstrates care, support, and respect.

During times of sorrow and pain, it becomes clear whom I can lean on. This lesson hit home when my brother and only sibling died. Some of you know about this significant loss in my life as it occurred a year before I served as your Interim Minister. I was very close to my brother Michael. He had struggled with addiction through out his life and there were times when my family feared we would lose him. However, in the months preceding his death, Michael had the language of recovery and we believed he was doing well. At the time I was living in Berkeley, CA serving as an Intern Minister in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. During the last phone call I had with my brother that Fall, we were counting the days until he and my parents would come to visit me over Christmas. So, as you can imagine it came as a shock when I received a phone call from my mother telling me that my brother had died of a heart attack. He was the same age I am today (42)- much too young and much too big a part of my life to suddenly pass away.

The following day I happened to receive a phone call from a boyfriend who I had been dating on and off for a few years. I told him what had happened and to his credit he came right over to my apartment. I remember that visit very clearly. Up until then, I thought that he might be my future husband. After a quick hug, my boyfriend sat in the farthest chair from me with his arms crossed. He asked what had happened. Tears streamed down my face, as I tried to explain. As I looked to this man who I thought might be my life partner, he said to me, “Amy, what am I going to do when I lose someone close to me?”

This was not the response I expected from a man who at one time said he loved me. My tears dried up. I listened to him explain how he had yet to experience the loss of someone close to him. Any confusion or lingering romantic feelings I had for this man changed in that moment. My heart could not remain open to someone who could not listen. If he could not truly be present in my time of grief, then he could not be my life partner. It was the beginning of the end of our relationship.

I share this story as an example of a time when I wished my boyfriend could be a better listener. Each person in this chapel probably remembers a time when you longed for someone to listen. Each person has experienced what it is like to have a romantic partner, parent, sibling, child, co-worker or friend who we’d like to listen to us better. This longing to be listened to comes from a deeper desire to be known, appreciated and understood.

Chances are if all of us would like to be listened to better, all of us could also be better listeners. Listening is actually a skill that we can develop. Many people have had some sort of training in speech but far fewer people have had any training in listening. According to Kay Lindahl, “The number of adults who have had any training in listening skills is about 5 percent of our population.”ⁱⁱⁱ Just imagine if corporate executives, politicians, teachers, and community leaders spent as much time preparing to listen as they spend preparing to speak! Given that the rate at which we listen to words is so much slower than the rate that we think, it takes practice and intention to be more fully present to what another person is saying without being lost in our own thoughts.

Jack Mendelsohn who devoted his life to our liberal religious movement upheld the “principles of freedom, responsibility, reason, and tolerance above uniform

theological doctrine”. From this morning’s reading, “Religion for us is no insulated segment of life. It is our entire being in search of meaning.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we value the experiences and beliefs of the individual while at the same time honoring our interdependence. Although as a lifelong Unitarian Universalist these principles are near and dear to my heart, sometimes living out these ideals is challenging. If sometimes I fail to listen to those near and dear to me, then it can be even more challenging to listen to those who hold different beliefs or to misunderstand someone who comes from a completely different background. That is why **Listening is a Spiritual Practice**.

How can we prepare ourselves to listen? The same way you can get to Carnegie Hall, PRACTICE!

In preparation for today’s service, I learned of a practice that will change the way that I answer the telephone. These days many of us tend to multi-task through out the day. We pride ourselves on being able to do several things at once. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who has a Retreat Center called Plum Village in France. Thich Nhat Hanh travels the world teaching the principles of Buddhism, especially the practice of mindfulness in daily living. Back at Plum Village, the staff has been trained to treat answering the telephone as a spiritual practice. Instead of rushing to the phone or continuing to be involved in other activities during a telephone conversation, the staff of Plum Village takes two deep breaths: one breath when the phone first rings to transition from their current activity, and then a second breath to prepare to speak to the other person. I have found that this simple practice of taking two deep breaths before answering the phone makes a difference. Instead of continuing to fold laundry or read email, now I am able to pause and give whoever is calling my full attention.

There is also an opportunity here at the UU Society to develop listening skills. You are invited to a **Listening Program on Saturday, November 3, 1-4pm at Howes House**. Before you start picturing a Zen-style retreat, I want you to know that this program will be an energizing gathering. You will not be sitting silently on a meditation cushion for three hours—actually there will be no meditation cushions. You will not be forced to share your innermost hurts and secrets—this program is not a therapy session. “Listening as a Spiritual Practice” is designed as an opportunity to deepen your

connections with members of this community and to give you some simple practices to enhance your ability to listen in every day life. There will be time for silence and time for sharing. There will be some instruction and some discussion. There will be questions for reflection and a spirit of playful exploration. Listening with an open heart and mind is rewarding because it enables us slow down enough to connect with our innermost thoughts and to appreciate another person's perspective.

Please sign-up on the bulletin board or call the church office. If you have any questions, I would be happy to talk to you after the service today or during my office hours on October 27th.

In the week ahead, prepare yourself to listen.

- Slow down your mind and heart to the speed of speech.
- Take two deep breaths before answering the phone.
- Offer the holy gift of your caring presence.
- Ask someone how they are and wait for the answer.
- Dare to understand someone who holds a different opinion.
- Arrive at someone's doorstep to show them you care.
- Provide a shoulder to lean on.
- Allow for silence in conversation.
- Find a moment to listen to Nature.
- Be open to the workings of the sacred in your life.

Last but not least, "Turn on your listening ears!"

ⁱ <http://www.highgain.com/newsletter/back-issues/e-news-06-00/hg-enews-06-00.html>

ⁱⁱ *Practice the Sacred Art of Listening*, Kay Lindahl, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT:2003, p.3

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p. 3