



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Listening As Spiritual Practice

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In W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," both Brueghel and Auden focus on a moment when something significant is happening to a fellow human being, but we as humanity do not notice. Although seeing a boy falling out of the sky, we continue with our plowing, just as the horse continues with her activities, and the sailors continue on their course.

It is possible to go through life not noticing others, not listening to others, not understanding what others are feeling. We have more important things on which to direct our focus. There are good reasons to work on other things. If we do only this, though, we miss much.

In a communication class some years ago, we were told there are three levels of standard spoken communication:

first, the words said,
second, the underlying meaning, and
third, the driving force behind what is spoken.

When I commented that I didn't understand this, my discussion partner gave me an example. "Think of it this way," he said. "In the evening when my wife says to me, 'Honey, would you please take out the trash?' she is communicating on three levels. First, she wants me to take out the trash. Second, she is saying she is very tired and wants me to help her. Third, she is asking, 'Do you love me?'" He said he always answers his wife, "Absolutely, Sweetheart, I'm glad to take out the trash." He said he knows she hears, "I love you." They've been married thirty-five years, reportedly happily.

Thoreau addressed these unspoken levels when he wrote, "Many go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after." And again he told us, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." I've long loved that our English word *esthetic* derives from the Greek word *aiesthetes* meaning *one who perceives*. Let us listen to understand what is actually being expressed.

By listening for the multiple levels of meaning in a communication, we expand our awareness. There is a lot more to listening than "meets the ear." It seems to me, in fact, that everything comes back to love. It's all about love. By really listening, we act our love. When we care for the other person, we hear the multiple levels of communication.

When we listen, we may gain valuable experiences from unexpected directions. While proselytizing, a Jehovah's Witness once told me something that I cherish – that the Hebrew word *Ruach* has three meanings – *breath*, *wind*, and *spirit*. These three forces – breath, wind, spirit – each invisible, but each a powerful force whose *effects* are visible – are poetically integrated in a single word. I am grateful to the woman who shared this with me, albeit a Jehovah's Witness. We don't need to think alike to love alike.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "We read to know that we are not alone." I think this is also why we want someone to listen when we express ourselves – to know that we are not alone. It is comforting to say to someone, "I am thankful you listened to me," and to hear back, "Take comfort, we've all been there." By listening, this person lets us connect to another and gives us a connection to life, a connection to all that is. I do believe that each of us who finds peacefulness affects others. In complicated, subtle ways, we are not islands.

We gain by listening to others and to our own inner voice. We know that in health we must listen to our own body. Hopefully in all areas, we listen and act. We hear, "Do the things you are inclined to *want* to do and you will develop." Our inner voice is worth listening to.

Jazz pianist Kenny Werner in his book *Effortless Mastery* shares his own spiritual path and suggests an approach into the core of improvising, creating music in the moment by listening both *with-in* and *with-out*

ourselves. Mastery of this requires getting *past* our ego. Something I really appreciate is Werner's saying that if something is difficult it only means it is unfamiliar.

Some people are *easy* for us to listen to, some people are *hard*. We give more when it is hard to listen.

I sometimes find it difficult to listen in the area of politics. Sometimes it seems that those holding views different from mine draw a line in the sand and cling to intransigence as an ideal. But our political democracy requires that we listen to and embrace each other. We need to understand each other's ideas. We each need to move to a place where we can work as a team.

How do we listen when it is very difficult? I think we must bring spirituality into listening, which means we must listen from love. *How do we do this?*

A girlfriend of mine, Mary Wheeler, died of cancer at age sixty-one last January. She had three years to get her affairs in order, and she chose to include in her responsibilities planning for her memorial service. She prepared everything meticulously, as was her nature, and she entitled her service "It's All About Love." In her presentation, Mary expressed gratitude for the cancer that had led her to appreciate life more fully.

In talking with a friend about my sermon today, he said to me, "Oh, you're talking about empathetic listening." No, the listening I'm talking about is more than "identifying with or vicariously experiencing the feelings or thoughts of another." Rather, the listening I'm talking about comes from a deeper place, it comes from genuine love. Mary was right, "It's all about love."

If we don't have love for someone, I think we can use empathy as a *first step* to see if we can build a love. By identifying with or vicariously experiencing the feelings or thoughts of another, we are taking a first step toward possibly loving that person. Other than as a step that *might* lead to love, empathy and love are not necessarily closely linked. You might find my idea radical, and I'm okay with that.

I don't know why I was either born or molded sensitive. Even occasionally someone whom I consider generally *not* sensitive has noted that I'm sensitive. It doesn't make life easier. And it doesn't make it easier to behave well when I'm upset. I think it just lets me look around and observe a few things such as, "If this person would notice the signals being emitted, maybe we could get further on the path to peace – whatever kind of peace." I liked Rev. Anne Hines's sermon last week focusing on "Peace be with you."

It seems to me we must *draw* on empathy – identifying with and experiencing the feelings and thoughts of the other. How do we *develop* empathy toward someone who – maybe we initially feel – doesn't seem to deserve it? Let's call this *unconditional empathy*. We can consider that nature and nurture create a person's worldview. We simply move over to be *inside* the other person, to direct our focus to understand the experiences and conditions that have led to this person's beliefs. We must also direct our focus to understand the experiences and conditions that have created our own beliefs.

Nothing just *happens* in isolation. Things are *caused*. When we can understand what has caused something, we can look at the individual factors and the facts that affect the outcome. We won't always know what the conditions are that have caused the effects. Sometimes we learn later of a brain tumor someone had, or we never learn of it. We need to accept that there is more we *don't* know – and more we don't know we don't know – than we *do* know. This humility can help us address particular details of an issue.

I think drawing on empathy – walking in someone else's moccasins – as well as recognizing our own ego's insecurity in protecting its sense of being right – can get us started in a difficult listening environment. Among my extended family, a politically liberal group, during a heated debate recently, one nephew energetically accused his aunt of being as adamant, narrow-minded, and intolerant as she was accusing the conservatives. I think he was right. We liberals can be as intransigent as anyone if we don't watch out.

An old story in bridge strategy I heard forty years ago and have since relished, presents a situation in the card game where, depending on how it is played – in this case by brilliant experts for offense and defense on each of the two teams – each side can be a winner. The witty observer comments, “Curious hand, each side makes four hearts!” For non-bridge players, it is like saying each side can make the same cake, although they begin with different raw ingredients. My thinking is that, even though in politics people start with different biological and environmental influences and factors, it *is* possible to arrive at the same reasonable result if we look carefully enough at the relevant details. Empathy – appreciation of others’ experiences – seems our best starting tool.

Through the years that I taught in a university, I noticed that an area in which I thought I improved in teaching, was in making personal connections – connecting a student with ideas that were helpful for that particular student’s progress, connecting influences in music history, and assessing and bringing forward ideas that were important for a student to hear. I think I became better at listening to the students.

It all comes back to *love*. I believe in the power of love. By listening fully present, we show love for the other person, we let the person know he or she is *worth* listening to.

Thoreau asked, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” We can modify the metaphor: “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to hear through each other’s ears for an instant?” In being fully present in listening through love, maybe we could do that. It seems worth a try.

Let us embrace the spiritual practice of listening. Pablo Casals practiced his cello on the day he died. Why? If it is something we love, we will want to continually deepen our experience of it. Familiarity *can* lead to mastery. Let’s listen and be mindful so that, as Joseph Campbell explains, “doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be.” We just might find ourselves more grounded and going forward in life with more confidence and joy. Life may be more fun, even as we take care of business.

Thoreau explained that “Friends . . . cherish one another’s hopes. They are kind to one another’s dreams.” I think this is listening through love – *grace* in listening.

I do believe we are capable of choosing *who* and *how* we want to be in the world. We can choose through compassion to create a sacred space with another by our listening. Thoreau observes, “The price of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it.” With our life energy we give the gift of listening, a gift of love.

So be it – Amen – Namaste.