

# The Sound of Listening

Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

29 September 2013

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

*“Hello Darkness, my old friend... I’ve come to talk with you again.”*

So begins the familiar lyric of the old Simon and Garfunkel song, “The Sound of Silence.”

Because silence is such an important part of listening, I was tempted to include an extended period of silence in this sermon. Shawn told me he felt the same way. We wondered if perhaps we could devote an entire sermon to silence.

Now that would be a bold way to make a first impression as your Intern Minister!

But the title of my sermon is not “The Sound of Silence.” It’s “The Sound of Listening”... and there is a difference.

Needless to say, it’s a title that’s a bit puzzling.

It doesn’t quite make sense...like the Zen koan about the sound of one hand clapping.

When we try to conceive of the sound of listening, we move a little closer to the realm of unknowing and mystery and unanswered questions.

That is perhaps exactly where we need to be in order to truly hear each other.

*Hello, Darkness, my old friend.*

When it comes to listening and understanding, many of us feel we’re on pretty solid ground. I certainly did when I began my student residency as a hospital chaplain.

We were taught that listening—not speaking—was what we should do. We needed to offer compassionate presence. To not interrupt or give advice...to not rush in to help or fix. I felt confident that I could do this. Simply listen to others, as they spoke.

The challenge came when I was placed on a ward with people who could not speak, as a result of severe brain injuries.

The act of listening became a lot more challenging when there were fewer words to listen to.

I became more and more aware of my own discomfort...my desire to fill silence...my impulse to assist or to entertain.

One afternoon, my inability to listen well proved especially entertaining. I entered the room with a friendly smile and addressed the patient by name... and I noticed him silently start to laugh.

At first I thought he was laughing at something on the television. So I talked about the television and said his name again...and he seemed to laugh even more, looking at me.

I think I said his name one more time in an effort to connect, to hang onto the only thing I thought I knew...and finally I listened to the name clearly marked above the bed...which was a different name than I'd been saying.

I listened to my intense feeling of embarrassment.

And I listened to the fact that although he was indeed laughing at me, not with me, his eyes were warm and kind.

So I apologized, saying his name correctly...and I stopped talking and sat down. We enjoyed the rest of an old wartime movie. And I visited him many more times after that.

So often we walk into rooms thinking we know who others are.

So often we have no clue.

We have techniques and analyses, reports and programs. We carry them around on clipboards...yet cannot see the person in front of us.

All of our words, as useful as they are, can get in the way. As the late poet and Catholic priest John O'Donohue wrote, "Often secrets are not revealed in words, they lie concealed in the silence between the words or in the depth of what is unsayable between two people."

By "secrets," I don't believe he meant "matters that should be kept confidential." I believe he meant "secrets" as in "keys to wisdom." That is: "Often the keys to wisdom lie in the silence between the words...in what is unsayable."

In our world, it seems that little goes unsaid. So, listening for the unsayable takes practice.

In the summer I attended a talk by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist master. To my surprise, he didn't use the words mindfulness or meditation very often. Mostly he talked about listening.

He said that the point of listening is not to "understand"—that is, to increase our own knowledge. And listening is not for the purpose of correcting or improving anyone else.

He has written, "We only listen with one aim, and that is to relieve the suffering of the one we are listening to."

Now, Thich Nhat Hanh understands human nature and so he knows this isn't easy. He said (and I took careful notes during this part...) "There may be times when you are listening, and you hear a great deal of bitterness and anger, even misinformation and falsehood."

You could almost hear the crowd saying, "Yes, yes, go on!"

In his calm way, he continued. "You might take the opportunity to correct the misinformation that your friend has spoken."

Wow! This guy was speaking our language. But then he said...

"You might offer that information two or three *days* later."

There was laughter throughout the hall.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I don't like the sound of what someone else is saying, sometimes two or three *seconds* can be a challenge.

At times, the sound of listening can sound like one person talking, for an uncomfortably long time.

The sound might not be balanced or productive or harmonious. It might not seem to make much sense.

But the compassionate listening Thich Nhat Hanh talks about...listening without interruption...even to bitterness, anger, falsehood... it sounds like something we all hear too rarely.

It sounds like unconditional love.

When we hear that sound, everything changes.

Indeed, Thich Nhat Hanh went on to say that when we are truly present to one another, we enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

He was using that language deliberately, I think, to dissolve some of the language barriers that separate faith traditions.

He seemed to be saying that when we hang in there to listen, even when the language is unfamiliar and the ideas uncomfortable...our inherent worth as human beings is affirmed.

When we honour what he calls our "interbeing," the world is transformed.

Perhaps that's why deep listening is emphasized in virtually all wisdom traditions.

The contemporary Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski put it this way.

"When we have only one care, to be truly present, we will be relieved of all care by the Presence that is the Creative Power."

And then there's a well-loved story in the Hindu tradition about a man who sleeps through many performances at the theatre.

On the evening when he finally stays awake, he is so swept up in the action he runs onstage to save the hero, completely forgetting that there is any boundary between himself and the players.

For the first time, he becomes the awakened subject of his own story—participating fully in the magnificent play of life.

Thus transformed, he is revered as the wisest of teachers.

When we show up fully, with heart and soul, for the Life Story that is bigger than our own, we join into communion with each other and with the Divine.

When we listen in this way, we begin to notice that we are both the Listener and the Listened To.

Paying attention to life more deeply, we start to hear calls sent through every channel: physical symptoms, synchronicities, well-timed phone calls from friends, symbols that are sacred to us, sermon ideas, dreams...

The channels are as unique as our fingerprints. But the Listener can and does feel its way into them, whether you understand that Listener to be in you or around you or both.

As we listen, we are heard.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber understood the connection between compassionate human presence and full relationship with life.

He recognized that too often, and certainly unconsciously, we see each other as an “It”...an object...but that we can grow to see each other as “Thou” or “You” with a capital “Y”.

Someone with whom we are in full and continuous relationship.

As we no longer see each other as “It” but as “Thou,” we experience each other’s divine nature. We enter more wholeheartedly into relationship not only with each other but with life itself.

Through the month of September here at First, we’ve been practicing deep listening—to each other and to our deepest selves.

We've been doing the work of transformation, not only for our own individual lives, but in a way that prepares this community to flourish in the years ahead.

Although much of that listening has been extremely pleasant—some of it may have been challenging at times.

As we stretched, to not jump in, debate or fix, we deepened our capacity to respond fully to life...whatever it brings.

The word “listening” sounds so gentle, so pleasant, so easy. But we know it's not.

When we open ourselves up not only to the pleasant sounds of life, but the painful ones, sometimes the sound is almost more than we can bear.

In his recent book *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen*,<sup>1</sup> author Mark Nepo tells the story of Beethoven, someone who, as most of us know, was a brilliant composer despite the fact that he lost his hearing.

Now, I knew that about Beethoven of course, but I had listened only to one part of the story—the part about the beautiful compositions, the personal courage, the brilliant harmonies.

When I thought about his deafness, I imagined only the sound of silence.

I had not heard that as a young man, Beethoven was tortured by the onset of tinnitus, a constant ringing sound in his ears that became more and more intense.

He became so frightened and depressed that he considered suicide.

By chance, I happened upon a very old book about Beethoven while I was writing this sermon.

It described the sound he heard as “humming, whistling and an increased sensitivity to shrieking.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Nepo, *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen: Staying Close to What is Sacred* (New York: Free Press/Simon & Schuster, 2012).

As a symptom, the sound of incessant noise is powerfully symbolic—perhaps even more so today than in Beethoven’s time.

Whether or not we hear constant ringing in our ears—and I am someone who does—I’d venture to say that many of us here suffer from “an increased sensitivity to shrieking.”

We find ourselves caught in what Leonard Cohen called “the blizzard of the world.” We may ache to block out the sounds that are incessant and horrifying...but we cannot.

And so we are left with what is, perhaps, the only “sound” response.

To listen to the world as it is.

To be present to one another.

The sound of listening is not the sound of silence, but the sound of presence.

Not the sound of emptiness but the sound of willingness.

Willingness to be present to the Holy Mystery of the universe—but perhaps more important, to the Holy Mystery sitting right beside us.

And the Holy Mystery within.

After going through his period of depression, and admitting his darkest fears to his closest friends, Beethoven went on to create his greatest musical works.

He survived not by rejecting the clamouring darkness, but by fully hearing it...and telling his story.

Because he did, his later compositions had such depth of human feeling, they transcended their time...extending far beyond the heart of the individual who created them.

Beethoven decided to live after expressing his terror and sadness to people he loved and trusted.

They are people whose names we don’t know.

People who must have listened well.

Thanks be to them...

and to you...

and to this life.