

Wisdom of Listening

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

February 6, 2011

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

It is astounding how quickly events in the world can change so dramatically. The violence in Egypt is unbelievably horrific, but perhaps just as unbelievably abrupt. Of all the places in the Middle East, Egypt seemed among the most stable. Or at least it has been for the past thirty years. What those of us on the outside have not seen, at least not clearly and not often directly, is that there has been much tumult roiling under the surface of calm. The very things we have hailed as a virtue—stability and reliability—have their shadow sides. Too much stability means less change and leads to a narrowing of views among leaders. Without some turn over periodically, resentment builds and builds. Until finally two sides emerge: one looking for change, and the other desperately clinging to power. Eventually these two sides polarize and the violence we have seen this past week is usually the result. The pattern might be present day Egypt, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the ouster of the Shah in Iran, or the Tiananmen Square protests. In every case, regardless of the nobility of the ideals involved, we see two sides fall into a cycle of violence.

Why is this so? Well very often what contributes to this kind of escalation and polarization is, to quote Cool Hand Luke, “A failure to communicate.” I don’t mean to imply that all war would cease simply by working out our differences over a nice cup of coffee one afternoon. No I am pointing to something far more revolutionary. I mean talking, and more importantly listening, to people whom you hate. That is a lot harder than war, and requires a good amount of maturity to pull off. But deep listening, if it is between nations, warring factions, different classes and races, or simply between friends and family, is a crucial spiritual practice for all of us. That is why it is our theme for the month of February.

Now when my wife heard that the theme for the month, and subsequently this sermon, was going to be deep listening, she let out a bit of a chuckle. “Listening huh? That’s a little ironic coming from you!” Some of us have reputations among our spouse or partner. So this morning may be a “do as I say and not as I do” sermon! Deep listening is different than the selective listening one does when it is time to take the garbage out or shovel the drive way. Deep listening, is listening to another person with your full attention to their words, their body language and to the meaning of what they are saying; the implications of their words for your relationship together. Deep listening is a full engagement with the other person. As St. Francis said,

and Steven Covey paraphrased, it is the spiritual practice of seeking to understand before seeking to be understood.

The irony is that the more we disagree or dislike what someone is saying, the more we need to engage in this kind of deep listening. A friend of mine in Ann Arbor Michigan, who attended the Unitarian Church there with me, told me that he regularly invited in Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons who came knocking on his door. They would come around and he would show them right in, sit them down in the living room, and they would go through the whole speech with him. He never converted to any of these religions of course, and he probably never intended to. So I asked him why he did this. Is it because you feel bad for them since so many other folks slam the door in their face? No, he said. "You see their religion calls them to speak their faith. My religion calls me to listen." I always thought that was a beautiful model of how UUs should practice their faith. For as much as "tolerance" becomes a buzzword in our religion, it is good to remember that there is an actual practice associated with tolerance. That practice is deep listening.

This came home for me when I was an on-call chaplain at a hospital in Omaha Nebraska. Once or twice a month for nearly four years, I would spend the night at Methodist Hospital filling in for the full time chaplains who were went home for the night. I would follow up with some of their patients, get some dinner, watch a little TV, call

Sharon, and then go to bed. At 6 AM I sometimes had to visit a few folks in the outpatient wing, then grab a cup of coffee and head home or to the church. That is if it was a quiet night. Most of the time there was something going on in this big hospital. My real job was unseen a lot of the time. I was the only clergy in the building and if someone was dying or their family needed something, if there was a prayer request or someone needed a sacrament; I got the call.

This was a nerve-wracking job at first. I remember I used to watch my pager, just waiting for it to go off. When my pager would go off, it meant something really bad was either happening or about to happen. The waiting was the hardest part at first. That used to psyche me out until I established my routine. A year or two in and I was able to handle most things pretty well.

When I was first studying to become a minister, they require that you work in a hospital; usually for the summer. At first I was waiting to hear from my teachers, these grizzled old chaplains who really had seen and done it all, to find out their secrets. What do you say to these people on the verge of death? What do you say to their spouse or to their children? There must be some wise teaching, some mantra perhaps, that made it all OK. As you might guess, there wasn't. When one of your loved ones dies there is nothing anyone can say to make it OK. The trick, in so far as it is a trick, was not how well you speak, but rather how well one listens. Listening is the key to good pastoral care, whether

that is done by clergy, members of a small group, or just between friends; deep listening is what people most need in those moments.

I have million stories from my days as a chaplain, and I intend to be your Senior Minister for a long time, so I will not tell all of them in one morning. But I will never forget my very first call on my very first day of being an on-call chaplain in Omaha. I started doing this when I was about four or five years into my ministry there. The page said to go to a certain room. I went up to where this room was and saw two women embracing each other outside the door. One of them was in tears and the other was comforting her. They were talking, and as I approached them, the one who was crying looked at me and said, “And if you are a priest or chaplain, you can leave right now!” I had no idea what kind of comeback was appropriate for that one, and there probably wasn’t one. So I turned around and left as instructed. Any illusions I may have had about being Florence Nightingale were quickly dissolved. When I related this incident to one of the chaplains on staff, he said, “Never take it personally, even when it’s meant that way!” A saying that is true for the parish ministry as well as the chaplaincy.

Deep listening requires that we place our egos to one side for the time being. Granted rarely does someone bark at you the way this woman did to me, but she was in unspeakable pain. While it smarted for a few minutes, I understood her need to shoo me away. Deep listening is about the other person and what they need to express in that moment.

It is not about fixing a problem or trying to figure something out. It is simply pushing aside my own personal agenda, that we get so wrapped up in and preoccupied with for most of our life, and just making a little room for another person's story to connect with mine. That is all. It sounds so simple, again there is no magic here, but being able to really stay with them without making it all about me, is very hard to do.

In our modern reading this morning, Christine Longaker encourages us to listen to another person by mentally trading places with them. After engaging in that thought experiment you find that you are surprisingly sympathetic to their point of view. This is a wonderful practice to experiment with before doing some deep listening with someone. In Buddhism this is known as compassion—experiencing the suffering or happiness of another as if it were your own. Most of us would probably call it radical empathy or if your minister or priest growing up liked to show off their Greek, you might know this as *agape*, one of the three forms of love. When practicing deep listening, we first set aside our personal agendas. By doing this, we find that we actually wind up being a bigger and more effective presence for that other person. Just by listening to them with our full attention and mindfulness, the other person begins to feel a connection to you. They feel as if they matter to you and the problems they are dealing with matter. Helping someone feel that way is far far better than any magic words or extra special Bible verse you could tee up and recite for them.

When you bring your full being to this encounter, then you are present for them in a way that is comforting. The way you bring your full self, paradoxically, is to let them be their full selves before you, in all of their brokenness and vulnerability, and to have it be OK.

If we are able to speak to each other from that heart level, then deep listening is happening. Often the last thing we want to do is to listen to people who disagree with us. Yet that is precisely when we most need to be talking and listening to them. Never run away from that fear. Confront your anxiety, take a risk, and talk to the person about whatever may be troubling you. More often than not, it isn't as bad as you think. So often we spin out of control in our minds with our problems and our dramas, and then these stories take on a life of their own. Sometimes just having a few words or part of a conversation with this person will reveal that your anxiety was for naught. Give it a shot some time. But remember—it's not about what you speak, it is about how well you listen.

The Tao Te Ching says that the highest good is like water which gives life to everything and everyone. It flows everywhere, even the places men and women reject. Even in those places the Tao is present. What a powerful faith statement of Universalism?! The Tao is everywhere giving life to us all. What does this mean? How are we to live our lives differently because of this assertion? Just simply by “dwelling close to the land, meditating deep in the heart, dealing with

others in a kind and gentle way, and be true in speech.” A deep truth, a straightforward practice, and a lifetime to live it out. That is what deep listening requires of us.

I am glad to report to you that the fruits of such a practice are many. Not the least of which, deep listening may help you avoid a few more domestic squabbles at home. Really taking the time to set aside your ego and your agenda, and listen deeply to another person’s story, can change your life. It did for me. It had been a pretty quiet night at the hospital. I went through my routine rather easily. I went down to the ICU to follow up with a patient that a chaplain had seen during the day. The nurse told me that the fellow in room three was not expected to last the night. “Oh, boy,” I thought. I got the page at about four in the morning that this poor fellow had said good bye to this earth and that his family was on its way.

Four in the morning is a rough hour of the night; not quite morning but later than a really late night. The family gathered around the bed, and literally formed a semi-circle around him. For the life of me I can’t remember this man’s name, though I wish I could now. His children and their spouses were there, and they were looking down at their deceased father or father-in-law and nobody weeped. There was no crying out in pain. They simply one by one began telling stories about this fellow’s life. The time they went to his house for Christmas. His love for his daughters and the smell of his cigars. The things he used to say to them

all of the time. It felt more like the memorial service than it did the bedside. Only it was one of those really good memorial services where people really get into it and share personal stories about how their life was touched and affected by the other person. What struck me about the stories these grown children kept sharing about their father was the way they were all introduced. With some variations, the stories started off with, “Josh, let me tell you about the time when...” These folks were doing some very deep sharing, but it was as if it was for my benefit. I probably didn’t say more than a dozen words really—I just got out of the way and let them tell their stories one after another. They asked for a prayer, which I gave, and as I was wrapping it up, I felt as if this was the most sacred ground in the entire city in that moment. The water of the life-giving Tao was flowing especially strong in that room just then. I didn’t make it happen; couldn’t have made it happen if I had wanted to. I just got the heck out of the way.

Once I started getting out of the way, all kinds of connections could develop. I didn’t have to push some UU agenda. If someone in the hospital needed a priest for a sacrament of the sick, I called the priest up. If someone’s baby had died and needed to be baptized, I did it. I didn’t believe that the baby had had any original sin to wash away in the first place. But if that small ritual helps the parents, why not? In dealing with others be gentle and kind, Lao Tzu teaches us. Simple to say and to understand, but a life time to live it out.

Let us be open to hearing others even, and especially, when we don't agree with them. Perhaps let in that Jehovah's Witness and really listen to what they have to say, not only about their faith, but about them. Who is this person? How has their life been transformed and made whole by their faith? Instead of smugly judging them, how might they instead be an inspiration? Trade yourself for another, as Longaker describes. Check out the spiritual homework insert in your order of service. It's new this month and has some other things to try as you develop your deep listening practice.

May we be present with each other in ways that are both great and small. May the power of our listening extend our bonds of love to all who seek comfort. And may the pain and violence of the world become open to the simple practice of hearing each other. Amen Blessed be.