

THE GIFT OF LISTENING

A Sermon by

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Call to Gather: *Excerpt from “This Day is a Blessing” by Ellen Kort*

...We bless this day and start from where we are
without fear
without asking what the seasons know
[...]
This day is a blessing
The moments ahead are invisible
And what we know is this
That love walks together with sorrow
Teaches us to listen
To speak from the heart
To love oneself
Because it is all we ever have to offer one another...

Reading: *“Take Off Your Shoes” by Karen Hering*

Take off your shoes. Bend knees. Fold hands. Bow down.

These simple instructions in prayer, though not part of my personal practice, have taught me by their common approach. They are not postures of making speeches, of claiming ground, commanding attention, or standing tall. No. Around the world and in so many religions, the practice of prayer calls upon us to fold our egos away and to make ourselves quiet and small. To pause from busy schedules and personal agendas and to point ourselves in the direction of the holy. *Take off your shoes. Bend knees. Fold hands. Bow down.*

We are instructed to listen.

“All sound requires patience,” wrote Terry Tempest Williams after sitting with her dying grandfather, leaning over him to hear his whispered words in the final days of his life. “Not just the ability to hear,” she said, “but the capacity to listen, the awareness of mind to discern a story.”

It can be harder than you’d think to do this. Much easier it is to listen only for the opportunities that will allow us to speak, to hear only the stories that will invite us to act. Especially in our

work for justice, when there is so much that needs to be said, so much that desperately needs to be done.

Some years ago, I was traveling in Nicaragua with a group of North Americans and we heard a lot of talk about how much was broken in that deeply impoverished nation. And our inclination was to ask, “What can we do? How can we help to fix the problems?” Whether it was a road washed out or a hospital placing patients two to a bed or the lakes thick with pollution, over and over again, we asked “What can we do?”

And then one evening, while staying with a woman named Marisol in the northern mountains, I felt a new answer stirring in my heart. We’d just spent the day hauling water in heavy string-handled buckets and patting out tortillas with our hands and frying them over a fire. And after eating dinner together by the light of a single candle, we lingered at the table in the dirt-floored room, singing songs to each other, and I listened as Marisol shared her story and her hopes and her fears with me. When we retired that night, for the first time on that trip, I knew what to do. Or at least I had discovered where to begin. Not with roads or hospitals or wells or waterways. No. The first step, I came to understand with Marisol that night, was in taking time to listen with my whole heart, with a patient ear and the awareness of mind that would allow me to discern another’s story.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, Lao Tsu said in the Tao. But a better translation of this familiar passage is to say the journey begins beneath our feet. Not in the first step but in the stillness that precedes it, in the ground beneath our feet, in the ground of our being.

So I take off my shoes, standing on the holy ground of this earth. I bend my knees, making myself small, and fold my hands, pausing their habit of doing, doing, doing. I bow my head and listen for a story larger than my own, waiting for a holy word in which to root the work for justice that lies ahead. May my listening be my prayer. May my prayer be my deep listening.

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Sermon:

I had originally drafted a kind of funny opening for this sermon, or at least an attempt at one. I had thought of doing a sort of a sales pitch for this marvelous concept of *LISTENING WELL*. I was going to try to fast talk a guarantee that *Listening Well* would enhance your relationships with your loved ones, and it would doubtlessly improve your life, and the lives of all those around you.

I’m sure this questionable idea, came from the fact that with my recent infirmity, I’ve watched way more infomercials than ever before in my entire life. But, even though it might have started us off with a bit of a laugh, I scratched that idea because I realized that I view this subject with much too much reverence. What I want to talk about today is, in my mind, a truly spiritual practice. And, I believe it has the power to help heal our world.

I know, we're just talking about listening - an exceptionally simple act. As words are spoken by one human, their meaning is registered by another. In a way, you might say we've been using this skill all our lives. And, actually, we know it's even longer than that because babies in-utero have auditory capability. Those who research that sort of thing know that babies' heart rates respond and slows as they hear the "melody" of their mother's voice. They are listening. And listening, we know, is a way of deeply connecting with another human being.

Learning how to give this gift of intentional listening has long been a passion of mine. It's a bit of an astonishment to me that given how much time we human beings spend in our attempts to communicate with one another, there are still so many of us regularly starving to be truly heard.

In the reading I shared from my good friend, Karen Hering, you heard her describe this act of deep listening as an invitation to stand on holy ground. The sacred place where one human shares what life looks and feels like from within his or her skin. I agree with Karen's assessment whole heartedly; it truly is **holy** ground.

In the 1920's, there was a philosopher named Martin Buber. He became famous for his ideas about how people relate to one another. Buber promoted his belief that the way to genuinely engage humanity - and God - was to approach all interactions from an "I-Thou" stance. He described this way of relating to others as a deep subject-to-subject relationship. Buber contrasted this "I-Thou" attitude with the unthinking, far more common and far-less rewarding "I-it" way of relating. The first way, (I-Thou) is a reciprocal relationship of mutuality; the second (I-it) is a relationship of distance and objectification. Mindful of the "I-Thou" relationship, one listens with attention and respect. "I-it" listening misses the opportunity for profound engagement with another.

Buber believed there was spiritual and emotional magic awaiting those who saw the world with an I-Thou attitude. To me, his philosophical concepts fit very well with our own Unitarian Universalist faith's First Principle, the one that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Living out our first principle upholds this beautiful "I-Thou" concept. Believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every person means that we listen with respectful, open hearts.

And when I think of Buber's idea, it makes me think, too, of the phrase "Namaste." Any of you who have taken Yoga knows this word often signals the end of the class, or, similarly, it is sometimes said with a bow at the end of a time of shared meditation. One translation of this is word, Namaste, is, "the divine in me recognizes and celebrates the divine in you." Listening with a Namaste heart is listening through Buber's I-Thou concept. It is listening through the truth of our first principle.

Maybe I'm so drawn to this because I have long been fascinated by the experience of others. As a kid, I have vivid memories of lying in the grass of my front yard, pondering the vast skies above me with the drifting clouds as a focal point for my grammar school existentialist thought. I was aware of an unrequited yearning, a frustration, that my own flesh was, in a way, a prison from which I could never escape. It wasn't so much that I didn't want to be me; it was just that I also wanted to have the ability to know what it is like to be others too. I rebelled against the obvious truth that the way we are constructed would forever thwart my desire to know anything other than my own experience of life. But, what I've found over these many intervening years, is that when you offer the gift of deep listening, you are inviting the other person to tell you, "This

is what it feels like to be me...." And when that happens, you are, indeed, standing on very holy ground.

I don't just mean in conversations about the big, thorny things; there's the every day stuff that occurs between loved ones all the time too. Not necessarily in a crisis, but just when someone you care about wants to tell you about where they dream of going on vacation someday, or how an incident at work made them feel. Amidst the habitual motion that characterizes most of our lives, more often than not, we miss those opportunities. We stumble through those exchanges with distractions, with no awareness of the potential gift that the I-Thou exchange may hold for us. The result is that both people miss the possibilities of that moment's genuine connection.

Of course, in these days of such significant societal challenges, many of us are handed each day opportunities to listen as our friends and family - people we cherish- are attempting to navigate their way through job loss, health issues, financial fear, worries about aging parents, and so much more. It is an unshakeable belief of mine that being a caring and attentive listener, you can provide one of the best forms of support possible. In fact, when I was in seminary, learning about how ministers offer this sort of listening (which, by the way, I view as one of the greatest joys and honors of my work here) we were told that listening in the way I'm describing today is a very rare gift indeed. We were told that people are almost never given the gift of being fully and supportively heard - outside, perhaps, a therapist's office - as they try to sort out their life concerns and experiences. It is a spiritual practice with great rewards.

So what I hope to offer you today, are a couple of key tools about how this very worthy task might be learned or deepened: a reminder to pay attention, to remember to mentally, take off your shoes as you stand on that holy ground. I do believe that improving your ability to listen well to those you love will, without any doubt, change your life for the better.

In order to listen well, the first gift you need to offer is time. It is not possible to listen well if you are also browsing the newspaper, sorting mail, checking an incoming text or glancing at the TV. If you want your communication partner to feel fully heard, you must be fully present. That we live in a multi-tasking world is taken for granted today, and that makes devoting full attention to any one thing a challenging endeavor, indeed.

I have someone in my life whom I love dearly, but frequently when he calls me to check in, I can hear the click-click of his keyboard going in the background and I know he's probably checking his email again while we're talking. I grant that our conversations might be on the boring side for him. Thankfully, for the most part, the updates on my life and family are not the most scintillating thing in the world. But, after all, we don't talk that often, and he did call me. I know he doesn't intend to be disrespectful or hurtful; he's just a busy man. But I can tell you that as soon as I hear the first click, it becomes a struggle to continue verbalizing my thoughts and I recognize a definite reluctance to share anything close to my heart. To be sure, when that happens, he and I are quite far from the gift of a "holy ground" exchange.

To listen well, we have to offer our full presence.

And, I believe, to listen well, we have to be open-hearted and curious. By this I mean that much of our attempts at communication miss the mark because as one conversation partner begins

speaking, the other quickly launches into crafting a mental response, or a defense, or may believe he or she already knows what the other person is going to say.

Now, I have to say that humans seem to be unfairly and terribly challenged in this regard because science tells us that the odds are *not* in our favor if we want to be good listeners. Research shows that in the average person speaks at a rate of about 125 – 175 words per minute. We hear at a compatible rate of about 125 – 250 words per minute. But we humans think at a rate of 1,000 to 3,000 words per minute! It takes enormous discipline, then, to quiet our thoughts and stay present to what is being said, without those thousands of extra words floating in and around our minds enticing us away from purely attending to the person before us.

The speed of our thoughts makes it difficult to hold this attitude of genuine curiosity, of patiently waiting for the person to unfold their story before us. When someone comes to us to share some thought or reflection about his or her life, it is so very hard, but it is also monumentally beneficial for both of you if the hearer is able to hold onto that attitude of wonder. Rather than letting our minds rush into "solving" things, holy ground listening respects the other's ability to uncover their own truth about their life, and there is an appreciation for what an *enormous* privilege it is if someone wants to tell you what the world looks like through their eyes. One of the biggest disciplines we have to impose on ourselves is to stop immediately trying to find a solution for the person.

This (rush to problem solving) is another of those oddly human characteristics that seems to militate against good listening. When someone starts relating a personal quandary to us, our minds automatically, it seems, view it as one of those ubiquitous Sudoku puzzles or word Jumbles – we start working on the solution. It may be instinctive, and I believe it frequently springs from a truly caring heart, but the magic of good listening is that most frequently, the person who has come to us, really just wants to be heard so that she or he can uncover his or her own answer. In most cases, all those instant solutions that pop into our minds have already been thought of because, in most cases, that person knows her/his own life far better than we do, and has already been mulling the life challenge for a long time before s/he ever invited another person into the reflection. So, that person has probably already thought of most of the things that come so quickly to our minds.

Rather than jumping into believing that somehow our superb problem-solving skills will quickly move them to their solution, a far greater gift is to simply be with the person, fully present to them, listening with a genuinely open heart and a true curiosity about their experience of life. I believe strongly that many, many times it is in THAT space, that the person's own answers can emerge.

To do this, we need patience and we need to be okay, even welcoming of, the *silence*. Good listening cannot be rushed!

This also takes a certain kind of humility. Humility is what helps us listen with an open heart and not jumping to our own supposedly great solutions. I learned a remarkably wonderful lesson in humility a few years ago, one that I will never forget. It was while I was working as a chaplain at Bethel Home in Oshkosh. I had really been attending to my listening skills and was feeling pretty good about the progress I'd made. I came across a patient (I'll call her Betty). I'm not recalling precisely her medical history, but Betty was a long time resident of this facility who

had impaired mobility and regularly her thoughts got stuck in a particular loop. Betty would often sit in a wheelchair outside her room greeting passersby but when her loop occurred, she'd just repeat over and over again in a high pitched voice, "I don't know what to do!" You could hear the distress in her voice.

The staff and her visitors had grown accustomed to this difficult symptom and most people paid little or no attention to it anymore; but I was a new chaplain and I wanted to do a good job. So as I passed Betty one day, and she looked at me and said, "I don't know what to do!" I got down to her level and held her eyes, and I said, "Betty, that sounds so frightening!" She nodded with relief, and I congratulated myself on being a good listener. Believing that I had interrupted her loop adequately, I said, "Betty, would you like to go see the aviary?" (they had one of those large glass bird houses in the lobby). She nodded again and I felt even better. I wheeled her over to where she had good eyeshot of the birds and for a short while she got lost in their play; and again, I was feeling pretty self-satisfied. But suddenly, sadly, the loop demon descended again: "I don't know what to do!" she cried.

I got down close to her. "Betty, would you like to go outside for a while?"

"No, I don't know what to do!"

"Well, would you like to go see the gift shop?"

"No, I don't know what to do!"

"Would you like to go listen to music?"

Betty angrily shook her head and said, "Would you like to **shut up**?" ... and I did!

Even, and maybe most especially, with her dementia, Betty just needed me to listen.

So, to be a good listener, we have to be undistracted and focused on the person. We give them the gift of our presence. And, to be a good listener, we let go of our "knowing" and solution-finding become truly curious about their experience of life. As another person tries to tell us, "This is what it's like to be me" they are offering us a moment to join them on sacred and holy ground: a remarkable exchange of the gift of human connection.

But what if the person is trying to tell you something you don't exactly want to hear? This was a very difficult lesson for me as I worked so hard to parent my three kids well. So often, they would come to me with some expression of their life experience and it would be something that evoked true anxiety within me. Let's say one of my kids is telling me about a conflict with his employer.

Remember that statistic I quoted earlier about how our thoughts fly thousands of words per minute while our words and hearing are at about a tenth of that rate? Here's what can happen: as soon as he starts in with his story, I may have some success in making my face look calm and attentive, but my thoughts have already jumped well ahead. He casually describing this conflict, and my mind has leapt into seeing him standing in the line at unemployment office! My stomach

tightens with worry over how he'll make his car payments and rent and what I'll say when he asks me for a loan and then I remember: all I need to do is listen. He's just telling me about his life. At this moment, he has not asked me to fix anything or change anything, he's just relating his experience.

If I can stay present and if I can remain curious, we have a much better chance of getting to a place where we might sincerely discuss the inadvisability of engaging in conflict with one's supervisor. But, if I let my anxiety fly and I react to him and dive into all the corrections and solutions, inevitably, he will shut down or argue back, and we never get to the constructive conversation where he might actually seek out my parental wisdom which might truly be helpful to him.

Sound familiar? These are things we've heard before, of course, but they seem to fall into that bizarre category of things we accept as true and worthy and, yet, we seem to suffer from some sort of life amnesia over and over again. We need to be reminded day after day, repeatedly, that if we want our loved ones to feel truly loved by us, one surefire way to do that is to listen well when they speak to us. Just stay present; just open your heart and hear what's being said. By your eyes, by your body, by your energy, let this person know that you truly do hear what they're saying.

This gift of offering holy-ground listening to our loved ones is one of the best gifts you can offer. It is a gift that costs nothing, and yet it is *priceless*! It is a spiritual practice to do this - much akin to meditation in my mind. The rewards are so great for the listener - not just the other person.

What, I ask is more important than the loving relationships we have in our lives? And what better thing might we do to make our loved ones feel cherished by us? Because as Ellen Kort reminded us in the Call to Gather –

*The moments ahead are invisible
and what we know is this:
that love walks together with sorrow,
it teaches us to listen,
to speak from the heart,
to love oneself. Because it is all we ever have to offer one another...*

Amen.

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