

Order of Service  
***Levels of Listening***  
Sunday, April 26, 2009

---

**Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting**

The flaming Chalice stands for  
And participates in  
The light of love that dwells in our hearts.  
As the light of the Chalice spreads in this sacred place,  
So may the sacred light within each of us  
Spread and join,  
Bringing Peace, Harmony, Laughter and Love  
Into every corner of our lives.

**Meditation and Prayer**

Find a stillness,  
Hold a stillness,  
Let the stillness carry me.  
Find the silence,  
Hold the silence,  
Let the silence carry me.  
In the spirit, by the spirit,  
With the spirit giving power,  
I will find true harmony.

**Readings**

**“Listening,” by Amy Lowell**

'T is you that are the music, not your song.  
The song is but a door which, opening wide,  
Lets forth the pent-up melody inside,  
Your spirit's harmony, which clear and strong  
Sings but of you. Throughout your whole life long  
Your songs, your thoughts, your doings, each divide  
This perfect beauty; waves within a tide,  
Or single notes amid a glorious throng.  
The song of earth has many different chords;  
Ocean has many moods and many tones  
Yet always ocean. In the damp Spring woods  
The painted trillium smiles, while crisp pine cones  
Autumn alone can ripen. So is this  
One music with a thousand cadences.

**“Please Listen, “ anonymous**

When I ask you to listen to me  
and you start giving me advice,  
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me  
and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,  
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me  
and you feel you have to do something  
to solve my problem,  
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen!

All I ask is that you listen.  
Don't talk or do - just hear me.  
Advice is cheap - 20 cents will get you both  
Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.  
And I can do for myself; I am not helpless.  
Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can  
and need to do for myself,  
you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.  
But when you accept as a simple fact  
that I feel what I feel, no matter how irrational,  
then I can stop trying to convince you  
and get about this business of understanding  
what's behind this irrational feeling.  
And when that's clear, the answers are obvious  
and I don't need advice.  
Irrational feelings make sense  
when we understand what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works - sometimes -  
for some people, because God is mute.  
and he doesn't give advice or try to fix things.  
God just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

So please listen, and just hear me.  
And if you want to talk,  
wait a minute for your turn,  
and I will listen to you.

**Sermon** *Four Levels of Listening* Rev. Bruce Davis (2116o)

Has anyone seen the marvelous old film, “White Men Can’t Jump” with Woody Harrelson and Rosie Perez? Woody as the character Billy is asleep in their bed, but Rosie as Gloria is awake. Gloria starts things off:

Honey? My mouth is dry. Honey. I'm thirsty.

[Billy groans as he gets up and goes to get a glass of water.]

*There you go. honey.*

[Gloria shoves the water away with a look of disdain on her face.]

When I said I was thirsty,  
it doesn't mean I want a glass of water.

[Billy looks befuddled]

*It doesn't?*

You're missing the whole point of me saying I'm thirsty.

If I have a problem, you're not supposed to solve it.

Men always make the mistake of thinking they can solve a woman's problem. It makes them feel omnipotent.

*Omnipotent? Did you have a bad dream?*

It's a way of controlling a woman.

*Bringing them a glass of water?*

Yes. I read it in a magazine. See. if I'm thirsty, I don't want a glass of water. I want you to sympathize. I want you to say.

"Gloria, I, too, know what it feels like to be thirsty.

I, too, have had a dry mouth."

I want you to connect with me through sharing and understanding the concept of dry mouthedness.

*This is all*

*in the same magazine?*

You're into control.

*Shut up.*

See?

There are fundamentals in learning to listen well that transcend gender differences. When we encounter a good listener, man or woman, we find that we spontaneously begin to open up to them about what's important. In so doing we open also to ourself, learning things that were previously hidden. A good listener doesn't jump in with solutions but waits to allow that treasured opening in the other person to take place. The first and most important step in listening is this: stop talking! For many of us, that's a tall order!

Quaker teacher Parker Palmer puts it this way.

If you come to me with a problem, I'll listen to you for about three minutes and then give you my advice. I'll tell you what I would do if I were in your shoes-- which I am not!--or suggest that you read a particular book or attend some workshop. This way of relating to each other is deeply ingrained in us. But what the human heart really wants is not to be *fixed*, but to be *heard and received*. A good listener gives me the gift of hearing me into speech, into my deeper truth.

A good listener gives us access to our own deeper selves, in a way that our own internal dialog, going 'round and 'round in circles as it does, cannot achieve.

I have a friend, Joyce, from many years ago, also a Quaker, who somehow developed the ability of wise listening as early as her teen years. I'm remembering a conversation that I had with her shortly after the break-up of my first marriage in my late twenties. She didn't do much or say much at all. She didn't try to stop my tears or make me stop feeling the despondency I felt. She was just there. She radiated confidence that I would, ultimately, be OK. I for one had grave doubts that I would ever rise up from that depression, but her quiet faith in me and my healthy future gave me the glimmering of faith in myself.

By her affirmative presence she communicated non-verbally that she loved me in a unconditional way. I didn't have to be someone I was not. I didn't have to pretend I was all right. Ultimately it was one of the most meaningful and healing moments in a process of rediscovering my wholeness after that profound loss in my life.

Such listening moments have encouraged, rescued, and affirmed me life long. And so, I've tried to understand what it is that the best listeners do. Partly, in my experience, some people seem to be gifted and wise in listening by the nature and nurture of their early years. And yet, many of the listening behaviors can be learned by anyone. So powerfully do good listeners benefit those to whom they listen deeply that it's worth our while to make a spiritual practice of listening.

In any practice of listening there are two phases: the *receptive* and the *reflective*. Both are essential. The receptive phase requires that I really take in what presents to me from the other person. How often it is that someone completes a

thought and we realize we've been daydreaming. The reflective phase of listening means that, in the least intrusive way possible, I become a non-judgmental mirror, in which the speaker may see a clearer vision of herself. A clean mirror, a flat mirror, so that the image they find reflected is of themselves, not of shadows that I have projected onto them.

The first level of listening is one we do all the time but may not be very aware of. It's what I call the listening of the body. The body is constantly and often unconsciously sending messages in our interactions with others. We lift one eyebrow for disbelief. We rub our noses for puzzlement. We clasp our arms to isolate ourselves or protect ourselves.

I was sitting with a friend not long back who had recently lost her husband. As she sat in her chair in my living room, even before any words were exchanged, I saw the corners of her mouth drawn down and the glisten of tears in her sad eyes. Her body was hunched forward, as if it were too much work to sit upright. I saw with my eyes the gestures of deep sadness that her body was naturally making. Yet, when we are listening well, our whole body becomes a receiver, and I could feel in my chest and throat the depth of the sadness that she was feeling. Again quite naturally what I was feeling reflected itself back to my friend as my face adopted an expression of concern and my hands folded together.

Listening at the level of the body is about noticing what their body is expressing and how your body is responding. It is often the first opportunity to listen, even before the first word is spoken.

If the first level of listening is body, then the second level of listening should involve the mind, which indeed it does. But, please, not the whole of the mind all at once. We need to take this in a couple of separate steps.

We begin by using our intellect to begin to understand the person and the context of their situation. In order to do this well we have to quiet our own mind. We are not evaluating or judging what we are hearing. We are not busy comparing the other person's experiences to our own. We are not preparing to give advice, nor rehearsing our reaction. We are intent on simply understanding them.

Then we *reflect* back to them what we've heard. If the speaker really *gets* that you are understanding their meaning, you will draw them deeper into their sharing. They will begin to explore territory that may be new for them, that may be a

bit risky, and ultimately that leads to valuable self-discovery. But it doesn't take much reflecting to do the job here. Just a word or two at intervals. Or, if you don't understand, ask for clarification.

Listening for meaning is most of what we do with listening in our culture, but that's not all there is. As the words flow, the listener can also attend to what the speaker is feeling. Sometimes we receive the emotional quality of the message directly, as in the statement, "I'm feeling sad." But more often the listener must pay attention to words that carry a feeling tone or implied feelings that are not directly stated. Sometimes you can feel the anger in another person behind their smile, anger they may not be aware of. Listening for feeling requires us to be subtle receivers to catch the nuances of the emotions of the other person.

The real power and magic of good listening comes when we begin to *reflect back* the feelings we are hearing or sensing, again in a non-judgmental way. When I was working as a family doctor, people would come to me with strong emotions about their health or their life situation. I would gently reflect back to them that I sensed their distress, usually non-verbally. Less is more here. Often it would take no more than handing them a box of Kleenex to open the floodgates of emotion into a healing release.

There is art in listening for emotion. The world of emotion is not limited to sad, mad, and glad. The more accurate and specific the listener is in reflecting the other person's feelings, the more helpful the listening tends to be.

So I'm listening to my daughter venting about her boss. Is she just *mad*? Or is she *annoyed* with her boss. Or is she just mildly *irritated*. Or does she feel *exasperated* with him at this point. It doesn't matter if you get the word exactly right the first time. If you show that you *care enough* to try using a specific feeling term, the other person will follow your lead to identify what it is they are actually feeling.

Emotions also come in clusters. In the book *Difficult Conversations*, Douglas Stone shows that, in any moment, we have a complex emotional footprint, including several feelings blended together. Have you ever felt happy and sad at the same time? Or anxious, depressed and angry? Emotions cluster like this because our world and our reactions to it are always complex. If we listen for this complexity of feeling, we invite the other person into the wholeness of their experience, as well.

Listening for body, listening for meaning and feeling—what more could there be? I would add one more level to this model. I would call it *listening for soul*, or *listening for presence*. It's the most powerful aspect of listening in my experience and yet the least talked about. When a listener has it, the other person feels safe, grounded, and affirmed. This is what my friend Joyce offered so powerfully as she listened me through my depression and loss those many years ago.

The best listeners in my life have this skill. I would count my spiritual director, Genjo, a Buddhist Abbot and a great listener at the soul level. I get that he reads my body language and that he cares to understand my thoughts and feelings. But there is a deeper dimension. Sometimes during a session I may be silent for several minutes at a time. Genjo doesn't leave mentally to do his grocery shopping or consider his weekend plans. I am still the primary focus of his attention, though I am saying nothing at all. He is present to my presence.

If *you* are sensing this oneness between your presence as listener and the presence of the other person, then in that moment you are powerfully inviting them to sense their own presence or soul. You are in the present moment, and being with the other, you are inviting them into the present moment, as well.

There was a young man in China who wanted to train for the circus. He apprenticed himself to a master juggler. First his master showed him how to hold a spinning plate on the end of a bamboo stick while he balanced the stick on his nose. After a month he'd learned the skill and returned to the circus.

“Am I ready?” the young man said. “Not yet,” replied the master juggler.

Now his master had him stand on a golden ball, balancing on one foot as he rolled the ball around the tent in a circle. After *two* months he'd learned the skill and returned again to the circus.

“Am I ready now?” the young man asked. “Not yet, replied the master juggler.”

Next his master gave him ten pomegranates that he must juggle in a perfect circle. After three months he returned once more, proud of his success.

“Am I ready now?” the young man said to the master juggler.

“It's a good start,” his master replied. “Now do them all at once and you'll

be ready.” It was many years before the young man returned again.

Such is the art of listening. It *is* about listening for body, listening for meaning, listening for feeling, and listening for soul. Not sequentially. Not one at a time.

But all at once.