

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

October 25, 2020

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Deep Listening

INTRODUCTION

We heard the words of Rebecca Coppola earlier today:

*Breath of life -
Give us the patience to live into this faith of community,
The curiosity to ask loving questions of each other,
And allow us to be always deepening
our spiritual awareness of the worlds within and without.¹*

These words are a perfect connection to the theme of Deep Listening in today's service. I want to talk about deep listening (as opposed to normal listening or shallow listening) as it relates to listening to yourself, listening to someone else, and listening to the divine or God. In this way I will touch on what Reverend Coppola refers to as "deepening our spiritual awareness of the worlds within and without."

SELF

Normal listening to the self would mean listening to one's thoughts. The incessant stream of thoughts is sometimes referred to as Monkey Mind. There's a lot of noise there, a constant chattering. The surface of the mind is also where desires are. If I'm practicing normal listening to myself, I might hear the sound of my cravings: I want to watch a movie, I want a cookie.

Deeper listening allows me to hear what's going on inside me beneath those surface cravings. Is there a fear or a deeper longing? (I have learned that when I am craving something, I can ask myself what feeling am I trying to avoid.) And beneath that is the certain knowledge that I am OK just as I am. (Whether or not I have a cookie.)

That deeper sense of calmness and self-sufficiency, the part of myself that is always compassionate and loving, can't be found on the surface by normal listening. It can only be accessed by deep listening.

chakra: *Belly or Root*

If there is a part of the body that relates to this deep listening to the self, it would be deep within me, one of the lower chakras or energy centers of the body: the belly chakra or the root chakra at the base of the spine.

quotation: *Rumi*

This quotation by the poet Rumi connects to this idea of deep listening to the self:

*If you want a clear mirror,
behold yourself
and see the shameless truth
which the mirror reflects.*

*If metal can be polished
to a mirrorlike finish,
what polishing might the mirror
of the heart require?*

*Between the mirror and the heart
is this single difference:
the heart conceals secrets,
while the mirror does not.²*

OTHER

Next I want to explore normal listening and deep listening between two people. Between you and me. In normal listening, I am sorting your words into meanings that fit my meanings. I compare what you say to my reality. If I'm confused I ask you for clarity, but for the purpose of narrowing your meanings to fit what I already know.

In deep listening, however, I listen in long silence to you. If I ask a question, it is open-ended. Your meanings don't have to fit my life. Instead, I am giving you space to grow by listening.

chakra: *Heart*

If there is a chakra energy center of the body that relates to this kind of listening, it is the heart. Deep listening to another person is an act of emotional openness.

quotation: *Thich Nhat Hanh*

This quotation from Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the practice of deep listening with a loved one:

Deep listening is, most of all, the practice of being present for our loved one. We have to be truly present for the person we love. In the person we love there is suffering that we haven't seen yet. If we haven't yet understood that person, we can't be their best friend; we can't be someone who is able to understand them. It's like when an excellent musician finds someone who understands his music: they can become best friends. Someone who can understand our suffering is our best friend. We listen to each other. We are there for each other.³

SOCIETY

One step beyond one-on-one listening, but before I get to listening to God, is listening to society. My metaphor for this is listening to the news. In normal listening to the news, I listen for what fits my world view, my politics, my values. I'm listening for what fits my existing analysis of how people are—including countries, political parties, and famous people.

However, in deep listening to the news, I engage with opinions that challenge me. Four years ago, many people were surprised that Trump was elected. It took deep listening to understand the people who voted for Trump.

quotation: *Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan*

My current example of this is from the New York Times, and an article this week called "The Real Divide in America is Between Political Junkies and Everyone Else." Research shows that only 15-20% of Americans follow the news closely, meaning that 80-85% of people follow the news causally or not at all. And differences of opinion between those who follow news closely and those who don't are stronger than differences between Democrats and Republicans! They asked people what are the most important problems facing the country, and here is one of their findings:

For example, Democrats and Republicans who don't follow politics closely believe that low hourly wages are one of the most important problems facing the country. But for hard partisans, the issue barely registers.⁴

In other words, most people of both parties think that low wages are an important issue—but news junkies from both parties are far less likely to see this as an important issue. To wrap my mind around this requires deep listening, because it challenges the way I previously understood public opinion.

chakra: *Temple (intellect)*

This kind of deep listening is about understanding. It is intellectual, and therefore the chakra or energy center is the temple chakra, the third eye.

GOD

Finally, I want to talk about listening to God. Here's my example. Imagine you are sitting on a covered porch and it's raining. Normal listening would mean that you are listening for information: is the rain slowing down or getting stronger? Can you hear cars in the rain or animals?

Deeper listening would occur if you really relax and just listen to the rain—not trying to hear anything, just being in the moment and listening. In the sound of the rain and the silence between the raindrops you might find a sense of serenity. You might feel an expanding awareness. You might feel a connection to something beyond yourself, a connection to God—at least, God is my word for it. You might call it a connection to nature or beauty or peace.

chakra: *Crown (spirit)*

The chakra related to this kind of deep listening is the crown chakra at the top of the head. This is the spirit chakra.

quotation: *John Saxon*

This quotation from John Saxon speaks to this kind of deep listening for the divine, for God:

Listen! Can you hear it? The Spirit is calling.

It calls us in the silence and through the noise and busyness of our daily lives. It calls us in the brightness of the day and the darkness of the night, in times of hope and despair.

*Listen! Can you hear it? The Spirit is calling.*⁵

CONCLUSION

I find God or the divine in three places: within me, between you and me, and beyond me in mystery. The last example that I just gave, finding God in the sound of the rain, really brings me back to the first example, listening for God within myself. The part of me that is always serene and compassionate, that I access by deep listening to myself, is the same as the feeling of serenity I get from deep listening to nature. And the deep listening that is practiced between you and me allows God to flourish there.

May each of us be open to deeper listening in ourselves; deeper one-on-one listening with friends, family, people in this congregation; deeper listening to forces of society; and deeper listening to the rain, the wind, the quiet places where we can find serenity and deep connection beyond ourselves that we might call peace or we might call God or we might call beauty.

May it be so.

¹ Rev. Rebecca C. Coppola, “Guide us gently into appreciating and listening...”

<http://revbecketcoppola.weebly.com/meditations--pastoral-prayers.html>

² Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Inner Garment of Love*, trans. Kabir Helminski. The Rumi Collection, ed. K. Helminski. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. pp. 49-50

³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *How to Love*. Parallax Press, Berkely California, 2015. p. 84

⁴ Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan, “The Real Divide in America is Between Political Junkies and Everyone Else.” *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2020. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/opinion/polarization-politics-americans.html>)

⁵ John Saxon, “Listen! The Spirit is Calling.” <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/listen-spirit-calling>