

Are You Listening?

Rev. David Ruffin

For Deep Listening

As I reflected this week, I thought anew of how extraordinary a promise we make at this church, when we covenant to seek the truth, because the world of truth is often not an easy world at all.

And Yet, we trust that there is a deeper truth which can hold all truth, especially the truth of love. And so we seek the truth in love, which is, I believe, truly the only way truth can make an appearance.

Today I want to focus on one very practical, and often largely underdeveloped, way in which we can put this power of love into practice in seeking truth:

I want to talk about listening.

I want to talk to you as a crowd of “doers,” who, like me, want to be in action, who see listening itself as an action, an action of love through which hidden and hard truths that need to be surfaced can be. And can be faced, healed, and transformed.

Listening is an act of love that makes way for the deepest of truths.

Now the irony talking about listening is not lost on me. I’m reminded of G. Bernard Shaw who said, "I believe in the discipline of silence so much I could talk for hours about it."

But the subject of talking is not actually a bad place to start our explorations of listening. Talking, after all, seems to be something most of us have down pretty well.

Speaking for myself, at least, I’m rarely at a loss for words. As are most preachers. For instance, one of the other great Unitarian preachers (of the last century), Rev. Richard Gilbert, estimated he uttered well over ten million words from the pulpit over his forty-five year preaching career.

And yet, we preachers also work hard to remind ourselves that quantity isn’t the measure of good preaching. Rather what makes for the kind of powerfully pastoral and prophetic preaching we all seek is actually LISTENING. Deep listening, in dialogue with a congregation and the world.

Rev. John Wolf, another great UU preacher and mentor to many, once said if you don’t know what to preach on, go visit someone in the hospital... presumably, not to just try out some ideas on them because, hey, they’ve got nowhere to go – Captive audience.

No, presumably, and my own experiences would certainly confirm this, Rev. Wolf was calling us to listen to them, to root our speaking in listening deeply to truths that arise from real experience.

And here's another thing I struggle with: Despite my own proclivity to make a speech, I often doubt the value of my words.

Especially at age thirty-four, I think of guidance, articulated by Lakota Chief Wabashaw, for example: "Guard your tongue in youth... and in age you may mature a thought that will be of service to your people."

And so, this doubt, this discomfort I feel, about talking so much, IS a good thing, I think. And I suspect I'm not alone in this. Many of us, I suggest, could benefit from a healthier dose of discomfort with our habits of talking.

Because we are living in a world where humans are talking more and more, and listening less and less. Perhaps "talking" isn't even the right word, because it implies conversation, and much of our communication has become broadcasting:

- Twenty-four hour cable news style
- sound biting, spin room spinning,
- talk show talking heads performative persuading,
- Twitter tweeting, facebook feeding..
- Emailing, messaging, texting... Outputting!

OUTPUT, by the looks of it IS actually the measure in so much of life these days.

And the more we output, the less we can actually receive. That is receive well.

It's like on those old cell phones, remember them? There used to be a button for SEND and a button for RECEIVE. It seems we've gotten stuck on SEND!

So much so manufacturers decided we didn't need that receive button after all, and they took it off.

But that receive button is what we need so much, right? We need it badly. We need to listen and we need to be heard.

A world without listening is a world without understanding, It's a world without authentic connection. it's a world of conflict.

Sound expert, Julian Treasure, put it bluntly saying, the genuine opposite of listening... is violence. Shoot first, ask questions later.

So what's going on here?

Why do we insist on talking so much?!

Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese spiritual philosopher, author of the widely read book *The Prophet*, offers an answer I want us to consider. He says:

“You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts; ...When you can no longer dwell in the solitude of your heart you live in your lips, and sound is a diversion...”

Gibran suggests that when we can't deal with what's on our heart and mind, that we use words to try to escape. We fill the lonely or awkward or otherwise uncomfortable silence, cover up the hard truths therein, and miss-communicate.

Can you relate?

You know how sometimes people will approach someone after they've lost a loved one, not knowing what to say, and instead saying too much, talking and talking, sometimes ending up using some worn out, trite, phrase that can be more hurtful than helpful.

Such talking is, of course, really to deal with one's own discomfort, rather than meeting the person who's suffered in their loss, who probably just needs a hug, a squeeze of the hand, some simple assurance of our love.

Or maybe you've handled your own pain in that way, wasting a precious opportunity to speak your heart to a friend, or even your minister, by talking about everything else but the actual source of your disquiet.

Or maybe, like me, once upon a time, you've committed (or been a victim of) the classic dating blunder of gabbing away, nervously, all through dinner, maybe even with your mouth full, trying to make that winning impression, & earn affection, when the key to the heart of the person across the table, and certainly to the mystery of your potential alchemy, lies in the simple act of shutting up and listening!

Words, words, words! As in *Hamlet* ...
but also, Eliza Doolittle in *My fair lady*... remember?

“Words, words, words!
I'm so sick of words
I get words all day through
....Is that all you blighters can do?”

This was her response to her courter's endless proclamations.

“Never do I ever want to hear another word (she says)
There isn't one, I haven't heard.
Don't TALK of love, show me...
Show me!”

How do we move from even the most eloquent and earnest talk of love to SHOWING our love? And to seeking and sharing the deepest truth of love, of the kind we can feel in our bones?

One thing I've found to be clear, is that to reach the deepest truth of love, that binds us all, we have to face a lot of harder, sometimes even divisive, truths along the way... we have to show up with love and meet these truths which aren't comfortable staying at the table.

So having examined the pitfalls of talking, let's take a closer look at simply... "not-talking." That is, let's look again at how LISTENING can be an act of love - a powerful way to show our love and give truth a chance to make an appearance.

And before we jump into listening to others, let's keep in mind that Listening can be an act of love we give to ourselves.

In Buddhist and early Yoga traditions, Satya, or truthfulness is a foundational practice. Author and Yogi Steven Cope tells of how a friend of his who had decided she needed and wanted to turn over a new leaf and practice truthfulness of speech, found that habits of untruthful speech were so pervasive for her, that to succeed, she had to actually refrain from speaking... all together.

She had to shut up and listen to what was behind her words. Listen to, rather than edit, her thoughts and feelings. After initially planning to keep silent for a week, Cope's friend remained silent for *three weeks*, waiting until she'd heard herself into a place of deeper truth from which she felt right to speak again.

Listening can be an act of love through which we listen ourselves into lives of greater authenticity and integrity.

We may not have to stop talking all together (though some of our loved ones might think that's a terrific idea) but we can give ourselves the gift of deeper listening, a little each day. We're worth that act of self-love. We're worth our own ears.

AND...

We are Relational beings; we all need others in our lives who will really listen to us, and they in turn need to count on us to listen to them.

We keep much of the hardest truth beneath the surface because the world, frankly, doesn't seem interested in hearing and responding to what's really going on with us.

**BUT WE CAN LISTEN EACH OTHER INTO TRUTH...
AND THAT IS AN AMAZING ACT OF LOVE.**

Rev. Rebecca Parker, another of our great prophetic liberal religious thinkers, tells a story of how her close friend, Maxine, discovered how transformative the simple act of listening could be when her brother Lyle, returned from world war II.

When Lyle came home, the only veteran to return alive to the small Iowa town he'd left for the Western Front, the whole town came out to greet their hero. When the train pulled into the station, the band played. Family and friends waved and cheered, and the mayor stood ready to greet him. But, in response to the music and cheers, the man who climbed off the train stared back, mutely.

Lyle's family took him home to their farm. He wouldn't speak, he wouldn't sleep, and he would barely eat. Lyle's sister, Maxine, decided to keep her brother company. Whenever she could, she'd sit in the parlor with him –sometimes telling him what she was thinking about, but mostly just sitting, snapping beans or mending socks, while Lyle remained like a stone. No expression.

It went on like this for days that flowed into weeks and on into months. Then one night, late, Maxine was sitting with Lyle, quietly knitting, when the eyes in Lyle's still face filled with tears. The tears spilled over and began to run down his face, followed by great gusts of sobbing. Maxine just held him.

Then he began to talk.

He talked of the noise, the cold, the smoke, the death of his buddies. And then he spoke of the camps, the mass graves, the smell.

He talked all night. Maxine listened.

When the morning light came across the fields, she went to the kitchen and cooked him breakfast. He ate. Then he went out and did the morning chores.

Maxine listened to Lyle's truth, even when it was locked deep within him. She listened him back into speech, and back into LIFE...

In a world in which we are ALL struggling, do we want to clang cymbals, blow brass, & shout cheers at our projections of one another? Or can we, like Maxine, listen?

Can we create space to meet each other wherever we may be, open up our hearts and hear the truth in love? Listen one another and ourselves into spaces of truth where, as Gibran puts it, "the voice within our voices can speak to the ear of our ears"?

Such listening and sharing, soul to soul, is not, of course, something we can just jump into the deep end with, with just anyone. I'm not suggesting you tell the next person who asks "how are you?" the whole truth just because they asked-- including the impact of your early childhood

traumas on your afternoon. Nor am I suggesting you expect to receive such deeply personal disclosure from others, even when you remember to listen.

But we do need spaces for the sacred truthful exchange made possible when we really listen, and we do need practice in order to extend that kind of open-heart space out into our everyday lives, at least a little more.

This is why I think all our UU congregations are working so hard to strengthen and expand our small group programs. These small circles of deeper connection and reflection, are central to us creating the Beloved Community for each other.

Seeking this deeper truth of a Beloved Community in which all individuals are truly included and heard, leads me to a final point I want to remind us of before closing today.

That is that Listening is an act of love that can also draw us toward justice.

There is so much incredible work of storytelling happening now in our congregations around justice. The secret to surfacing the concealed and marginalized stories that call for our attention, and then telling and living out the new justice stories that respond to them, IS, turns out, yes, LISTENING.
Listening toward justice.

I think of Saul Alinsky, who is the founder of community organizing justice work in this nation as we have seen it in the 20th century used in the farm workers movement and the Civil Rights struggle, among innumerable other justice campaigns.

Alinsky took his inspiration from workers' unions in Chicago in the 1930's. What he witnessed and was trained in began with labor organizers listening to the community, bringing people together to listen to one another and learn what their interests, struggles, and needs really were, and then organizing these people to fight together to see their most pressing needs met.

It's all a reminder of just how powerful your ears are as instruments of, not just love, but justice. When we let our listening do its work, it connects us right to our heart, to each other, and to the deepest truth we all seek.

When we learn to listen anew, we learn to love AND LIVE anew!

If the opposite of violence is indeed listening, then listening can be an act of love that can bring us and our world much needed peace. Imagine a church whose members knock on doors all across this city, and simply listen. Imagine being known and becoming trusted because we learn better to love our neighbors, as ourselves, in this way.

The world, it seems, is talking itself in circles.

It needs churches that listen.

So let us keep asking ourselves: Are we listening? Are we listening? Are we listening?

Amen