

The Will and the Skill: The Sacred Art of Listening
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Have you heard the story of the Buddhist scholar and the Zen Master?

The scholar was an expert in Buddhism, who had arranged to meet a Zen master over a cup of tea, so that he might further his "enlightenment". As the tea was being prepared, the scholar began to talk about his extensive background in Buddhist studies. He rambled on and on about all that he knew.

The master listened patiently until the tea was ready. Then he poured the tea into the scholar's cup letting it overflow and run all over the floor. The scholar saw what was happening and shouted; "Stop, stop! My cup is full; you can't get any more in!"

The master stopped pouring and said: "As is your cup, so are you also overflowing. Before you can find enlightenment, your cup will need to be emptied."

We live in a time that is overflowing with copious information. There is so much knowledge vying for our attention. There are so many stories and opinions to take in. "Talking heads" are everywhere. It is ironic in a way that there is so much energy and effort put into communication, yet so there is little that satisfies our thirst for connection.

Have you seen the Kleenex commercial that ran on TV a few months ago? Perfect strangers, who just happened to sit together on the same park bench, miraculously share a moment of connection so moving, they need a Kleenex to wipe their tears.

We have a deep need to be heard. When someone truly listens... it can move us to tears....

Maybe that is because it is so rare that we really listen to each other.

What usually happens is that we all talk at the same time!

Kay Lindahl, in her book, The Sacred Art of Listening, begins with these words; "Perhaps one of the most precious and powerful gifts we can give another person is to really listen to them, to listen with quiet, fascinated attention, with our whole being, fully present."

She reminds us how precious and powerful it is to be listened to.

Despite the willing strangers on the park benches in the Kleenex commercials, encountering someone who can and will listen (without expecting to be paid) is not a daily occurrence for most of us...

Bombarded by boundless information, we can all get so caught up in ideas and opinions that we leave little room for really connecting with another being. When we forget to leave space open in our hearts to connect with other beings our communications become just mutual broadcasts. Perhaps some of our broadcasts contain useful information, but making "announcements" rather than making connection will never satisfy our yearning to be "enlightened".

Without someone who will listen to us in a way that connects us to who we are and who we long to be, we will never find wholeness, or healing,... Without learning to listen to each other we will never experience the sacred space that exists among us and between us.

There are so many longing to be heard, desperate to be listened to.

I think it is especially difficult for those who have been silenced for long amounts of time for whatever reason to learn to listen. Before, they can learn to listen to another, they need to be heard. Once they have experienced being heard, perhaps they can learn to listen to themselves.

When a person who has never really been heard is asked to give "quiet, fascinated attention" to another person, they hear that directive as just another time when they are expected to be mute. If you have lived through a time when you have been kept silenced, when no one wanted to hear you, your need to be heard can be overwhelming. You may shout and go on and on...

I look at our society and see that it is full of people who are seeking to be heard. There are so many voices are shouting, listen to me, we are all in danger of going deaf!

In this time of rapid digital communication, when the amount of information, when the sound of so many alternative voices is only limited by the speed of your internet service provider, we are approaching a critical moment when we must learn how to really connect with each other, or we will all go deaf.

Talking, talking, talking. No one is listening!

All too often we think we are listening, when what we are really doing is collecting and sorting through vast amounts of information, making constant discernments about whether the other person we are "listening" to is worthy of our time, is worthy of

inclusion into our network of connections. We are constantly making judgments about whether or not this or that person can hear us.

With so much to listen to, so many voices seeking to be heard, we are constantly trying to determine who is worthy of our attention! Less and less space remains...for connection...

I believe that those of us who are committed to changing the way the world works based on the belief that every being is intrinsically worthy, must learn to free up more space in our hearts to truly connect with others. We need to learn to be better listeners.

We need to learn to be fully present with whomever we encounter, to give quiet, fascinated attention to the every being who will, if we give them space, unfold and become who they are.

Listening is the learning how to “get yourself out of the way” to make room for another.

It isn't easy. When you first practice listening you just have to just pretend, “act as if”, you can set aside your issues, your agenda, your story in order to just be present to another.

As you practice listening, unconditionally attentive to what you hear, you will find that a door will open that allows for a “sacred” connection with another being.

Those who become skilled at listening learn to resist giving advice, resist one upping the other person with their better story, resist talking about the weather or sports or “those people” (anything external that takes the focus off what is being revealed about the other's internal thoughts and feelings). When you become engaged in listening, you learn to resist the urge to smooth over tension or conflict or that which is difficult with polite words or platitudes. You learn to listen to what is, rather than project your idea of what could be.

You hear what the other person thinks and feels and what they give meaning to.

As you step into the role of listener you will know that your only role is to tell the other person what you have heard them say, so that they can hear themselves.

As you find the will to be a listener, as you trust that as you can *step away from yourself* you will find that you can become a representative of a source of comfort and healing that is beyond yourself. Whether you are aware of doing this or not, you will represent a source of healing that miraculously appears when the soul of another is accepted unconditionally and loved without judgment.

When we learn to listen we become both the symbol and the source for caring.

When this happens you will feel like you are “channeling” that which is holy! You are reflecting, to mirroring the “spark of the divine” that is within the other person. You are embodying the promise of the beloved community. You are the representative of the transcendent source of the soul’s repair.

In other words, you will know you have mastered the skills of listening when you are quite aware that something or someone else is “in the room” ...besides you!

When that happens you are not just responding to the person before you desperate for a care-full hearing, you are the beloved community. That is ministry.

We all need to practice this ministry of presence with each other..

The best part of learning to listen is that the one who listens will be more aware, more centered, more whole, more available to themselves...

Each of us hungers and thirsts for connection. May we leave open space in our hearts for each other, getting ourselves out of the way enough, to hear and see and welcome the spark of the divine speaking, moving us to connect with what is truly worthy of our time...

May it be so!