

Paying Attention - Listen

September 24, 2006

Do you listen better if someone shouts or whispers? Do you listen better if someone looks in your eyes as they speak or if they speak across the room? Do you listen better if there is a limited amount of background distractions or if there are background distractions?

Of course I suspect that we all listen better to whispers, listen better when engaged intimately and in direct visual contact, and listen better when giving full attention to the words rather than trying to hear over background noises. This is so because; really and truly listening is really and truly paying attention to another.

But listening and paying attention is not something that happens without some practice and intentionality; therefore I like to take at least a few minutes each day to listen more intently. As is the case with all of us, the visual senses that I encounter each day are staggering: Television, email, snail mail, moving vehicles, flashing neon and safety lights, advertising flyers, newspapers, magazines and masses of people are a daily bombardment. Oftimes I do not even know that I am on sensory overload until I feel atightness in my jaw and impatience in my mind and until I become aware that I am being less than attentive to others. So what do I listen to? I listen to the rustling of the wind, the flutter of tree leaves, my cat Tito purring, birds singing, soothing music, the sound of my own breathing, and silence. And, you know what, sometimes this silence can be absolutely deafening. This reminds me that it is important to think about listening and paying attention with our ears. One of my favorite authors, Alice Walker wrote in her book, *The Temple of My Familiar* about her husband. She said, "I was attracted to him because he was one giant big ear." In order to stay and be in right and good relationships with other it is important to be attentive, and practice becoming like one big ear.

Paying attention really involves intentionality of all the senses. I love the story about Elizabeth Peabody, some of you have probably already heard me tell it, but indulge me again please. She lived in the 1800's and was a brilliant thinker, educator, and early Unitarian educator and leader. She never married and was considered a bit eccentric because she was so bright and innovative in her thinking and her life style. One day, as was often the case, with her she was walking in the Boston Common ruminating on some one or another theological, philosophical conundrum. She walked right smack dab into a large tree knocking her on to the ground and giving her quite a bruise on her forehead. Those around her who witnessed this ran up and after being sure she was okay asked, "But Elizabeth didn't you see the tree?" "Of course, I saw the tree," she answered. No more was said. I think of that story, when I think about paying attention, for isn't it true we can see lots of trees in front of us, we can see even the biggest tree in front of us and we can still not be paying attention and walk right into it.

Paying attention means that we must engage all of our senses, the one I think we might want to focus on today is listening. The sense of sight involves seeing light waves, which move much very fast, much faster than sound. To be exact light moves at 186,000 miles per second, while sound waves move at 1,088 feet per second. Thus to listen well we must intentionally slow down.

Let's also be clear that listening well does not involve hearing better. I don't hear well and as I age, my hearing becomes less fine but the loss of hearing should not compromise my listening. Listening involves different skills. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, a professor of pastoral theology has identified three such skills. ¹

1. Accurate paraphrasing

¹ *Christian Century*, August 22, 2006 "Paying Attention- the art of listening", Professor Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger p 24-30

2. Productive questioning

3. And checking ones perceptions

Carl Rogers, those of you who took psychology will perhaps remember him as the person who identified and taught accurate paraphrasing as empathetic listening, described empathy this way. “To sense the clients’ private world as if it were your own, but without every losing the “as if” quality- this is empathy and seems essential to therapy.” One must pay attention to be able to accurately paraphrase what has been said. It is not guessing what one has said, nor is it adding your own thoughts and opinions to what one has said it is reflecting key words and thoughts back to the speaker.

Productive questioning involves asking both open ended and welcoming ones and asking questions that clarify meaning.

But the hardest skill to develop and to become comfortable with is the skill that makes us check our perceptions. One of the first ways to develop this is to become conscious of how we listen and learn to identify reactions. There are certain ways that are almost automatic when listening. If you are honest about this you can identify them. First, we almost always take what someone says and put it alongside our own experiences, turning and molding the expressed thoughts of another until it fits against our own experiences. Then when we respond we use our thoughts and examples to talk or speak to the other. Second, and we have all been both guilty and victim of this, we don’t wait till the other person is done speaking but jump in to offer our words. Third, there are words or phrases that have emotional overtones that influence what we are hearing. Checking our perceptions and practicing good listening help us to not become victim to this. Let me give just one example of a study done that confirms this there could be many more. A group of people were shown a film of two cars colliding. One week

later they were broken into two groups one group was asked how fast were the cars going when the *bumped* into each other, and whether there was any broken glass the other group was asked how fast were the cars going when the smashed into each other? The group who were asked how fast they were going when they *smashed* into each other replied that the cars were going much faster than had been reported and that there was broken glass, when in fact there was none. This is just one example of the need to check our perceptions for we all have memories and perceptions that greatly influence how we listen. Listen to the difference in your perceptions as I say some of these phrases.

Battle of the sexes: relationships between men and women

Most controversial: most important

Focus on differences: search for common ground

Win the argument: understand another point of view

The other side: another side

Thus while practicing good listening you might ask yourself this question: What was I thinking as I was listening? What memory or image of my past experiences or interactions with this person have been triggered? Remember our memory is a powerful force for good or ill in how we perceive those around us and sometimes our listening is more a reaction to past images and memories than to current words. Listen for this and other challenges. Listen not to confirm your own opinions or perspectives, listen not to hear evidence that affirms your point but that may broaden your perspective.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish Theologian, taught us about the I and Thou relationship. One of the big challenges facing us as humans and in all our interactions is how to maintain our individual self hood while at the same time maintaining relationship with the other. The I-Thou is a mind set that helps us to deepen our spiritual connection with others. Buber came to

understand faith not as a pursuit of an ecstatic experience but as a life of attentiveness to others and the experience of the divine in that experience of interconnectedness.

Paying attention to another is the most positively affirming act of love we can extend. It is the way to see the divine in another. Just as we began by affirming the divine in Abigail Acadia Shapiro, let us end by committing ourselves anew to paying attention to the other.
So be it.