

Gift of Grace



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JUST Listening

By Sharon Browning

Listening is the oldest and perhaps most powerful tool of healing. Our listening creates sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person.

— Rachel Naomi Remen

MOST WEDNESDAY mornings, I walk around the streets near the Clinic and St. Francis Inn, and just listen. It's a luxury, this listening. It's what everyone working inside the clinic does too; but they must do it while engaged in myriad other patient-care tasks. I am privileged with time, inclination, and the generosity of clinic staff, volunteers, and patients to do only this: listen.

One definition of justice is "right relationship". Paul Tillich made the connection between justice and listening when he observed: "All things call to us with loud and soft voices. They want us to listen. They want us to understand their intense claims, their justice for being. But we can give it to them only through the love that listens." JUST Listening empowers people simply by providing a space in which they can speak and be heard without judgment, condition, or ego. Most of us can count on one hand the number of times we have been deeply listened to; people living lives of vast social exclusion may never have experienced the embrace of a listener at all.

Ideas, insights, analysis, new perspectives and solutions often arise from the generative space created by listening. Suddenly we can hear ourselves and the Inner Wisdom we hold. "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force... When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life." (Brenda Ueland)

TIME AND AGAIN, people listened to in Kensington are startled by their own insight, or edified by a deep recognition of their own goodness. There is a thoughtfulness that gradually moves in during an extended conversation; it's a process of self-reflection and clarification, a space in which Inner Wisdom can be recognized and honored.

The medical staff at the Clinic tell many stories of patients who gained a new insight, took a step toward health and wholeness, or were emotionally fortified simply by being listened to with compassion and respect. The safe and receptive space at the clinic creates an atmosphere of trust where people feel able to share otherwise-hidden parts of themselves more freely. I am regularly awed by the profound, moving stories and perspectives with which I am gifted.

Truthfully, I feel like an unworthy recipient of such trust and openness. The gratitude with which people on the margins respond to the simple act of someone listening to them seems somehow disproportionate to the act itself. This response springs from a deep human hunger for connection, for acceptance, for love, and it demonstrates the power of listening to awaken the spirit and nourish the souls of both parties to the conversation.

THESE ARE NOT one-way relationships. I am both enriched and stretched by my exchanges with Clinic and Inn guests. Many people living on life's edges are adept at spotting insincerity, fear, pity, condescension, and manipulation of any

kind. This astuteness is a leveling factor, making genuine relationship and mutual growth possible if one is willing to be vulnerable, rigorously self-reflective, and accountable for all of those ego dysfunctions that get in the way of honest and intimate relationship. So listening is not only an act of justice, it is a rigorous spiritual path, a challenging journey of the spirit.

I have learned more about pure, unfettered gratitude from people who have nothing than I have from anyone else. I have been pulled into a circle of generosity of spirit, tutored on the virtue of patience, and instructed on the true nature and function of faith. And I am always brought face to face with my own shortcomings and sore need of grace. Listening in Kensington necessitates a contemplative awareness and rigorous self-scrutiny. It's also amazingly freeing....the freedom of being nothing; I don't have to do or be anything. There is a dynamic of Spirit at work over which I neither have, nor desire control. All I have to do is listen.

Although I am tempted to say that I am the major beneficiary of this listening, ultimately I believe that there is a profound mutuality for both speaker and listener in these exchanges, a kind of communion.

TO LISTEN in this way is to encounter God, both in Light and Shadow. "If you're really listening, if you're awake to the poignant beauty of the world, your heart breaks regularly. In fact, your heart is made to break; its purpose is to burst open again and again so that it can hold

ever-more wonders." (Andrew Harvey) And if you're really listening, you're also awake to the massive suffering of those of us living on the social margins: the fierce addictions, debilitating mental illness, chronic homelessness and ill health, the pervasive violence. So one way or another, whether by beauty or sorrow, listening on Hager Street is guaranteed to break your heart, crack it wide open, fuse it to so many other broken hearts.

Perhaps every clinic should have listeners, whose sole task is to prime the pump of healing simply by being present to the articulated, shared experience of patients. And for sure, the world would be transformed if we recognized our common humanity enough to simply listen to each other. **JUST** listen. It would break, and heal our hearts. Which is what they are made to do.