

How Listening Gave Me My Sight

By Donna Duffey

I volunteer at the House of Grace as a “listener” through the Just Listening program. We are trained to listen with the heart open; to allow space for others to share what is in their hearts. Our job is not to fix problems, tell people what to do, or judge in any way. There is more, but at the core, this is our work.

Every time I go, I remind myself that everyone has a story, and everyone deserves the chance to be heard. Yet to listen is harder than you might think.

I started this work as part of my spiritual journey, intuiting that it would possibly be a “next step” in my progression. My husband and I had recently placed our fifth child, who has Downs syndrome and autism, in an adult placement.

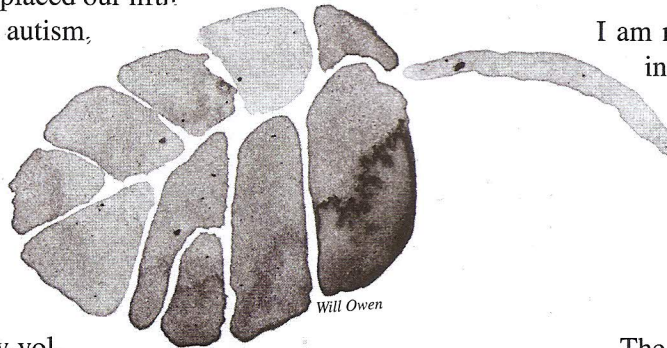
I felt raw, but ready. At first, I was nervous and unsure, not knowing what to anticipate. I decided not to anticipate. (This, too, is harder to do than you might think.)

From the outset, I was struck by how volunteers at House of Grace interact with clinic visitors. Their kindness, gentleness, and care show with every detail of their work. They come, whether it is 100 degrees or 3 degrees, in snow, rain, sunshine. Their devotion and love are palpable.

My own experience interacting with visitors has deeply changed me. The stories break me open and often bring me to tears. I listen to intimate stories of sadness and grief and lessons learned from devastating experiences. The honesty of people astounds me. We spend thousands of hours with good friends and family who share almost nothing in the span of a lifetime. Yet, in minutes, these strangers lay themselves out to be just who they are, hearts vulnerable and open.

Once a gentleman in recovery from addiction shared his life story with me. He told me how much God saved him, and saves him every day. Then he turned to look at me intently. “Our conversation right now is a prayer.” He took my breath away.

A mother visiting from a shelter for battered women, upon learning that I had a daughter with severe disabilities, told me that my daughter is vulnerable to violence like her, and that she would pray for her. Then she hugged me hard, with tears in her eyes. Another gentleman, homeless and sick with AIDS, shared his amazing gratitude for every day that God gives him.



Will Owen

I am never prepared for the respect, interest, and gratefulness with which they meet me. Since beginning this spiritual practice, I have been given so many gifts. My world is expanding. I am learning to see through new eyes.

The most profound and greatest gift I have received from listening is seeing God in every face of those who share. I recognize it, and carry it in my heart. This experience has taught me how to look for God when I am outside the clinic, where it is more difficult. I have to search a bit. But listening shows me that the looking is always worth it. It will reveal to me the face of God, in everyone and everything.

I am the awed and grateful one.

Donna is a homemaker, mom to five, Grandmom to five, and a volunteer listener at the clinic.