

I didn't get straight A's in kindergarten. It's true. On every report card there was one glaring mark on my otherwise unimpeachable record- Active listening. Right next to active listening, Mrs. Zona my kindergarten teacher always wrote a bold "N." N meant needs improvement. And she never failed to fill in the comment box, "Robin is a very spirited child. She would do well to listen more often."

It was true. I chattered all through recess, nap time and even show and tell. If our teacher took a breath, I was there to fill in the silence.

But I did pass kindergarten and gradually, I learned how to be quiet in class and raise my hand when I wanted to speak. Although I was taught the social graces of dialogue, I never did really get a handle on active listening. You know, kind of fake it till you make it?

In fact, it wasn't until college when taking a course in the Tibetan practice of sitting meditation that I began to understand how active listening really is active.

Harvey Cox, Professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School, has written about his own experiences with listening. He writes, "Only in recent years have I learned that prayer can be simply listening, and that listening itself can be a spiritual discipline. [...]. At first I found the silent sitting practice—awkwardly perched cross-legged on a cushion—virtually unendurable, but gradually I learned to watch and listen—without judgment—to what was galloping through my mind."¹ Professor Cox describes an experience with what I would call self-listening. This self-listening, a form of prayer in its own right, invites the quaking awareness of deeper connection to transcendent mystery. It is here, through our discomfort and unease in silence, that truth springs forth from our deepest awareness of being human.

This is the beginning of active listening--connection. When we invite a space to be in relationship with mystery. The first steps toward a spiritual practice known by many names-empathic modeling in psychology, non-violent communication in communication seminars, non-defensive response in mediation, compassionate listening in community building, meditation in Tibetan Buddhism and yes even prayer here at First Church.

But our prayer does not stop with the self. I remember years ago reveling in the practice of meditation in a freshman course on Death and Dying from a Buddhist perspective. Just as I felt myself really engaging with silence and the power of this active listening, our instructor switched gears.

He told us that we were now supposed to listen to each other. Each other? What kind of prayer was listening to the burnout kid behind me who fell asleep every class? As our course syllabus was turned on its head, I remembered my kindergarten report card. Listening to my peers would be a joke. One of my friends bitterly remarked, "I came to college to listen to renowned professors not folks who know as much as I do!"

Begrudgingly we were split up into two groups and we had to listen to each other. Community listening. This was so remedial. This was so touchy feely. This was so hard.

I found myself in conversation preparing my response before the speaker was finished. How many times have you been in a conversation with the most obstinate, rigid, angry person and you latch onto one word that they say? You hold on as they are talking and you begin to formulate your rebuttal. It doesn't matter what they say between when

¹Harvey Cox *The Best American Spiritual Writing*. Ed. Philip Zaleski. Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 2007. xx.

you became defensive and they stopped talking because now it's your turn to talk. Or worse yet, while someone was talking I was going over my midterm from the week before as they were speaking, or thinking about where I would have lunch, or when I had to work...anything but staying focused in the present.

But gradually, just like Professor Cox sitting on an uncomfortable cushion fidgeting and protesting all the way, I found truth in my silence. I learned, and I am still learning to avoid being self-congratulatory or defensive or even to run through my grocery list while a friend is talking.

I heard stories with spiritual truths about death and dying in that course from supposed novices that I would never have encountered otherwise.

Eugene O'Kelly, who wrote a memoir after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, said that his diagnosis forced him to pray in the present. He learned to listen without planning an agenda for six months ahead, and in doing so found peace in the last few months of his life as well as new relationships with his family and friends.

My course ended in the spring of my freshman year and I didn't really give active listening another thought. I understood Tic Nat Han's caution to live in the moment and figured I knew all about the obstacles of being present.

That is until a couple months ago when I visited Washington D.C. for the annual Human Rights Campaign Dinner. I was pumped as the plane touched down, with a full day ahead of me for site seeing while my friend worked at HRC. I had marked off monuments and museums, highlighting the quickest path amongst all of them. Not a bit Type A personality at all.

I quickly dropped my things off at a friend's place and headed for the Capital West stop on the metro.

I had fifteen minutes for the Washington Monument, 15 for the Lincoln Memorial and 10 for the Whitehouse. Stepping off the metro I opened my carefully drawn plan for the day. There was a giant lawn stretched out before me, with trees falling on either side that had been planted by past presidents, congressional leaders, first ladies and even outspoken social reformers. Here were the living remnants of a century of prophets. I began to pray- self-listening- as I strolled past the trees contemplating the persons who planted them remembering my freshman class and centering.

I put my nicely highlighted map of D.C. back in my bag and began to ascend to the hill to the Washington Monument. Mostly on schedule. As I walked up to the monument I began to notice all the conversations around me, and as I approached this monolithic tribute to our first president I started to listen to the tourists. I sat down on the benches next to the monument, deviating slightly from my plan. And I eavesdropped. Well listened. I heard men and women, American and foreign, young and old describing a country I forgot was my own.

In an era marked by increasingly polarized politics and sound-bite conversations whittling the spiritual down to the ravings of televangelists, I listened...and I heard hope. I heard dreams I had forgotten I believed, and stories that I had lost in my liberal cynicism. I had to travel beyond the community I knew in order to find a new way of being in the world.

After some time, I traveled onward to the Lincoln Memorial. I was astonished by this 19' marble figure towering about my 5'2 body. Looking over to the walls I found a familiar quote, the Gettysburg Address, my eyes fell upon the sentence "It is rather for us

to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion." I ran my fingers along the wall reaching toward Lincoln's words, and listened to Lincoln as he addressed a worn-torn nation, as he described the last full measure of devotion.

I sat on the steps watching the sun descend behind the Lincoln Memorial throwing aside my plan for the day. The last full measure of devotion captivated my ears.

Despite appearances, Lincoln is not so far removed from our UU faith. In fact, Lincoln's words for the Gettysburg Address were taken in part from a sermon preached in 1858 by Theodore Parker a Unitarian minister living in Boston.

What is the last full measure of devotion today? What do those powerful words mean here and now?

I thought of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address displayed on the opposite wall of the Gettysburg Address. "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

We are no less divided in many ways than the country Lincoln faced during his presidency. Our divisions are not as clearly demarcated by north and south or by the aftermath of a civil war but they are carefully built barriers along red and blue states within cities according to class and creed. We need now more than ever to find the better angels of our nature.

I believe we have a nation of talkers, chattering themselves into the grave. We haven't been listening.

I haven't been listening. Not really. I listen to myself in silence, and I listen to this church, to Unitarian Universalism but my prayers rarely extend beyond those select communities. Praying with our world is hard.

Listening is hard work. It insists that we stay in the present, not a well planned future or regret-filled past but right here right now. Being in the present certainly isn't made easier as stores flood with holiday music and gifts over a month before Christmas. We are told again and again to think toward the future, leaving little space for the present.

I believe we as Unitarian Universalists, though, have a particular claim to being in the present. We are the religion of here and now. We do not wait upon a distant judgment of heaven or hell as other religions do. Often despite our theological diversity it is our insistence to make the most of this life that unites us.

We are called, by our own principles to live into a present that is inclusive and that recognizes and gives voice to the communities beyond this small corner of Boston.

As we heard in this morning's reading, compassionate listening, spiritual listening requires moving out of our community into foreign territory. This kind of prayer is distinctly active and engaged in the world.

Leah Green's portrayal of listening circles, of Palestinian and Israelis sitting alongside Americans to listen to the pain and rage of generations is a powerful reminder of the potential of prayerful listening. For listening is about being in relationship with another human being in the only way we know how-by witnessing to their truth, and the common struggle we share.

I try to imagine what Compassionate Listening circles might look like here in Boston. Can you imagine what it would be to have dinner with families living in Roxbury who live with the daily realities of gunshots outside their houses and empty cupboards inside their homes? What would it be to listen to their stories and give them agency in this world?

I believe Lincoln listened. I believe he looked across a country torn by war and he listened to their pain and their grief. This is prayerful living. Because he felt the losses they felt, he was able to hold a nation together despite all odds. He wagered everything he had—indeed the future of our country—upon the hope that the United States would again be just what it is known as—united.

Could we give no less devotion to this faith in our world?

Listening, I am sure, sounds like a strange measure of devotion. Not the typical, “message bearing” we are accustomed to when we speak of transformation in our world.

But prayerful listening is no passive endeavor. As Brenda Ueland a Feminist writer reminds us, “listening is a magnetic and strange thing. A creative force. When we really listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other. We are constantly being re-created.”

I propose a listening evangelism. Gone are the days where conservative religion can control the radio and television waves, lambasting society for its evils.

We can usher in the era of the faith of here and now; a religion that will listen to the world rather than endlessly talk to it.

Listening as giving agency to the world to heal itself. Let’s seek the courage required to stand in the noise and hear truth.

I believe we’ve already begun. A couple weeks ago I joined a group of members from this church for an open mic night at Urban Ministry in Roxbury. We sat while young women and men read poetry, sang and rapped about lives unknown to many of us. We heard girls who missed their fathers, and boys who were tired of the violence in their neighborhoods. We heard men tell us about the institution of racism and its poisonous hands reaching into the present and future. I was so proud to be an intern at this church and amazed at the courage it took to risk being uncomfortable and awkward, to risk listening. As Winston Churchill once noted, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” I believe this church has the courage to listen.

Listening to our new neighbors, the folks we don’t know living right next door.

Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt in one of the drive time essays entitled “The World Needs Us” identifies our neighbors. She writes, “Who is our neighbor? The brother who is a born-again Christian; the mother who is a member of an evangelical church; the co-worker who leaves tracts on your desk; the family who won’t let your children play with their children because they are not saved; ... the evangelist who declares women should be silent in the churches; the neighbor who invites you to prayer meeting and encourages you to leave that place you say is a church but she knows is really a cult. Those people are our neighbors, not just the ones we like, or feel good about talking to, or have hope will one day see the light of liberal faith.”

We need to listen to those folks we don’t consider our neighbors. We’ve already begun in Roxbury, listening to the voices of the next generation. Who knows what will come of our compassionate listening project.

But I do know that now is the moment to begin. O'Kelly who I've mentioned also wrote in his memoir that he saw how important it was to "move up" those things he had put off. Have a neighbor you've been meaning to talk with about church? Move it up. Been planning to volunteer at a youth center? Move it up. Want to start listening to the world, living in the present? Move it up.

I believe we were born to listen. We were born to bear witness. We were born to pray.

May it be so. Amen.