

“Listening”
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We all want the same things. All people want to be happy. We want to be loved and accepted. And we all want to be understood. Imagine being able to share whatever it is that’s on our minds without interruption, to have someone really listen. That’s a rare thing in our world. OK, well, we can always pay a professional to listen. A counselor or a therapist. And when we talk, they do seem to pay attention and listen. If they’re good at what they do, they act like they care. I should say that if they are true professionals, they do care.

I remember a cartoon from the New Yorker magazine, in which the psychiatrist’s patient is lying on the couch. All we can see is the back of the patient’s head, but the speech balloon has him saying, “blah, blah, blah,” as the psychiatrist throws aside his notepad and jumps out the window.

It’s probably best not to analyze this cartoon too deeply. (ahem – no pun intended!) But as I said, it’s all too rare in this world to find someone who will listen to us with caring and compassion and without interruption.

Writer Brenda Ueland wrote that listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. “Think how the friends that really listen to us are the ones we move toward,” she says, “and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us good, like ultraviolet rays.

“When we are listened to,” she says, “it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. You know how if a person laughs at your jokes you become funnier and funnier, and if he does not, every tiny little joke in you weakens up and dies?” Whether or not we are listened to affects us profoundly.

When we have a problem we want to talk out, whom do we seek out? We’ve probably learned by now that the eager advice-givers who will gladly tell us exactly what to do are not the people who can really help us. Instead, those who listen with kindness and attentiveness and with little or no judgment are the ones

we tend to seek out. These are the people who seem to ask the right questions, so that in the end, we feel we have figured out the problem ourselves.

One of the keys to growing as spiritual and emotional beings is the gradual process of letting go of obsessively wanting someone to love us, to listen to us, to care about us. A shift comes when we realize the futility of this chase. This shift frees us to concentrate instead on becoming a person who can truly love, who can truly listen and who can truly care about others.

Ueland says, “When we listen to people there is an alternating current that recharges us so we never get tired of each other. We are constantly being re-created.” Brenda Ueland’s father had been a prominent lawyer and judge, and in his elder years, she lamented over the fact that he seemed to have lost his ability to listen. He was a lonely old man who didn’t know how to connect with her; she was frustrated in not being heard. She attributed his inability to listen to a life-long habit of striving, of having to be forceful and assertive in his professional life.

Ueland thought for years afterward that if only she had known as much about listening then as she did later on, she might have been able to bridge the chasm between them. Ueland, who died in 1985 at the age of 93, wrote of having had an opportunity to take a different tack with another man who had lost his ability to listen. He was a forceful businessman who had made a lot of money.

She says, “He talked rapidly and told wonderful stories and it was just fascinating to hear them. But when I spoke –restlessness: ‘Just hand me that, will you? Where is my pipe?’ ...He read countless books and was eager to take in ideas, but he just could not listen to people.

“Well, this is what I did. I was more patient. I did not resist his non-listening talk as I did my father’s. I listened and listened to him, not once pressing against him...with my own self-assertion. I said to myself, ‘He has been under...driving pressure for years. His family has grown to resist his talk. But now, by listening, I will pull it all out of him... When he has been really listened to enough, he will grow tranquil... And he did, after a few days. He began asking me questions. And presently I was saying gently, ‘You see, it has become hard for you to listen.’

“He stopped dead and stared at me. And it was because I had listened with such complete, absorbed, uncritical sympathy, without one flaw of boredom or impatience, that he now trusted me.

“‘Tell me about that,’ he said.” And she did. She told him, in essence, “Unless you listen, you can’t know anybody...” and, that listening is love.

This man, this successful businessman who had stopped listening to people, wrote to Ueland sometime after this encounter to tell her that their conversation changed his life. He and his children had become much closer and he spoke about how original, independent and courageous they were. His wife seemed to really care about him again and they were actually talking about all kinds of things and making each other laugh. He had learned to listen.

Being a good listener is not easy. In order to really listen, we have to give up our own agenda. We have to be at peace and we have to be present to the moment. “Then,” as Ueland puts it, “watch your self-assertiveness. And give it up.” GIVE IT UP. We can’t just will ourselves to listen to people. It takes an attitude of great patience, openness and a resistance to our tendency to pass judgment.

When we listen to another person and give our attention to that person as if he or she is our teacher, and we honor their words as valuable and sacred, all kinds of possibilities awaken. “To act in the world most effectively,” says Buddhist practitioner Jack Kornfield, “our actions cannot come from our small sense of self, our limited identity, our hopes and our fears. Rather, we must listen to a greater possibility and cultivate actions connected with our highest intentions...”

In the Buddhist tradition, those intentions arise from the patient and compassionate Buddha within. Kornfield says, “We must learn to be in touch with something greater than ourselves,” whatever name we may give it. When we are able to let go of our egos and our agendas, when we feel within ourselves our listening heart, there is a deep current of truth that we may hear.

When we listen with compassion, things we never thought possible can happen. The Compassionate Listening Project is an international peace organization which trains members in listening with care, attention and deep compassion to every side of difficult situations.

Recently, a team from the Compassionate Listening Project spent several days in the Middle East with a group of peace activists, some Palestinian, some Israeli. Many of the Palestinian participants had never even spoken with an Israeli person, and many Israelis had never had direct contact with a Palestinian person. I watched a video with some clips of the workshop, and seeing pairs of participants, each one Israeli and one Palestinian, standing facing each other, with the listener often placing a hand on the speaker's shoulder, and seeing the breaking down of the hurt, the tears, the compassion and the looks of understanding passing between them – it was quite moving.

One of the participants said, “This format, of Compassionate Listening, allows us to move through our story, our shadow, our wounds, and to come out the other side. And not only that, but, in the process, to connect with our own humanity, and with the humanity of the other. And to see this happening with Israelis and Palestinians is extremely, extremely...transformational.”

The essence of Compassionate Listening is seeing the person next to us as a part of ourselves. It takes courage to listen honestly and nondefensively. No one has ever lived our life before: we each follow an unknown path and land that is uncharted. It takes great courage to move ahead with openness. As we listen and deepen our compassion, we may find it necessary to change our lives again and again, to let go of parts of ourselves that no longer serve us well.

To listen with compassion is to live a path with heart. It's what Buddhists call, “Living the Life of a Bodhisattva.” A “Bodhisattva” is an “Awakened Being,” “a person who is committed to awakening, a being committed to the freedom and well-being of every being, who...uses every circumstance to express the human capacity for understanding and compassion.” (Jack Kornfield) Of course, no one is perfect. It's about making the commitment and practicing these principles.

Mahatma Gandhi was once asked by a reporter for a message to the Indian people. Gandhi was on a train that was just pulling away from the station. He quickly wrote a note on a piece of paper, leaned out the window and handed it to the reporter. It said, “My life is my message.”

We all want the same things. We all want to be happy. We all want to be loved and accepted. The more we practice listening, the more we develop our capacity for understanding and compassion. And the more we offer love and acceptance to others, the more love and acceptance come to us. If we can change ourselves, we can change the world. May you hold Mahatma Gandhi's words close to your heart: "My life is my message."

Closing words: "Until we meet again, may love and compassion flow through us in our giving and in our receiving."