

FAITH IN THE LISTENING

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Every so often churches and other organizations go through a process of planning about the future. Often these efforts result in plans, sometimes they don't. When they do result in plans, life sometimes shifts so much over time that not much of it gets implemented...sometimes it does.

First Parish is just beginning a process of reflection about possible future directions. But this time the process is meant to be meaningful by itself and stand alone as meaningful regardless. The process is based on a book called 'Holy Conversations' and is about listening to one another...deeply listening and authentically speaking together about who we are and for what we yearn. Today I want to speak about the practice of listening and the practice of authentic speaking as a spiritual practice.

I think that we come here because as individuals we want to become more fully human, to support one another in moving away from those things in the culture that distract us from our humanity in the best sense. And, I believe we come here because we want to live for purpose greater than our private selves. Both of these desires make up what I call the spiritual life...awakening to our deepest humanity (that which connects us with all life and the spirit of love that some know as god)...AND living for a purpose greater than our individual lives.

Now in most organizational planning and in our living (at least in our culture) there is a-foot an serious imbalance of living. Many of us live in our "doing" heads, multi-tasking and accomplishing, convincing and strategizing to achieve our agendas. There is nothing wrong with this per se. Work has to be done and there can be much satisfaction in the world of many tasks...the world of a neatly crossed off "to do" list. It is one aspect of our being, but it has taken over as the main mode in which we reside.

What is the effect of this lop-sided way of living? I notice that it can become easier to begin to view ourselves as worthy because of what we do; living in our lonely heads. It is easy to gradually begin to experience people in ways that are mechanistic and objectifying, rather than knowing them as the sacred being they are...and to forget this about ourselves. And, this way of being is a solitary mode, leading to (what Americans have become famous for) pathological individualism. We communicate from this place for purposes of our doing or winning and gradually forget who we are.

You see this kind of relating everywhere...the media, politics and in many organizations. It creates huge divides between people and we begin to forget the two principles of Unitarian Universalism that I believe (of the seven) are most rich: (#1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person and (#7) the interdependent web of all existence.

First Parish is a place where we seek to find some balance in that living. One of the spiritual practices that enables us to travel to the other side of “LOP” is listening. Re-learning how to listen...alone and with one another is a huge and profound bridge to the fuller life of love and service for which we yearn.

Two movements, two arenas where listening can foster that for which we yearn:

One: LISTENING ALONE Every religion in the world, at its best, instructs us to take time to abide in silence...to empty our chattering minds and breathe...to remember that there is a huge spaciousness in which we live and move and have our being. “Be still and know that I am” from the Hebrew Bible. The meditative practices of the East where the inner self is calmed and comes to know that there is life beyond the exalted ego. The praying Jesus who frequently separated from the crowds to be alone with his god. We are familiar with this kind of emptying and listening...if we would take more time for this listening in the silence.

Now science and medicine have confirmed that this is a good idea. That we are healthier and happier for taking the time away. Those who study creativity have learned that good, vital ideas do not come out of anxious, stuffed -to -the brim, overworked brains. Rather they arise in moments of play and in dreams and in other unlikely moments when we are relaxed and in touch with a certain voice of novelty and innovation and wholeness that is available to us.

TWO: LISTENING TOGETHER This relational listening practice does not get much attention in our day to day lives. Better are we at knowing how to get our point across. Better are we at waiting for the pause so that we can speak. Better we are at listening to talking heads harangue us on television.

Yet, one of the most healing encounters we can have as human beings is the reciprocal one of sharing authentically and knowing that we are being heard. This requires practice and time. When we remember this art we begin to create a container for the growing of better human beings. Being a good listener requires us to empty ourselves of our agenda and our ideas and most important our judgments. Being a good listener so as to coax out the authentic person in front of us requires us to speak rarely and put our own story on the shelf... so as to make room for the spacious reception of the story, the heart of another human being.

Margaret Wheatley writes of sitting in a circle with women from many nations. Each was invited to share a story. “A young, black South African woman.....began to quietly tell a story of true horror-of how she had found her grandparents slaughtered in their village. Many of the women (in the circle) were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix, to make it better, anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up, as if to push back their desire to help. She said: “I don’t need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me.” (p. 88, Turning To One Another, Margaret Wheatley)

Why is it that we feel more whole when someone listens to us with a non-judgmental mind and a loving heart? I think it is because we do not have access to our full humanity alone. Science teaches us that everything takes form through relationship. EXAMPLE We are no different. We too take form through relationship. slower paced listening and sharing that we come to experience ourselves and others as inherently worthy and dignified and that we are all connected in the web of life and as we remember this, we receive the sustenance of love and compassion.

These words from Hindu Scripture say in poetry our first and seventh principles:

“There is an endless net of threads throughout
The universe...
At every crossing of the threads there is an
individual.
and every individual is a crystal bead.
and every crystal bead reflects
not only the light from every
other crystal in the net
but also every other reflection
throughout the entire universe. ...

(Indra's
net from the Rig Veda)

In our church life, perhaps, we get a chance to practice the fine art of human communication...face to face and with some higher purpose calling us together. Face to face and with some higher purpose calling us.

Now we are learning that this kind of encounter can be used in groups as well.

‘Dialogue’ is the name of a process of listening and speaking that is actually a way of thinking together. It is a practice developed at MIT by David Isaacs and is based on systems theory. We can learn it and practice it... and is based on the following principles:

- respect for others and creating a safe container for authenticity
- radical equality of all people
- learning how to listen with your whole being to others
- suspending your own judgment and agenda while you are listening
- remaining curious about others
- waiting in the silence together and trusting what emerges through us
- only speaking when you are spoken; that is to say...only speaking when that speech comes from authenticity and concern for the common good...not ego or competitive edge or political gain or anything else.....

I experienced a week of this kind of dialogue with Isaacs and a group of total strangers. I learned that when a group participates in this kind of communication something can arise in the center of the circle that could not otherwise arise...creative ideas, deep peace, and feelings of connection and love. In this space concern for the whole of life is easy to embrace.

I am about to introduce you to some of the Vision 20/20 team that the Board of Assessors has chosen to lead us through this process. These are delightful and engaged people...busy in their lives...and each of them serves or has served First Parish in many capacities. And they are quite different in temperament and style and this group is practicing the art of listening and authentic relating as they plan the process.

I want to say briefly another thing about this way of being in the world. It has a strong social justice and witness component to it. If we ourselves experience radical equality and compassion in our relationships more and more frequently....if our hearts are more open to the profound love and compassion that is at the core of humanity....our role in being a witness to it in the larger world will evolve naturally.

Today we are asking you to put aside any negative ideas you have about “long range planning” and “visioning for the future” because there are things qualitatively different about this process. First, It does not focus on problems as a starting point...rather we seek to begin by celebrating the goodness of First Parish...the strengths. Second, this process is more open ended because it is based on faith in the listening. The team will invite us to speak and listen together over this year in many different ways and settings. They will listen and begin to know the themes that emerge. They will present these themes that have been shared in the space in the middle to you as the grounding for our future together.

Today we are asking you to put aside your notion of what usually happens on Sunday. The team is going to lead us through one simple process and ask us to practice listening and speaking together with one other person. They and I ask that you give it a whirl...and that, in the coming year, you participate as fully as you can. Potlucks and surveys and small groups will be the venue.....and it is our intent to have the process arise out of the flow between us based on a natural giving of the heart.

When this kind of interaction is applied to a planning process it fosters creativity, takes us out of the debate mode and gives us the experience of inviting creativity to arise within the crucible of love.

I close with this poem by Margaret Wheatley:

STARS

In places where air still offers clarity,
stars sing a siren song from space
in the bright night.

Lying on soft earth,
carried into sky by longing,
humans respond to stars
with questions. Why is the Universe
so vast? Why are we so small?

Call and response through the night.

My whole life I have sent
these qualities into space. And
listened for response.

The sky wakens and star song fades.
Humans forget mystery and get on with living.
But the stars, the stars
keep calling. No response.

Why is it that we call to
stars with science and insignificance?

On the next bright night,
find the clear air and ask again.
Humans, ask again. Who are we?
What is our place in the mystery?

Perhaps you will hear what I
have heard, a song of inner
radiance.

For the stars
The stars are calling

saying we must
turn to one another
turn to one another and see
finally see
the stars everywhere.