

## *A Wonderful Gift*

Three days ago a truly great man died.

I am grateful to have seen the impact of Nelson Mandela's brave and amazing life from afar. Reflection on his life in the wake of his death also challenges me; it challenges all of us to think about what gave him the capacity to renounce violence and to guide the country through an incredible systemic transformation from oppressive apartheid regime to a democratic state. And all without bloodshed, without the violence of the oppressors being turned back on them in a retaliatory wave of death and destruction.

How was he able to lead the people of South Africa, both whites and blacks – those who had brutalized as well as those who had been brutalized for decades – to leave that mutual fear and hatred behind and especially for those who had been victimized – to forgive their enemies enough to create a new country together?

Most importantly, what can we, can I, learn? What gift can we take from this man's life into our own lives?

There is so much we could talk about, including his trust in a God embodied in the movements of Love and Justice in our world.

We could talk about faith, which he had so strongly, the kind of faith that keeps you going when you are grieving and lost and stripped of joy, the faith that there will be more to your life's meaning than the particular feelings you have right now, or than the physical situation in which you find yourself. Imprisoned by a cell, chained by a job, bound by love or duty to a difficult family member... Faith that my life, your life has meaning beyond this...

Or, we could talk about the ability to forgive, for Nelson Mandela led South Africa in a nationwide, completely improbable experiment of reconciliation after the transition to majority rule that was amazingly successful. How can we learn to get better at letting go of the hurts others have done us, so that it no longer eats at our insides, gnaws at our hearts, contorts our humanity with anger and pain? In South Africa, black people were impoverished, exploited, diminished by the political and economic system called apartheid. They were murdered, kidnapped, and imprisoned by the state's white police. How does one forgive all that? But so many were able to do that.

These are all important parts of Nelson Mandela's story, and of South Africa's story. And I will explore forgiveness, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's process for healing in a service in January.

But one of the keys to Nelson Mandela's ability to forgive and his conviction that forgiveness and reconciliation are crucial to growth is something else, something that seems so mundane – the ability to really listen.

Nelson Mandela grew up speaking his tribal tongue and the language of education, English. While he was imprisoned he worked hard to learn to speak and read the native language of South

African whites, called Afrikaans. And he used it well, often speaking with white South Afrikaners in it before and after he was released from prison. He thrilled them when he quoted a poem in the language during his inaugural speech after he was elected president of the new democracy. The white world trembled in fear of the black majority, and Nelson Mandela reassured white Afrikaners as he spoke again to them in their own language. Learning the language had allowed him to listen, to connect with the whites in a way that reassured them that he respected them, that he could really hear them. He explained why he had learned Afrikaans in this way: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, (English) that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

Listening is terribly important to the person being listened to.

It is the most important part of pastoral care.

The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich said that “the first duty of love is to listen.” Another writer put it this way: “Deep listening is miraculous for the listener and the speaker. When someone receives us with open-hearted, non-judging, intensely interested listening, our spirits expand.” And healing happens.

But listening is not only a gift we can give to those who need to speak and heal, or those who are afraid, it is also a deeply spiritual practice for the listener.

When we do it well, we practice – and so we learn – humility, which is really a sense of our right size in the universe. When we do it well, we can experience the unity of life with life, and an intimate connection with the holy through that.

Listening also leads us, walking with Nelson Mandela, on the path to spiritual maturity that traverses the arc of the moral universe. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker noted, the arc bends long, but bends toward justice.

But it isn't easy for any of us to really listen, listen well to anyone, even when the other person doesn't seem dangerous or bad, or when we care deeply about the person speaking.

For one thing, our cultural tradition values self-expression and individualism so highly that, for example, our most common current idea of prayer involves speaking to the holy, rather than its original sense of listening and responding to the holy.

Still, we *can learn* to listen better.

And it sounds straight-forward to do – be attentive, open, non-judging – **until** we pay attention to ourselves as we listen.

Because no matter who or what we are trying to listen to, there are some things we humans do that get in the way of listening. I'm going to read a short list of the things we commonly do while, or rather, instead of, listening. Do you recognize yourself in this list? Which of these do you most commonly do? Here it goes...

1. Thinking about what we are going to say as soon as we get a chance;
2. Thinking about where our own story intersects with what we are hearing;
3. Assuming we know what the speaker is going to say, perhaps even interrupting them to tell them what they are about to say;
4. Listening to our own personal beliefs about what is being said;
5. Evaluating and making judgments about the speaker or the message.

These habits are trap doors. They lead us down a chute, and flying away from understanding what we are hearing, from communicating care and respect and the value of the other person in our listening.

What are the causes of these common habits: judging, rushing ahead, assuming, talking to ourselves about what we hear?

When we try to listen to others and instead fall into the chute, it's because of the trap doors – our assumptions about other people and the world, and our personal agendas: who we think we are, what we want to get done, how we want to be treated or thought of.

Let's get a handle on this individually. I invite you to consider the question "who am I?" and list four words that come to mind to describe you, your core identity, silently.

This is important, because there is something about who **you** think you are that gets in the way of your ability to listen.

I'll share a story to illustrate what I am talking about. I was convinced for a long time that I was really special because of my losses and my grief, and this idea of who I was got in the way of my listening well to people who spoke about death, or grief. A real handicap for someone who wanted to become a minister!

Now, I knew that I was special in this way in part because of a memory I had. The memory was of a long time ago, when I was a child in elementary school, and exploring my mother's cherry veneer roll-top desk. You know how some kids go through every nook and cranny in a house? Well, there was a bottom drawer in the dresser that she usually kept locked, but for some reason, it was not locked this day. As I went through that special drawer, I found a couple of odd things: some clipped locks of hair in folded white tissue paper, and a very familiar orange woolen cap. Compelled by a feeling of both dread and fascination, like a moth who couldn't resist circling close to the candle flame, I went to my mother and asked, "What are these?" I remember she was clearly upset as she reached for them. "Richard's cap, and his hair," she replied. "Who is that?" I asked her. She looked at me, and said, "your brother."

Ah, Richard! Richard had died when I was nearly four from an aneurysm that killed him over the course of a month. For many years, I believed that I must have been unusually traumatized if I had *forgotten* my brother existed. This was one of the ways I held on to my grief, to thinking that I was special. It was really only years later – when I *listened* to a friend speak about her work with grieving children of different ages – that I finally understood how normal my forgetting had been.

When I understood that, I was able to let go of an idea about who I was, a self identity that had gotten in the way of my ability to listen to other people, that kept me leaping to my own story when others spoke of their losses.

So, I invite you again: think about what part of your own identity comes up when you are trying to listen, what makes you need to turn away or interrupt or shift the subject in your mind? This part of your story that gets in the way is probably related to those four words that you thought about earlier, your core identity. Maybe for you it's a need to be the center of attention, to be in control, to be unimportant, or a problem solver, to be someone special, or someone who doesn't do anything important wrong. There are many possibilities.

After you consider what gets in the way of your listening to others, you might ask yourself "What can I do to become just a little less attached to that idea of myself, so that I can listen better?"

Author Scott Peck has a wonderful description of the best kind of listening, what it requires and what it can give. He writes:

"An essential part of true listening is the discipline of bracketing. [Bracketing is] the temporary giving up or setting aside of one's own prejudices, frames of reference and desires so as to experience as far as possible the speaker's world from the inside, step in inside his or her shoes.

This unification of speaker and listener is actually an extension and enlargement of ourselves, and new knowledge is always gained from this. Moreover, since true listening involves bracketing, [which is] a setting aside of the self, it also temporarily involves a total acceptance of the other.

Sensing this acceptance, the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recesses of his or her mind to the listener. As this happens, speaker and listener begin to appreciate each other more and more."

Scott Peck's words also point to why true listening is a religious, a spiritual experience: when we are able to truly listen, we connect with each other in a way that is the holy. We connect with someone else in a way that allows us to know our essential unity.

We put aside our ego, and meet the holy in each other...

Listening to the self is another, special, kind of listening. It is essential for self-knowledge, and it is hard, too.

Sometimes we sit down, reflect, try to understand what we are really feeling or thinking, but the flotsam and jetsam of thoughts and ideas floating around on the surface of our awareness can block any effort we make to get to the depths of ourselves.

As if it wasn't hard enough to find a spot to dive in amongst all that flotsam and jetsam, our *fear* of diving into the deep – even if we do see an opening – makes it harder.

Many of us fear what is down there inside us, when we are quiet and still and staying in one place; many of us fear drowning in the feelings we repress, fear what the whirling thought fragments might hide. Attentively noticing what we are thinking and feeling, and neither holding on to it nor judging it, can help us get beneath all the currents of upper consciousness thought and feeling. Or perhaps we can think of it as being stabilized amid all the changing thoughts and feelings. Silence and meditation are helpful.

Deep listening of any sort is prayer, a spiritual practice. Joy Harjo, the poet, points to this beautifully in her poem, "Eagle."

To pray you open your whole self  
 To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
 To one whole voice that is you.  
 And know there is more  
 That you can't see, can't hear  
 Can't know except in moments  
 Steadily growing, and in languages  
 That aren't always sound but other  
 Circles of motion.  
 Like eagle that Sunday morning  
 Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky  
 In wind, swept our hearts clean  
 With sacred wings.  
 We were born, and die soon, within a  
 True circle of motion,  
 Like eagle rounding out the morning  
 Inside us.  
 We pray that it will be done  
 In beauty.  
 In beauty.

Harjo is wise. To listen is to pray. To listen is to love.  
 To listen is to settle down, despite our swirling thoughts and emotions. May we honor many things about Nelson Mandela, including his determination to hear and understand others: "Maybe this year, we'll listen."

Blessed be. Amen.

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*A sermon delivered by Rev. Meg Soens  
 on December 8, 2013 at  
 First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Medfield.*

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