Sermon 11.24.19 Deep Speaks to Deep

Our theme this month is attention and I’m reminded of the ways that Unitarian Universalist seminarians are taught to pay attention. Every aspiring UU minister is required to go through at least one session of clinical pastoral education. This is chaplain boot camp that usually takes place in a hospital, although it can happen other places. Here is where future ministers do a combination of meeting with actual patients and then reflecting on those visits in a highly structured way with a group of other future clergy. It’s intense and it’s a rocket ship of ministerial formation. A classmate of mine from seminary lasted one day at her hospital, throwing her chaplain ID badge in the garbage as she walked out. That story has a happy ending though, she’s now working as a chaplain. This ministry thing is a crooked path. Can I get an amen from the ministers and seminarian in the room?
In my first unit of chaplain training my supervisor was a spiritual light named Sister Maureen, and she was a Sister of Mercy. She started our months together as a group in a radical way. The seven of us gathered in a circle in the morning, and she said that today we would tell each other our stories. And we would do that by taking turns, and each of us was allowed to take as long as we needed to tell our story. By as long as we needed, she meant, as long as we wanted, with no limits and no timekeeper. I was horrified. I thought “Oh man, this is going to be awful. These folks are going to kill me with their endless blah blah blah.” I was wrong about that. My classmates sometimes took a couple hours to tell their stories, but they said what they needed to say, and I never felt like they were wasting my time. And when my turn came, I realized what a profound gift it was to be given permission to tell my story, without feeling rushed, without tacitly or explicitly being told that I was wasting other people’s time. The message was that my story was important, that I was important and it made me feel valued in a fundamental way. And that helped me understand the power of being listened to.
Being listened to in that way changed me, but over the course of my chaplain training I came to realize that learning how to be a listener was also profoundly transformative. This intentional practice of listening changed me, and I’d like to share some of the ways that I was changed.

New chaplains are taught the basics for learning how to listen. Folks in this sanctuary who are in professions that call for listening are probably aware of these basic rules. In fact the other day I facilitated a deep listening session with the Wisdom Circle and it was clear that the folks there had lots of prior practice with that style of encountering each other. I laid out the principles that the Quaker theologian Parker Palmer in his Circles of Trust. They will probably sound familiar to you. As we listen:

- There is no fixing, that is, no trying to solve someone’s problem for them.
- There is no saving, that is, no taking on someone’s problem as if it is our own.
- There is no advising. What’s the worst kind of advice? Unsolicited advice.
- I’ll add a rule for listening of my own: there is no waiting until the person is finished speaking to jump in with one’s “well, I have a story about that!” response.
You’ll notice a common theme in all these rules: they move the focus from the listener to the speaker. The listener puts aside their egos, their agendas, and their needs, and they simply are witness to the speaker. I’m as self-involved as anybody, and there are times when that simply being present for someone is really hard for me. But the more I do it, the easier it gets, and in place of my self-absorption comes something really wonderful: a genuine sense of connection.

Now, setting aside my agenda when I’m listening doesn’t mean that I’m not paying attention to what is going on inside me. In fact, part of the process of listening well is also about cultivating self-awareness. Watching myself to see how I’m reacting to what’s being said to me helps me listen better. Let me share a story from my chaplain days. I once was called to a room by a supervising nurse. The patient was a man in his 70’s was in for heart problems and he had just decided to sign himself out. The term is AMA, against medical advice. His family was there and according to the nurse, they had talked him into leaving. I think the nurse hoped that I could get them to reconsider, since he was seriously ill and his decision might kill him. His family was in the room when I walked in. After I spoke with them awhile, I realized what was going on. The family practiced some kind of fundamentalist religion and they believed that they should place their father’s care in God’s hands rather than using the hospital.
As a chaplain, I’m not there to change people’s theologies, but instead to help folks find their own spiritual tools for resilience. So I bit my agnostic tongue and said that I hoped it worked out for them. But then the patient’s daughter, an adult, turned the tables on me. She asked me my denomination, and then began to pepper me with questions: Was I really a follower of Jesus? Had I accepted him as my savior? I tried to take the focus off my beliefs but the woman was relentless. She told me that my eternal soul was at stake and that I needed to take Jesus in my heart. I wished them all well and left. The problem was, I left that room because I was angry, not because the visit was over. And I didn’t realize until I left how angry I was. I was not self-aware in that moment, and it meant that I wasn’t listening.

I’d like to take a moment for us to practice watching how we react when we’re listening. With your indulgence, I’m going to say three words, and I invite you to just watch yourself. After each word or phrase, consider the way your body may have automatically reacted to that word. Did it feel good or bad? Where did you have that sensation? Your stomach, or your neck or somewhere else? Did a rush of thoughts automatically start in your mind, unrequested and hard to stop? Take your time and watch. So here goes:

- Mother
- Ukraine
- Wildflowers
Did any of that surprise you? When we see how we’re reacting, it helps us to separate what’s going on in ourselves from what’s going on in the person we’re listening too. And that helps us more deeply understand that person, without confusing our experience with theirs.

Watching how we react when we listen is important. And there’s also an essential variation on that idea to think about. We who would be listeners need to understand the expectations that we bring into a conversation before the first word is even said. These are kind of like pre-reactions. When I was a chaplain, I had to constantly fight my habits of pre-judging patients or rushing to a conclusion about what their spiritual need was in the moment. The life of a hospital chaplain is repetition. Every morning I got a list of names, and I saw patients in the same rooms every day, often times with the same conditions. In my small community hospital in Buffalo I started to see the same kind of folks every day. Mostly they were elderly, white, Polish, Catholic, and working class. I had months of this. And it was so easy to assume I’d know where the conversation was going. But the truth was, the patient visits when I showed up with no expectations and no agenda were the most powerful and effective.
A friend of mine recently completed chaplaincy training in a Buddhist tradition. And she talked to me about the three principles that she was told to bring into every interaction. The first is Not knowing, that is, showing up without preconceptions. The second is bearing witness, the practice of not avoiding the truth in front of us, no matter how painful. The third is taking compassionate action, which speaks for itself but is also not as simple as it seems. In the poem by Rumi that we read, Rumi says “Friends, be careful. Don’t come near me out of curiosity or sympathy.” I feel like Rumi is saying, “don’t come to me with your preconceptions.” I had so many visits where I had to confront the stereotypes I carried and frankly my own spiritual laziness. But from that practice I’ve come to learn that being ready to be surprised is a lovely way to encounter the world.
The act of deep listening gives us surprising lessons, and some of them are hard. Once I was working the emergency room and I came upon a young woman who was waiting to be seen. This particular ER is always busy, and folks are often placed on gurneys in the hallway, surrounded by other people on gurneys, all of them waiting. This young woman was in obvious pain, writhing, and groaning and sobbing. I tried to engage her a little and as she grimaced she indulged me with short answers. I went to check on her nurse and find out if there was something I could do but they were busy and I knew better than to press them. I went back to the woman and asked if I could sit with her while she waited. She continued to groan and sob while I made some pointless chatter. Eventually she said to me, while crying “I’m walking out. They’re not gonna help me here.” I tried to talk her out of it. I said she’d just end up in another emergency waiting room. She wouldn’t hear it. She was done. And she left. And I was shaken by the encounter.
And I had to accept a hard lesson from that moment. Sometimes we have no idea if our listening helps. Sometimes it sure seems like a ministry of futility. I wish I could put a happy end on this story and say something that I did ended up making a big difference but that would be a lie. The real lesson is figuring out how to keep going when the reason we’re doing the listening is not clear. That keeping going is an act of faith. I have faith in the power of listening. And I’m going to keep doing it, even when it’s hard to see the point.

While I’m cheerleading for the practice of deep listening here, I want to take a moment to talk about exceptions to the rule. There are times when we have no obligation to listen to a person. Being willing to listen doesn’t mean that we don’t have personal boundaries. So for the record, no one is obligated to listen to hateful speech, or to sit and endure comments from people that tear us down or tear folks that we love down. That’s not listening, that’s taking abuse. It’s funny, one of the weird things about the moment we’re in, well at least weird to me, are the folks who think the problem with our times is that we’re too divisive. That the conversations aren’t civil. Somehow, it’s the conversations themselves that are to blame. Well, I do see conversations that are divisive or uncivil, and usually that’s because someone is being openly bigoted or self-serving. You don’t have to listen to that. But that’s the exception.
Mostly, listening is a beautiful practice. In my UU theology, I think we conjure the holy through our relationships. When we connect with each other with integrity, and lord knows I fail it this all the time, but when we connect, we create something positive that wasn’t there before. We bring the holy into being.

I want to finish here by going back to my story about the woman who tried to convert me while her father was making a reckless decision about his health. After that visit I knew I needed a break so I went back to the chaplain’s office. Fortunately, there was a wise senior chaplain there as well. I explained to her what just happened. She was very understanding (big surprise, right?) but then she shared a thought that caught me off guard. In her gentle way, she said that perhaps in my anger I had missed something. She suggested that the woman’s overly aggressive attempt to convert me was actually an expression of the anxiety that she was feeling about the decision she just helped her father make. Perhaps she needed to double down on her faith now that she was making a dangerous bet on it. I think my chaplain friend was right about that, and I missed it because I was too caught up in what I was feeling. The lesson for me was that I needed to listen for the pain behind her words. I know that woman cared about her father. It wasn’t about me.
My prayer for us as listeners is that we be self-aware as we listen. That we watch for the pre-conceptions that we bring into our conversations, and that we have faith in deep listening as a way of being. My prayer is that through our listening, through our connections, we conjure the holy.

May it be so. Blessed be.