

First Unitarian Church

October 4, 2020

A question we received this summer when we did a “Question Box” Sunday:

Dear Ministers,

I’m not quite sure how to deal with people in these contentious times. On one hand a large proportion of people pride themselves in denying science and other facts, and are proud of their intolerant attitudes in areas such as race, immigration, and reproductive rights. On the other hand, people I generally agree with seem to be applying a purity test to everything and look down anyone who is not in total agreement. They even disapprove of still having relationships with family and friends who don’t have the correct political views. And a contentious election is approaching. And even smiling doesn’t work since I wear a mask in public. How do I live among people now or should I just go be a hermit in the mountains?

How shall we live when there is such polarization and the stakes are so high? I do think the occasional trip into the mountains (or into a romance novel, or a television show, or the bosque) is a good idea. We need respite, restoration, uncomplicated breaks from the intensity. During the presidential debate on Tuesday I took a trip into a bag of chocolate cookies. But we can’t stay gone forever.

We do have to figure out how to live among people.

I love that the writer of this question mentions smiling. We’re missing that natural, simple way to show a bit of kindness. This is a great time to have a lot of laugh lines so your eyes can smile above your mask. If you don’t have any wrinkles yet, a few more months of the year 2020 ought to do the trick. If not, I think we should bring back the wink.

Smiling reminds us that one of the ways to live among people in a time such as this is to treat each other with simple kindness. A society that is this polarized is also a society that dehumanizes. It dehumanizes by lumping people—who are multidimensional—into categories that are simplified and blunt and obscure the humanness in us.

So, here’s what I know is true:

I know that when the stakes are this high, it is important to speak up, to side with love, to march, vote, donate, etc. All of that on the big social level. Yes.

And I know that in smaller interactions, on the personal level, a deeper connection—one that goes beyond categories—is also necessary and is healing. I am talking now about the kind of connection that occurs where there is deep listening. That’s our theological theme for October. Deep listening.

That kind of connection is necessary and healing between people who share the same beliefs and values, and also between people who may be polar opposites.

Can you think of a time when someone deeply listened to you? When you were able to share from your heart, and you weren't interrupted? When someone was just present with you, and you knew that what you shared was being received without judgment. Maybe you've experienced this with a friend or family member, or a mentor, minister, or therapist. Maybe it was in a covenant group here at church.

What did it feel like for someone to give you that space and their undivided attention? When someone listens to us in that way, when we know they are really present to us, it's very moving, isn't it? It's a gift. Maybe the conversation didn't even last very long—maybe you've had a ten-minute conversation with someone who was really present to you and listened, and that was all it took, and you had that feeling of being witnessed, companioned. Deep listening is an antidote to loneliness.

And when it occurs between people who *do not* share the same beliefs and values, then it is also an antidote to dehumanization. Connection beyond categories is an antidote to dehumanization.

The way we listen to each other can have a transformative effect. It isn't a magic cure for all of the things that ail our society. There isn't one. But it's definitely good medicine.

Now, I want to say a couple of things about this right off the top. First of all, when I talk about listening, I'm not talking about a physiological thing. You can listen without being able to hear with your ears. Listening is about leaning in to the communication being shared with us by another being. That can happen through spoken or printed words, or signing, body language, art, or images. There are many ways to communicate. Listening is about engaging with that communication.

The other thing I want to say is that listening is not about being passive or persuaded.

One day when my daughter was four years old, she lobbied hard for something. I can't remember now what it was. It might have been about a toy or maybe she wanted to try to launch her baby brother out of his stroller or something. I don't know. What stayed with me about our interaction is the moment she got really frustrated, looked me in the eye and said, "You're not listening to me!" And what she meant was that I wasn't doing what she wanted.

I realized in that instant that for her whole life (all four years of it) I had been teaching her the wrong thing about listening. I had been saying, "listen to me" when what I meant was, "Do as I say."

Listening and persuasion are not the same. Deep listening is about presence, not persuasion.

Deep listening always involves three spiritual skills: attention, awareness, and curiosity.

Let's start with attention. How often have you had the experience of trying to tell someone something, only to have them abruptly shift the conversation to another subject... or perhaps, to themselves? Probably you have also observed yourself doing this to someone else. My husband and I do this to each other sometimes. One of us will start to tell the other something about our day, maybe something challenging for example, and the other will say, "Oh yeah? Wait 'til you hear what I had to deal with!" And back and forth we go.

In meditation when our minds jump from one thought to another, it's called monkey mind. In conversation, when our attention jumps from what the person is saying, to ourselves or something else, it's the same thing happening. It's just making itself obvious outside of your head.

It reminds me of the movie *Up*. Remember that? The animated Pixar movie. In it there's a dog, who wears a collar that translates his thoughts into human speech. Once in a while, the dog will be talking and all of a sudden, he goes, "Squirrel!" and freezes with his eyes trained somewhere else. We are like that talking dog.

Looking at the culture around us, it's easy to see why. It's all squirrels out there. We live in an information age designed to interrupt us. Our phones ring and ding with texts, emails, voicemails, and notifications from apps. Our computers do all of these things too, and while we are responding to one thing, an invitation, notification, or other distraction pops up in our screens. The boundary between what happens in digital life and what happens IRL- in real life—was always blurry, with our gadgets barging in when we are trying to focus on the three-dimensional world. But now, because of the pandemic, more and more of our real lives takes place through technology. And we are more tempted than ever to multitask. Do you have multiple screens open right now during church? *Do you?*

If you do, I get it. My phone has been lighting up the whole time I've been talking. I'm not going to look at it right now. This is the water we swim in. The funny thing is, even goldfish have longer attention spans. Seriously. Look it up. Not right now! Squirrel!

When we give our focused attention to another person, when there are so many other things competing for it, that is a form of generosity. It's also a spiritual skill. Just as in meditation, when we notice our mind wandering and we gently bring it back to the present moment, when we set an intention to listen deeply to someone, we are guiding our attention, focusing it on the person, and when the mind wants to wander—whether to an outward distraction, or to an inward one—we gently bring it back. This is one of the ways practicing meditation is practicing at life.

The second spiritual skill is awareness. It is cultivating our awareness of what needs, wants, or feelings we may have that prevent us from deeply listening. If we are attached to a goal of changing the person we are listening to, then instead of being present to them, we will be thinking of our strategy. We will be mentally sifting through what they communicate to us, looking for the things we can use to make our case and change their minds. Or, our attachment to changing them may cause us to experience anxiety, frustration, or fear of failure. The conversation becomes a win-lose situation. We tighten. It

is unlikely that much connection or depth will happen. And they will not experience us being truly present with them.

What a relief it is to let go of that attachment. To not make ourselves responsible for another person's thoughts or behavior. And instead to trust that the deep listening itself is enough for now. To trust that when we do not tighten, when we are attentive and open, it invites the other person to do the same.

When we notice that we are wanting a certain outcome, in our minds we can simply acknowledge that want, and then let it be. We don't have to act on it.

Likewise, if the other person says something that causes a feeling of anger, defensiveness, or aversion, we can say to ourselves, "I am experiencing a feeling. It is passing through." And we don't have to let it steal our attention or hijack the conversation.

If someone is belittling us or being abusive in some way, that's different. We do not *owe* anyone our deep listening. And there are times when a better gift to ourselves and the other person is to end a conversation so they cannot continue doing harm. I wish the commission on presidential debates would take this to heart.

But most conversations in which we might experience negative feelings are not extreme in that way. Instead, when negative feelings arise in us, it is often because we are becoming tempted to make the conversation about us. We want the other person to think differently. Maybe we want them to experience us in a certain way. Or maybe we are feeling fear about the wider world. But the person we are listening to is only one person. They do not control the world.

The meditation teacher Tara Brach says, "With deep listening, there's a quality of presence where there isn't a lot of selfing, a lot of activity of interpreting, judging, reading into, preparing. There's just openness and receptivity. There's no controlling of anything." She says where we don't have this kind of openness—which is most of the time for most of us—there's a lot of "static" between us and other people. The static is the noise of our projections, wants, feelings, strategizing. I think of all that internal noise making a sound like televisions used to. Between people, static also means there is probably poor reception.

When we practice awareness, we quiet that noise down. We are able to continue to focus our attention, intentionally. And then we get to practice something really satisfying, which is the spiritual skill of curiosity.

Practicing curiosity is about replacing any frustrations, assumptions, or judgments with an attitude of wonder. This can be just as satisfying to try with people who we think we know as it is with people who we just can't figure out. Where we might have responded to another person with our own opinion, or a story about our self, or an attempt to change them, instead we respond with curiosity. I wonder why this person feels this way? I wonder what I don't know? I wonder, if I listen deeply, whether they would share from their heart? It's important not to turn our wonder into questions too quickly. If our intention is deep listening, we don't want to turn the conversation into an interview, or replace our openness with a sneaky new goal of achieving a certain kind of insight. The first

curiosity in deep listening is an open ended one: I wonder what this person would like to share, if I am fully present to listen?

When deep listening happens, the listener allows there to be pauses. The listener doesn't rush to fill the pauses in, but leaves room for the speaker's thoughts to unfold naturally. There may be something else they'd like to say, but they are working up their courage, or looking for a sign that you are still interested in listening. Allowing pauses is one way of expressing our curiosity and wonder.

But when the conversation reaches a point where you could ask a question without rushing things, there are some open-ended ones that can increase both the listener's understanding and the speaker's feeling of having been deeply listened to.

I would like to hear more about that.

Will you tell me more about what that means to you?

Is there a story from your life about how you came to feel this way?

What do you think might happen if things don't go as you hope? How would that impact you? Or people you love?

It's profound what we can discover about another person when we listen deeply, with attention, awareness, and curiosity. It's amazing how much humanness, how much fear, and longing, and love, we have in common with people who seem utterly different than ourselves. The poet Mark Nepo writes, "Still yourself and listen and soon, in time, the Mystery will begin to speak to you, through its thousand disguises as life on Earth."

In our fellow UU's question that began this sermon, they wonder about maintaining relationships with friends and family who hold differing political views. You will understand by now that I am not quiet about my own views. But neither am I a purist when it comes to love. I could not be a purist and love myself or anyone at all. No one can.

Better then to side with love out loud when we speak, and in attentiveness, awareness, and wonder when we listen. In this way may our lives to help to create the kinder, more connected world that is trying to be born.

May it be so.