

Just Listen

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Healing Sunday

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We all have a part to play. Every good institution has their part to play in the making of the good society, in the upholding of our social fabric, in the strengthening of our commonwealth; not to capitalize on one another's suffering or weakness, but to care for one another in this good but hard life. Science and medicine have a part to play. So do the arts, and commerce, and religion.

With regard to the pandemic, science and medicine is out-front, where it needs to be! It's the triage work of our time. Vaccines! Testing! Medical care and cure! You are on the front line in this human suffering.

But science and medicine only go so far. And that's where we come in. Religion-- synagogues, mosques, temples, churches.

Even before Covid there was more and more talk about the epidemic of emotional and spiritual heart disease, that is the increasing loneliness and isolation in our society as voluntary associations dwindle. And about how this loneliness affects people's health and wellbeing. This isolation has deepened dramatically in the last two years.

Science and medicine are marvels. We are more in awe and grateful than ever before! But humans cannot live by science and medicine alone. We also need meaning. "There is no meaning in facts." * (Ornish) We need community. And we need stories. Stories are the lifeblood of community.

Scientists and medical people have been and continue to be so hard at work, doing their part for humanity.

It's our time now. Religious communities. To do our part to heal the suffering. I'm not talking about miraculous cure. That's more medicine's role. I'm talking about healing our souls from the trauma of these last two years.

There's nothing new about this. As Rachel Naomi Remen writes: "People have been healing each other since the beginning of community. The tools of healing are so innate, so much a part of our birthright, that we believers in technology pay very little attention to them. But they have lost none of their power. **Listening is the oldest and the most powerful tool of healing.**"

Yes, listening to our ancient sacred stories imbedded with meaning. But also listening to another, deep listening.

Listening creates a sanctuary for the other person where they can feel safe to express the truth of what they are going through.

Listening creates a holy silence... when you listen generously to another, they can hear the truth in themselves often for the first time.

"Listening, allowing the other to be the most vulnerable they can be until they discover what is invulnerable within", they discover the strength of the life force within.

Listening and letting them know, at the deepest level of their being, that they are not alone in this existence.

Listening and the privilege that comes with that for the listener, becoming even more in awe of the heroism of every human being....

Oh Church, now is our time to do our part for humanity. To do it as fully and wondrously as science and medicine has done their part these last two years.

Our Church Council is very wise. As they are shaping the mission/vision of this church for the next five years, they are not just jumping to the proactive... Yes, we need to chart a new path forward in terms of diversity and race. Yes, we need to re-engage our earth healing work and tending to climate change refugees. It's a natural impulse to say: "Come on! Let's get to it! Let's leave these two years behind and get a move on!!" But they, council, in their wisdom, know that our mission, for a time, will also be to heal from the trauma of the Covid pandemic and all it has wrought and uncovered. This is our work too as a church. We can do both, and we must, our God's dream of justice work and our healing our souls work.

There is so much healing to be done. I've heard from many parents of young children recently, that the last several weeks have been the hardest of all. Can you relate? Our souls need to heal....

And the best tool we have is listening. Asking the question...What has this been like for you? And then really listening. God forbid we look at our smart phones when someone is sharing.

We are fortunate, so fortunate as a church, that so many of us have been trained as Befrienders, whether currently serving as a befriender or not. This church is leavened with befriending. Yes, we have a music culture at Mayflower and a justice organizing culture and a contemplative spirituality culture and an inner generational faith formation culture... Yes, to all of this! But perhaps more hidden but just as real...we have a befriender culture... which means a-listening-deeply-and-with-compassion-to=the-truth-of-your-life culture... And that's good. We're really going to need this as we gradually come back together, as we return from the exile of Covid...

This sanctuary is a safe space for tears and truth and healing.

One of the most vivid memories I have from before Covid, before that fateful week in March of 2020, is what I'd been witnessing more and more in the sanctuary after the postlude. And it seemed to be getting longer and longer.... Until the lights were turned off sometimes.... You'd look over the sanctuary and see all these little clusters of people, some still sitting, some standing, people leaning in and listening to one another.... And it was often inner generational, 20 somethings with 80 somethings... And often newcomers with Mayflower old timers, like Russ Brackett, leaning in and asking questions and really listening.... It was beautiful. I believe its that leaven of the Befriender culture at work.

Though we are beginning to come back together for in-person worship, to be held in this safe space, surrounded and lifted up by the music, praying as one in the holy silence-- all of this is so healing-- but it will be awhile before we can feel safe enough hanging out for as long as is needed; a while before we can touch a hand or hug; a while before we can lean in and ask "what was it like for you?" and listen, really listen and so begin to heal one another from the trauma of this global pandemic. Soon we hope!

And when we're together again, we will see how the children have grown and we'll see how the adults have changed too, aged, more grey hair in the older adults, a little more stooped, two years is along time and two years living in stress affects these bodies and minds. This sanctuary will be a place of holy healing, of deep listening....

There are actually very few stories in our story book about Jesus listening. There are stories about him getting away from the crowds to be alone with God, to listen for God's still small voice within. But not so many about him leaning in and listening to the human in his midst. There may have been such stories circulating about Jesus... maybe these stories will be found some day on papyrus in clay pots hidden in caves. But the editors/writers of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, did not see fit to include these stories in their books. Perhaps the act of listening is not enough action. A listening scene doesn't move the story line forward very well.

But I like to imagine that active listening is part of what made him such a great healer. He was so aware of the people in his midst who were suffering. Story after story of his eyes seeking out and landing on the suffering one, the one way at the back of the sanctuary, or in the midst of a crowd or up in a tree, seeking them out and his kind eyes looking deeply into their eyes as if to say: "I see you. I care about you." So highly intuitive he was, remember the story from last week? "Who touched me?" It's easy to imagine him, maybe not with the crowds bearing down around him, but when they were walking from town to town, or they were sitting at the table together for that four-hour Middle Eastern meal, easy to imagine him turning to the one next to him and leaning in and saying: "How are you? No really, how are you? I'm listening. What has this been like for you?" And they, when sharing their deepest vulnerabilities, discover what is invulnerable within, a strength they didn't know they have; and they when sharing the truth of their life with Jesus, feel that they are not alone; and they in this healing encounter recognize the life force in and around them.

Maybe he learned how to be a good listener from Mary, when he was visiting Mary and Martha's home? Remember that story?

One of the best, and few, listening stories about Jesus is on the road to Emmaus...at least a big chunk of this story is about listening... I'm taking a different interpretive angle on this story today.... Did he ask them near the beginning: "what was it like for you?" and then listen to them? They were distraught. Everything they lived for crashed down when Jesus was crucified. *They* talked for a long time. It was a seven-mile walk. And *he* listened before he said anything. Is this a healing story? And they so wanted this good listener, this healer, to stay with them that they invited him to supper. At the end of the journey, the long walk and talk and listen, they were feeling a renewed deep trust of life.

We have our work cut out for us when we return from exile, return to our sanctuary. The holy work of healing through the ancient art of listening. Asking "what's it been like for you". Then, just listening.

It's enough. It's more than enough to know that you are not alone on this life journey.

It's enough. It's more than enough to be reminded of the heroism of every single human being.

And who knows? Maybe more will come out of this healing of our trauma from Covid in the years ahead. Maybe it will transform this church in ways we can't even imagine...

Sources

Ornish, Dean, M.D. Foreword to Remen's book...

Remen Rachel Naomi, M.D., Kitchen Table Wisdom, Riverhead Books, 1996.

