

Adventures in Listening

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ADVENTURES IN LISTENING

I want to speak just briefly on the whole idea of universalism, since that's what has brought us all together and I'd like to share a little bit about my own background. I was raised Catholic, and I'm now a Quaker – a member of the Celo Friends Meeting, which is part of Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting. I am also a practicing Buddhist, and I have had some experience in Native American religious tradition. This past summer, I had the pleasure of experiencing Hinduism in Indonesia. So when someone says, "What religion are you?" I give a different answer each time. The fact is, it really doesn't matter what you call yourself. What I have found is that words are easy to come by, and I've heard many things said in the name of religion. What really matters is what people do with their lives. How they live out their faith and what they do with what they believe and what impact they have on the world and on their neighbors. That is the essence, I think, of religion.

That is what we're going to be talking about this evening, too, in the area of listening. I think listening is one of the most powerful forms of living our religion that I know of, and I've been fortunate to explore it in many ways.

I grew up in a military family. I think that's one of the reasons I do the work I do and one of the reasons I started the Listening Project. My father was a veteran of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. He was in Vietnam at a time I was protesting the war. He just died a year ago from cancer. A doctor told us that my Dad's cancer could have been caused by the Agent Orange he was exposed to in Vietnam.

My father and I went through quite a reconciliation process before he died. Even before that, I had realized that

he was probably one of the main inspirations for my involvement in peace work. His life was a life of service and my life has been devoted to service. I understand how my father felt – that by serving in the military he was serving humanity and the cause of peace. That’s difficult for some people to see, but I think that’s the essence of what the Listening Project is about.

Many times in social change movements, activists help polarize the situation. We create enemy images, just as anyone else does. They are the bad guys, we are the good guys. Or they are the people who don’t understand, and we are the people who do understand. So when we approach people in this way, they feel defensive and the potential for change actually decreases. We don’t really listen to people who disagree with us – listen to their fears and concerns – so they become even more polarized against us. Too many peace groups are largely isolated and seen as “outsiders” or fringe groups in their own communities. That was one of my primary reasons for starting the Listening Projects. I saw people in the peace movement going out to preach, to convert, to change people and tell them what was the right way, but very little true communication was happening. As you know, the minute you’re preached to, you become defensive, because the people preaching to you seem not to really care about who you are or what you believe. All they care about is changing you.

So the Listening Project was an attempt to break through the isolation and barriers that separate people into the good vs. the bad; liberal vs. conservative; hawks vs. doves. The Listening Project is an attempt, through deep listening and non-violence, to get down to the basic human values that really connect us all. These are the same values that connected my father and myself. Deep down in us all there is a desire for peace, for goodness and for justice. For

each person those feelings come out in different ways and in some cases they get covered up, distorted or hidden by painful human experiences, by fear, insecurity or lack of knowledge. As children, we've all learned ideas from adults that we later found to be negative or problematic. My father grew up as a poor farm boy. He had no other opportunity to change his life than to join the military. The military became his way of understanding world issues. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with him that made him go into the military and want to use those kinds of solutions. It could have been me. Any of us could have ended up in the military instead of at a Quaker gathering about peace.

Our first Listening Project actually related to this issue of peace activists and people in the military. It was in 1986 in St. Mary's, which is a small town in south Georgia. Someone asked me if I would speak about working down South. I am a Southerner. Yes it is difficult to work for social change in the South. Southern people are very friendly, good people, but people are less open to progressive, new ideas in the South. The Moral Majority, the Religious Right, the Klan – they're still alive in the South. St. Mary's is a small town where the Navy base has been expanded to be the East Coast home port for the Trident nuclear submarines. One Trident submarine has four times the firepower used in World War II. Activists from outside of St. Mary's had been coming into the community to do prayer vigils, protest walks, civil disobedience, and all the rest. It was the traditional Vietnam era approach to dealing with peace issues. The result was that the protesters were pretty much seen as outside agitators, or they were just ignored. They had virtually no support from the people in the St. Mary's community. So when we got involved, we asked Trident activists to go to the homes of people in the community and not preach to them but listen to them and hear what they had to say.

The Listening Project involves listening at a very deep level so that one builds a relationship of trust and respect between oneself and the person doing the speaking. We try to be non-judgmental and not react to things the other person may say. The other person must be allowed to start from where she or he needs to start. As this trust is built, people open up and begin to reconnect with their basic yearning for goodness and peace. What normally prevents that opening up from happening is a polarization process. People aren't able to overcome their fears. When we tell them that what they think is all wrong, they feel that they have to defend themselves. So while we're sitting there telling them what all the right answers are, they're figuring out a way to say, "Yeah, but this is what I believe." They defend their viewpoint.

At St. Mary's we listened, and we asked questions that got people to begin really thinking about what it meant to be living in a community where the Trident submarine was. We asked questions related to how they felt about the base, and ultimately asked questions about how they felt about the risk their children were experiencing living in a world dominated by nuclear weapons. We asked them questions that got them to go deeper into their feelings. What we found is that indeed people really did care.

Now, these are Southern people whom most people would call rednecks. Many people would write them off, saying they're never going to be of any help. But many of them are really vulnerable, caring people who have been disempowered, so that their own values and feelings have been covered over by fear and defensiveness. Some may outwardly support nuclear weapons and the arms race, but through this process of listening to them, we gave them the opportunity to really go deeply into their feelings, their fears, hopes and ideas. We didn't judge them at all and we found

that many were able to actually change some of their ideas and beliefs. They were able to express their concerns and, for the first time, say that they were afraid. People told us they didn't like what was happening, that they wanted things to change. It was powerful. Remember, this was in 1986 when fear of the Soviet Union was still very strong.

Many peace activists went out fully expecting to have doors slammed in their faces, because that's normally how they think the public relates to them. But instead, the main problem they experienced was that people didn't want them to leave their homes. People rarely have the experience of being listened to, having someone say: "We care about what you think. We care about what you feel. What you have to say is important." This was a wonderful experience for most of the people we interviewed in St. Mary's and elsewhere. Most activists ended up spending about half an hour or more with each person they listened to. We used a list of ten or twelve survey questions and then listeners asked additional clarifying questions that enabled people to go deeper into exploring their thoughts and feelings. St. Mary's was an important project because it enabled some positive relationships to happen where before there was only suspicion, apathy or mistrust. In that sense, listening is a profound social change experience.

It's also a profound spiritual experience, because when you listen in this way, what you're willing to do is let go of who you are and not be so attached to your own ego. You open yourself fully to other people and allow their essence to come into you. Then it's a process of empathizing with the other person.

One of the things we tell listeners is that if you disagree with 90 percent of what a person says, start off by focusing on the 10 percent you can agree with or at least relate to. What are our commonalities? Those people in St. Mary's all

care about democracy; they all care about their children. Many of them start off saying, “We want to build nuclear weapons.” But the fact is, the reason they want to build more nuclear weapons is that they have families and are concerned about their safety and protecting them from the Russian menace. They have people they love – the same reason we’re working in the peace movement, but it comes out in different ways. By listening to people, we gave them the opportunity to begin to examine some of their own ideas and thoughts and look closer at them and to see how some of them weren’t really reflecting their deeper human values. We’d talk to someone and they’d say, “We need to build more nuclear weapons,” and we listened and let them get out their anger and their frustration and their fears. We’d ask them clarifying questions and they’d end up by saying, “We need to have more negotiations, we need to stop this arms race.” The listening has proven itself to be very powerful for social change. We don’t change people by clobbering them over the head. We change people through an active process of love. That’s what the Listening Project is about.

A more recent Listening Project was in Keyville, Georgia, a small rural community of 400. In Keyville, we again had a situation where there was a great degree of polarization. Keyville is a poor community with a majority African-American population. At one point, some of the black population realized that they weren’t incorporated as a town, and therefore they had no tax base for meeting human needs. There were people without water, and there was no sewage system or fire department. People were without the basic services that most towns have. So a group of African-American residents decided they wanted to organize and get chartered as a town so they could elect public officials and raise money to provide clean drinking water and other services. It seemed like a simple matter.

But there were white residents in the community who came out strongly opposed to developing a town government in Keysville. The opposition was so strong that it took two or three years for the African-Americans to finally succeed in getting their town incorporated so they could have an elected town government.

In the process, the press came into Keysville and began to talk about how Keysville was a prime example of racism in the 1980's. Keysville became a national issue. The story was on national networks and people were coming in and talking about Keysville. It became a very difficult situation. When a local government was finally elected, it consisted of all African-Americans. No whites would even run. Whites would not support nor be involved with this government in any way. There was a completely polarized community with an African-American government, but no support from the white community. So we organized a Listening Project.

We worked closely with the city council, the mayor and the Keysville Concerned Citizens (all African-Americans) in setting up what the goals of the project were – what they wanted to achieve with the project. Together we developed a survey with questions that would open people up. We brought in white people from outside and formed bi-racial teams, so that there were both blacks and whites conducting the survey. We went door-to-door to the homes of white residents, and we listened to them. Rather than talking to them about how they'd been a problem, we asked them questions such as, "What would you do to improve things here in Keysville, if you were on the City Council?" So, rather than just assuming they were a problem, what we did was ask them questions that put them in the role of being a solution. That's just one of the methods we use.

We also asked how they felt about various projects that the city government had already undertaken. We found that

they didn't even know some of those projects were done by the city government. When they learned what had been happening, some whites began to develop more appreciation for the city government. We also found that one of the primary reasons for white opposition was a fear of taxes.

Part of the problem was racism. There were people who just didn't want black government. We also found that there was a lot of confusion, a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of hurt. Some whites had been hurt by the fact that the press had come in and called them racist, even though they hadn't been a part of the opposition to change. It was a complex situation, and outsiders coming in and saying it was all racism had not helped. The Listening Project was able to begin a process of healing in the community. I think white residents felt positive because they were being listened to and were able to talk about their concerns. I think the African-American residents felt good about some of the positive attitudes they got from white residents. After the project was completed, several white residents came out publicly, for the first time, in support of the town government. Several of them began working for the first time with the African-American officials. A bi-racial human relations council was formed even though some people were afraid to join it.

There's still plenty of work that needs to be done in Keysville. Our project wasn't a big thing in comparison to the tremendous struggles and victories of the Keysville Concerned Citizens, but at least we began the process of healing and reconciliation. That was important, because all the work that this local government was trying to do was simply being held back by racial divisions.

Basically what the Listening Project is about, is taking the concept of listening and applying it in the area of social change. It's hard to communicate to some people how

important listening can be, and how valuable and powerful a tool for change it can be. People tend to think of listening as too soft – not strong enough really to change things.

People say: “We want change now! We don’t want to just listen; we want action!” I’m not knocking demonstration and civil disobedience as means of achieving change. I think they are valuable forms of action. But I do believe they are overused and abused methods of working for social change. There is also great strength in gentleness and great transforming power in reconciling with our opponents rather than just defeating them.

We’ve had several opportunities to do Listening Projects internationally. The most recent was in Palau. When I first heard from the Catholic Commission on Justice and Development in Palau, they said there was an issue that had completely divided the whole country. Palau is a group of islands in the Pacific near the Philippines. The issue was the Compact of Free Association which had to do with the degree of independence Palau would have from the United States. It also involved the fact that they are a nuclear-free zone and the United States wanted a relationship with them that would give the United States government access to land for military bases and nuclear weapons. The Compact was a very complex issue, and it had completely polarized the country into those for and against it. The Catholic Commission wanted a Listening Project to help them break through the polarization.

When I arrived in Palau, I was informed that the Commission had decided not to do a Listening Project on the Compact because it was too explosive. They had decided that it would be better to focus on development issues and talk about the Compact indirectly. The Compact had divided families. There had been a bombing and there had been a house burned down. It was thought that the matter should

not be addressed directly. I respected their decision – but at the same time I felt they would be passing up an opportunity to use the Listening Project on this important issue. So I talked to them more about the Listening Project. They finally decided to focus on development but to have several questions focus directly on the Compact.

What happened is what often happens. The Palauan activists' images and stereotypes of people – how they thought people would react to the issues – were not accurate. Many thought that people were so divided on the Compact that they could not even talk about it. They thought there would be angry responses if the issue were raised. In fact, because we came as listeners, people were eager to talk about the Compact.

We designed a questionnaire that asked people if they wanted to learn more about the Compact from unbiased sources. Virtually every single person said yes. They were actually very hungry for information. They wanted to know more and they wanted information from someone not promoting one side or another. So through listening, the Commission was able to work on this issue in a way that responded to people's needs. They were also able to identify other key development issues and find new people interested in working on those issues.

Activists have lots of stereotypes of the general public. One is that many people are apathetic. We have found through Listening Projects that most people really do care, but they also feel powerless to change things. They feel overwhelmed, powerless and confused about what to do. So they shut down and sometimes take on attitudes and beliefs that protect them from their confusion and pain. Quick easy answers such as, "Build a stronger military" or "Those blacks are causing all the problems" can take hold in this fertile ground. But underneath it all, within each of us, there's

still a person who cares and who believes in peace and equality.

Many people don't turn toward joining a social change group because they too have negative stereotypes – of the activists. Listening Projects can help reduce stereotyping and prejudices coming from people on both sides of an issue. In a Listening Project we focus on our common humanity rather than our differences and prejudices. We build trust with people so they can wrestle with their beliefs and ideas and get in contact with their positive human values. It doesn't always work but it's remarkable how often it does work.

I was interested in the sharing we did earlier in the day on listening – in the context of different spiritual traditions. The woman who spoke about her Christian beliefs, and the co-creation speaker and others were all excellent. I was thinking that each had much to offer us. I thought about the symbol from Christianity of the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and I related that, at one point, to listening. When you really listen, what you're doing is actually going through that death and resurrection process. What happens when we are truly listening is that we need to let go of ourselves fully, let our egos die. This enables us to be completely open to the moment and to what's happening to that person who is across from us. You let your own ego die and you become fully open to the light that's in that other person. You are being open to mystery and the beauty of life and the potential of that other person. In that sense, listening can be a deep spiritual process that's like a resurrection. A resurrection into the blessing of each moment.

Listening is a way of empowering people. It's a way of saying to people, "What you think, what you feel and what you believe really counts and is important, and you can

make a difference.” In Palau most of the people with whom we talked said they wanted more information and they wanted to get involved. In Southern communities and areas that are probably some of the most conservative areas in the country, we’ve gone in using a Listening Project and a large percentage of the people have said: “We do care. We want to get involved.” We’ve used projects to talk about social problems and military spending and we’ve found that people have never had the opportunity before to really explore their feelings and explore what they think and what might make a positive difference. One very important aspect of a Listening Project is that the group conducting the project is committed to following up with people who express an interest in getting involved. Listening Project participants are committed to acting on some of the input and ideas that come from people. So even after the active act of listening has concluded, a process of empowerment continues.

To end these comments, I’d like to say that *listening* is both a spiritual and a social change process. It is a process of opening to the potential and the goodness of other people. It’s a process of understanding the basic differences that separate us and the common human values that connect us. Thus we can appreciate and care about other people. We can learn to love, not because we think we should be loving, but because we experience empathy – the ability to truly understand the other person. Understanding and listening are the seeds and water of compassion. That’s something that we as Friends can strive for in all areas of our lives. I am very grateful for the opportunities I have to use *listening* in my work and I am continually challenged by my need to incorporate *listening* into my personal life.

Dialog

This talk was concluded with an opportunity for the audience to ask questions. These and the answers follow.

Q: How can I get more information and get involved with something like this? I've never heard of it before.

Herb: There are Newsletters available and will send further information to people here tonight. Unfortunately, the Listening Project is pretty complex. It's not something that happens easily. It involves quite a period of training and orientation. Thus we're not able to do a lot of projects, but we are working in many different communities. Probably the next one that will happen will be down in North Carolina around environmental issues. We are also beginning to be able to offer projects outside the Southeast. So the main way to get involved is to stay in touch and find out when projects are happening and then come, take part in one, or find a need in your own community and request a project there. We're trying to train trainers as well, but it's a slow process.

Q: How do you move into the community? By invitation or sponsorship by a group that's in the community?

Herb: It's only by working with a group already in the community. Sometimes we're just asked to come. Sometimes when we set a situation, we let the people involved know what we can do to help. Next we have to go through the process of helping them understand how the Listening Project can help them and their situation.

Q: Would you mind saying how you got involved- - how that worked in Keysville?

Herb: Keysville is close to where I grew up. I met with residents there to explain how we could work together. The mayor of Keysville is a wonderful woman who was very open and interested.

Q: Before you can listen, you have to have thought

through what is a suitable question and how you can ask it in a suitable way?

Herb: Right. The questions happen in two ways. One way is by our working out, in advance, about a dozen survey questions that provide a structured way of entering into the listening. The first questions are always easy opening questions: “How long have you lived here in this community?” for example. In St. Mary’s, one of the first questions was: “What are the positive effects of the Kings Bay naval base here?” And then, “What are the negative effects?” The second way builds on the initial questions. Our program enables our trainees to ask both clarifying questions as well as others which draw out people. As this is done we find these people expressing more and going deeper into their thoughts and feelings. So it’s a combination of questions you already have plus using questioning and communication skills learned in the training.

Q: Short of going down to North Carolina, how can one get some training? Do you have any printed material on this, or does there have to be a class? How do you work that?

Herb: I have printed material, but, as you know, this can be used in all areas of life and it’s really basic. It’s active listening that people understand from counseling and psychology. The Listening Project has taken that whole approach and tried to break it down, tried to put it in terms that were easier to understand, so that a common person could understand how to use them. Then we built a structured way of using them for political outreach and organizing. That’s where it gets a bit complex.

Q: Do you have any plans to try to have other kinds of outreach? Because so few people can go down and get into a project.

Herb: Well, there are going to be projects in other parts of the country. We’ve just received some money to help us

expand staff. One of the problems is that we're a small, grass roots organization. To date I've been the only field staff person. But we train new trainers wherever we go. Thus we encourage growth, but it's a slow process. It's frustrating, because as you know there are a lot of people who say, as you do, that they'd like to get involved. I can't give a quick, easy way for people to get involved other than to say if you can't come to where our project is, it's possible there will be one up in this area within the next year. We could use a staff of twenty and then we could work all over the place. But now we don't have that kind of financial ability.

Let me close by sharing our address and phone number so that anyone who is interested in this work can get in touch with us. It is: Rural Southern Voice for Peace – Listening Project, 1898 Hannah Branch Road, Burnsville, NC, 28714. Phone (704) 675-5933.