

Listening to Others, Hearing Our Song

by Pam El-Dinary, Worship Associate, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD
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When our Minister, the Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, is out of the pulpit, the church mice are left in charge (we're commonly known as Worship Associates), and anything can happen! As part of our annual church fundraising auction, I invited bidders to join the shenanigans by choosing my sermon topic. After Claire Kim's earnest bidding, I was eager to hear what topic she had in mind--and wondering how it might fit with our January Soul Matters theme, "The Path of Finding Our Center."

When Claire told me to choose any topic I wanted, I thought she was letting me off easy. I soon realized that she was giving me a gift: the opportunity to find my own topic--something from my center--right in alignment with the theme!

A topic in the Soul Matters worship packet that sparked my interest was entitled "On Needing Others to Find Our Center." Conventional wisdom suggests that the path to our center is a solitary journey, achieved primarily through quiet contemplation and listening to that "still, small voice" within. So, I was interested in exploring what role others might have in finding our center.

Listening to others is often seen as, at best, a distraction from our personal center. Poet Dawna Markova says, "When the inner walls to your soul are graffitied with advertisements, commercials, and the opinions of everyone who has ever known and labeled you, turning inwards requires nothing less than a major clean-up."¹

I wholeheartedly agree that listening to others' judgements, criticism, and even advice can be a hindrance to finding our center. Words of criticism can derail us. People imposing their own ways of doing things can knock us off course. As business coach Richie Norton puts it, "Intentional living is the art of making our own choices before others' choices make us."² When we rely on the judgemental voices of others instead of listening within, that can certainly be a deterrent from finding our center.

¹ <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=552>

² Richie Norton

And yet, sometimes, listening to others can be a conduit to listening within. In fact, isn't that a big part of why we come to church on Sunday morning? Why would we sit for an hour through a worship service listening to a sermon if we didn't find some benefit in it? And I believe that there can also be value in listening to other people. Come to think of it, the potential value of listening to others shouldn't come as a big surprise: interdependent web and all!

I think it comes down to what we are listening to:

- Universal truths versus petty criticisms.
- Personal stories versus external advice.
- A shared human experience versus an individual personality preference.

During her 13-year ministry here at Channing, Rev. Susan LaMar spoke frequently about a "chip of divinity" in each of us. Rather than just floating around in there, perhaps that chip of divinity is firmly at our center. Alternatively--or simultaneously--we might say that our humanity is at our center. Personality, preferences, opinions, and even beliefs may not be so important if our humanity/divinity is at our center. Moreover, if this is the case, then logic would suggest that my center isn't so different from that of my neighbor. We have a shared human experience. That could explain why listening to others can help us find ourselves.

For example, in a Sundays After conversation at the beginning of the month, I heard sharing that was spot-on to ideas I had hoped to bring forth in this sermon--some of which were not fully formed until I heard them expressed by another and said, "Yes, that's it!" And even when I hear someone's idea and think, "Hmm, I'm not sure I agree."--I'm still getting a clearer picture of my own stand--finding my own center. What's more, I'm getting a window into someone else's center.

Listening to others' hopes and dreams, fears and struggles -- often their words reflect back parts of ourselves. In Covenant Circle, I often listen to the personal story of another and think, "Yes, that's me!" And even when I hear someone's story and think, "Wow, that isn't me at all!"--I'm still getting a clearer picture of who I am--finding my own center. What's more, I'm getting a window into someone else's center.

Because listening to others helped me more fully form my ideas for this sermon, I've asked permission to share some of those voices here. Here's one idea that I'm not sure I would have thought of on my own, but that makes sense when I hear it: Resonant voices can also be heard in the arts. As Eric Smith pointed out in that Sundays After discussion, "Perhaps this is why reading meaningful books can be a way of getting clarity about who I am and what's important to me." Mel Currie spoke of this as "books that resonate bringing me home." The same might be said of music, theater, dance or the visual arts. Art that moves us teaches us something about ourselves, calls us back to our center.

The first time I read our Story for All Ages, I was struck by the page with the child on the sidelines at the playground. "The run is too fast and too far, the game isn't one you can ever really play," describes author Jacqueline Woodson.³ And the other children say, "I don't want him on my team." "Yes, that's me!" I thought. Or at least that was me in my childhood.

When I read the pages where the classroom fills with laughter because they don't understand a student's name, I realized "No, that isn't me at all!" Or at least that wasn't me in childhood, growing up with the basic name of Pam Beard. But reading about it helps me better understand the childhood experience of my husband, Ashruf El-Dinary.

In addition to listening TO others, there is listening BY others that can lead us to our center. In our story, the "day you begin" is the day you are first heard. The first listening of you. When the teacher repeats your name "so soft and beautifully that your name and homeland sound like flowers blooming the first bright notes of a song."⁴ Your song. The teacher has listened to you and is singing you back your song. Reminding you of your truth, your essence. Calling you back to center.

As another literary example, Mel Currie described to the Sundays After group this scene from his novel, *Just Before Too Late*:

Ernest Robinson says something about Paul [the hero of the novel] in front of his wife and daughters at the dinner table. Ernest and Paul almost choke from laughter. Earlier in the book was the following sentence: "No one laughed at him anymore. They didn't know

³ *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafael López

⁴ Ibid.

him well enough.”⁵ Well, Ernest did know him well enough and reminded Paul of who Paul was. Paul had to laugh, too.

Mel added, “This is what goes on when I get together with three of my high school teammates who live in this area. They know who I am and let me see myself. Sometimes it’s laughable.”

In that Sundays After conversation, others of us also resonated with Mel’s example. Eric mentioned getting together with college friends and how that could often remind him of who he is. A shared human experience. I could relate to it, too, with my high school friends. Later I also thought of my niece, who is more like a sister. And my husband, who has known me now through many life stages.

In the presence of loved ones like this, that “still, small voice” within finds a space to grow and blossom into a full-throated song of who we are. As we share more deeply our own truths, our own ideas, our own stories--and even as we share our own struggles, our own questions, and our own doubts--sometimes we can find ourselves in others’ listening.

“The Names of Love” is the title of a chalice lighting in which Rev. Scott Tayler expresses gratitude for “The love of friends who help us feel seen and sing our song back to us when we cannot hear it with our ears alone.”⁶ The flip side of this is: We can be that loving friend. When we listen openly and generously to others, it can help them find their way to center.

In her opening sermon this month for the theme of Finding our Center, Rev. Jane described Quaker services, in which individual insights are shared in a space of silence. Note that in this space, there is not only silence but also the listening of others. Perhaps it is the listening of others that calls the insights into being.

I often remember an anecdote that Claire Kim shared from her many years of experience as a Montessori educator. (And with her permission I share it with you.) Instead of telling the kids in her classroom to be quiet, Claire invited the children to “make silence.” Thinking about it this way reframes silence as an invitation--and reminds us that there is an art to silence.

This idea of making silence led me to contemplate a concept of “making listening.” Making listening often begins with making silence -- creating a space in which another can speak and

⁵ *Just Before Too Late* by Mel Currie

⁶ “The Names of Love” by Rev. Scott Tayler

hear their own thoughts. As another educator, author, and activist, Parker Palmer, puts it, “It’s not about what you say. It’s about creating a space where every person can hear, discover and listen to their own voice.”⁷

Generous listening also includes the kind of deep listening that Oriah Mountain Dreamer writes of -- a listening that doesn’t care what you do for a living, or what degrees you hold, or how much money you have. A listening that wants to know “what you ache for... whether you can be true to yourself... what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.”⁸ That kind of listening can illuminate the way to center.

Our own Virginia Voigt, herself a licensed social worker, pointed out in that Sundays After discussion that therapy can provide a source of listening that helps us find our way to center. Social workers are skilled in listening in a way that can help us speak from the “still, small voice within.” And when a therapist provides feedback, listening to that is often a way to help us clarify our own thinking. Perhaps what some of the best therapists do for us is to restore our confidence in ourselves by helping us remember our own power. Parker Palmer speaks of this in his book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*. Sharing from his own healing journey, Palmer says:

I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed their faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek -- quietly bolstering my faltering faith.⁹

Palmer goes on to guide us in how we can be that resource for others, being that loving friend who helps them find their way to center. He says,

If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person’s soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself.¹⁰

⁷ *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* by Parker Palmer

⁸ “The Invitation,” a poem by Oriah Mountain Dreamer

⁹ *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* by Parker Palmer

¹⁰ Ibid.

As I come to closure this morning, I want to wrap it all up in a little goodie bag for you to take with you: So, how can we best listen to one another in our search for center?

First, we can make listening by creating space for others to speak their truth.

Second, we can let go of the urge to rush to advice or problem-solving, focusing instead on simply being present and waiting for “the soul to show itself.”

Third, we can tune our listening in to the things that matter, to qualities that are central to one’s being, to our shared humanity, that chip of divinity--that center.

To quote The Reverend Jane Bennett Smith as we started on this path at the beginning of the month, “The world will never be whole until each person’s inner light is realized and celebrated. When we find our core, we engage with a sacred invitation to see this in all others; a true gift.”¹¹

See? I was listening!

May it be so, and Amen.

¹¹ “The Wisdom Within” by Rev. Jane Bennett Smith