

Is anyone listening?

BY THE REV. DR.
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Spirit of Life

There is a whole lot of talking going on in the world today, in an expanding array of media, but is anyone really listening? Some days, I have my doubts.

This month, our congregation's theme for worship is "The Practice of Deep Listening," and I've been pretty surprised by how engaged folks have been. Here are some things we've been exploring:

- Listening is receptive but super active. It requires active energy to focus on another and be attentive to what they are communicating. When someone else is talking, it is not the time to compose your grocery list or ponder the significance of salad.

- Listening is a way to love someone. David Augsburg said, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable." Knowing this, many of us would do well to prioritize our listening over our generation of output.

- Society is inequitable, and our individual listening/speaking behaviors are influenced by our socialization. Children are told to be seen and not heard, depriving us of their wisdom. Conversely, the voices of elders are routinely overlooked. Marginalized groups have had to struggle to be heard, which has lasting effects on whether and how they speak up. Conversations are often dominated by those with the most privilege. That means those who hold privileged identities have extra work to do to moderate/regulate our own contributions if we want our collective conversations to be more equitable and rich.

- WAIT – If we're wondering if this is our moment to talk vs. listen, this mnemonic device might help. WAIT stands

for "Why Am I Talking?" It helps to ask ourselves if we've already spoken (while others haven't yet), if most of the talking is being done by people who look/sound like us or if our unique perspective is likely to help expand collective understanding or add a missing point of view.

- THINK – After waiting to determine if we are the ones who should say something, we could THINK about the content of our contribution. Is it "Thoughtful, Honest, Intelligent, Necessary and Kind"? If not, perhaps we should refrain from saying it. (I, for one, am completely fed up with the endless stream of misinformation and meanness aimed at keeping us overwhelmed, polarized and pitted against one another.)

- It can be helpful to consider the purpose for our listening. Are we listening to respond? To debate? To refute? To learn? To understand? To empathize? To problem-solve? To collaborate? Some of these objectives enhance (and are enhanced by) listening, and others make it impossible. For example, we cannot both listen and compose at the same time; if we are thinking of our response, we are not really listening.

This is a season when things feel heavy for many. Contentious politics, multiple wars, tragic effects of climate change, fears about technology and so much more are layered on top of already full lives. Whatever future we face, we're going to need to work together thoughtfully and respectfully to build and sustain it. The practice of deep listening is one way we can enhance our relationships and foster a more inclusive community.

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