

THE ART OF DEEP LISTENING JAMES 1:19

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A father went with his alcoholic son to a couple of AA meetings, as a guest, and said, I wish the church could capture how healing it is to simply listen to one another’s stories. In AA you can’t ‘cross talk’ by asking questions or giving advice, which I found really difficult at first. A gut-reaction when someone else is talking is to fill in the spaces with your own words. AA simply provides a safe place for anyone who wants to share, anonymously, and then thanks them for doing so. That’s it. Yet this simple form of caring through listening, without pressure to advise or approve, is almost never practiced in homes or churches. I was amazed at the power of it. Therapists can often sum up what they do by saying, “I help people find their voice, and I hear their stories with the goal to be a kind, non-judging witness. Though I may help and guide, most often it is in the attentive listening itself, simply ‘catching and cradling’ someone’s story, that people begin to get better.” When you realize that people pay \$150 or more per

hour for this service, one has to wonder if people have simply lost the art of lending an ear, friend to friend.

Certainly there are times when the strict anonymity and skill of a professional counselor are needed. But there is a wide empty gap of good listeners in our world today. And it seems to me that the best peacemakers I've known have all been highly skilled in the art of deep listening. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor wrote, The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the church is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. God doesn't only speak to us through his Word, he "lends us his ear" as he attends to our prayers; he hears us when we talk to him. Philip Yancey wrote, Some who attempt prayer never have the sense of anyone listening on the other end. They blame themselves for doing it wrong. . . . Prayer requires the faith to believe that God listens. The Old Testament is full of references to God hearing our cries, our pleas, our requests. The New Testament only gets bolder. John speaks of the "confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). And the writer of Hebrews encourages us to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence [like the beloved child of a King], so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Therapists use a term to describe the sort of attitude they need to have in their sessions so that people can relax and open up and trust and heal and grow. It is the concept of "unconditional positive regard." The good news is that God invites us to come to him and offers us just such a safe place of unconditional positive regard because he knows we are made of dust and loves us anyway. There is no condemnation because of Christ's sacrifice. There is no fear at all in the sort of love God has, for Jesus came not only to talk and to teach, but to listen to our stories as well.

I know of few better ways to do this than to learn and then practice the spiritual art of deep listening. I've often been amazed at how I can go from absolutely frazzled to peaceful after talking to an empathetic friend. How it happens, I don't know. My problems are usually still there, but the anxiety that was tightly wound around them has relaxed in the listening, caring presence of another human soul. Perhaps this is part of the peace that passes understanding that Paul talks about in his letter to the Philippians. It is a mystery, really, how simply talking to God in prayer (and believing he is listening with love in his eyes), or talking to a friend who cares, brings a measure of peace that cannot be dissected or analyzed. It can only be embraced and gratefully accepted. Listen to my words, LORD, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. Psalm 5:1-3 4

ARE YOU LISTENING?

THE ART OF DEEP LISTENING JAMES 1:19

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward and this also is true about the friends we listen to. When we are listened to, we grow in 3 vital relationships.

“Reaching Out to Our Innermost Self” “Reaching Out to Our Fellow Human Beings” “Reaching Out to Our God”.

Old and New Testament stories not only show how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger into our home, but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to the receptive host. The key word in that sentence is receptive. Most of us have full lives, with little margin for lingering with one another. When I am too busy, I find that guests or people or even family members I love become irritants instead of intimates.

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