

Difficult Listening

The Challenge of Being Unitarian Universalist

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt got tired of smiling his big smile and saying all the usual things at White House receptions. So, one evening, with a long line of visitors, he decided to find out whether anybody was actually paying attention to what he was saying. As each person came up to him with extended hand, he flashed his big smile and said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."

People would automatically respond with comments such as "How lovely." Or "Continue on with your great work." Nobody listened to what he was saying, except for one foreign diplomat. When the president said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning," the diplomat responded softly, "Well, I'm sure she had it coming."

What FDR was demonstrating is actually a very common habit in social settings – one person discussing a particular subject while the other is "somewhere else," either hanging onto words previously uttered or totally absent in the conversation.

Social consultant Bob Weinstein writes, "Speaking is easy, listening is difficult. Experts say that the average person actually remembers only a fraction of what is said to them."

Why?

Well, in the first case, when "listening" to someone else, we can be formulating a reply to something just said while not paying attention to what the other continues to say. Not staying on message, we can ignore relevant nuances that actually address what we either think we want to ask or comment on.

Or, we may find ourselves thinking of wholly other things, our minds drifting subconsciously or intentionally. How often have irrelevant issues crossed your mind while you're supposedly conversing with another, particularly in active social settings. At such times, we can be totally distracted, not paying the least attention to what is being said. And while we typically imagine that such moments reflect complicated situations, they actually occur more often than we think.

Given such, may the real culprit be over-active lives?

Let us, for a moment, examine the physics of conversation. Dr. Gilda Carle, NYU Professor of Psychotherapy, writes that we have trouble listening because we focus on body language 55 per cent of the time and vocal intonation 38 per cent of the time, leaving only seven per cent for actual attention. "We're tend to be terrible listeners because we are 93 percent distracted by nonverbal cues as opposed to seven per cent of truly listening."

Even so, it is important that we be attentive in social settings; that we learn to listen "from the heart." Why? Well, for example, this morning we came here, each in our own way seeking community to nurture or celebrate our meaning, to become more comfortable speaking truth to

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power, or to find ways to both enlarge our lives and be inspired to share that which adds depth and imagination to our worlds. And while intonation and body language are parts of this engagement, our “difficult listening” – truly hearing what is spoken – is very important.

Attentiveness “from the heart” is respectful, and enriching at the same time. It honors both the speaker and the listener – the first by valuing words and delivery brought to the moment, the second through embodied openness and participation. It implies full attentiveness to an event and a desire to be in it, grounded in a spirit of belonging.

And personally listening both well and thoughtfully leads to community building, whatever the setting. Each Sunday morning speaker is unique, whether in message or presentation, offering opportunities to learn new bits of wisdom or to help build understanding. Such engagements nurture deeper clarity of thought and knowledge, enhancing individual and community grounding and relationships.

But listening can be challenging for Unitarian Universalists. Why?

To begin with, ours is not a school of canned, structured theology containing purported answers to every question. Unlike other denominations, the right to individual opinions and ways of constructing and interpreting language are fundamental to our reality. We hold firmly to the principle that “you don’t have to think alike to love alike,” even if living amidst extensive spiritual diversity can be challenging. But, as long as we work to continue to practice loving one another, we can actually learn to celebrate differences rather than being threatened by them.

Second, we have a history of being ready, willing, and able to engage both presenters and one another in questions and challenges emerging from Sunday services. Such discussions can become quite animated, causing coffee to sometimes grow cold, but all the while growing an opportunity to stretch understanding and vision in unexpected ways – on every side of a conversation. When we let the spirit breathe in these moments, we can learn to listen as well as we hear, even when we don’t see eye to eye.

Third, we must remind ourselves that we Unitarian Universalists hold to the principle that “*revelation is not sealed.*” To us, the Bible (or the Bhagavad Gita or the Koran, or any other “holy” work) is only one of several maps of spirituality. Consider for a moment conservatives doing their best to deny gay marriage, believing it conflicts with their definition of marriage. They are certain that there has always been one immutable definition of marriage, and stepping outside that definition is unthinkable, while we, always looking for new ways to understand our world, engage in choosing a willingness to reshape the way we comprehend marriage, opening our churches to embrace those who wish to live, and love, together.

We don’t want to rehash quarrels between now and our past. We want a new perspective on a different day.

All of which can feel incredibly demanding. We look outside and see others, particularly many of our peers, spending time “having fun,” and here we are, wrestling with difficult listening. So,

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we ask ourselves “Do I really want to do what I’m called to?” Well, as Pam Sparr put it, “Our spiritual challenge is to...wear our Unitarian Universalist skin all the time.”

Might we? Well, let us go back to some important Unitarian grounding.

In the words of Theodore Parker, Unitarian Minister from the first half of the 19th century, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; it’s arc is a long one, and my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, yet I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

Engaging life is Unitarian Universalism. Thus we reflect our faith, or if you wish our spirituality, and call out our Principles, which embody the union of two historically radical Christian groups who evolved beyond spiritual labels and joined one another in 1961. In the history of these threads of an ever-evolving relationship echo framers of our nation’s Constitution, men and women who worked against slavery, fought for gay marriage, ecological-spiritual thinkers, liberal religious characters and voices, all grounded in roots of radical thought stretching back to pioneers in Transylvania, Poland and England.

Their roots run deeply within this community.

In the many colors of our faith, we entrust ourselves to weave together groundings and personal motivations bravely, embedded with curiosity and compassion, thinkers and doers, diverse in faith, ethnicity, history and spirituality, but aligned in the desire to embody the good. Standing on the side of love, justice, and peace, we deepen our listening and seeking, building wells of commitment and fulfillment.

In doing all this, we need not think alike to love alike. We are people of many beliefs and backgrounds: people of faith, people of none, and people open to unfolding mystery; people walking many spiritual paths.

This morning, our vision should be to welcome all. As Robert F. Kennedy put it, “What we need more than ever, is to tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.”

Bring your whole self, truths and doubts, worries and hopes. Join us on this extraordinary – and at times demanding – adventure of faith and wisdom. We simply ask you each day to pledge anew to learn to listen.

We work together to build new worlds. We ground ourselves in our deepest dreams, our most intimate or heartfelt environments. Peeling back whatever words nuzzle, annoy, trouble, threaten or challenge us – all our difficult listening – it is time we understood we’ve arrived. Now. Here. Right where we are. Listen well, with love. It is good to be among us.

Amen and blessed be.