

**October 18, 2020—UUFM**

### **What Gets in the Way of Listening?**

Always. There is always room for more love in the world. And I crave abundant love especially at times when I find in my mailbox a newspaper like *The Epoch Times*, full of all the things I find so disheartening and cause me to despair. Stories about the death of the American family. What they mean is the monoracial white, cis-hetero family. That America is sinking into Communism, meaning equality as a baseline for social relations rather than commercial success and a meritocracy. That religious expression, especially Christian religious expression, is under attack. Not only do these articles scream “unloving” to me, but I feel **myself** becoming less loving, which to me means the death of creativity, of exuberant imaginative generativity. All that I sense as the cause the and the reason for the universe. What I call love. When I read the unloving *Epoch Times*, I become as unloving as it. And that is the real problem.

Our world cries out to be infused with more love, as it is love which sustains us all. That call to love is a duty we fulfill by listening, as theologian Paul Tillich reminds us. Listening, a sacred responsibility to nurture and nourish the life-giving and life-sustaining. And I realize that some of us are really sick of listening, especially when we have to listen to words that tear down our being and right to be. So much—both external and internal —gets in the way of fulfilling that duty to love, of answering that call. Yet, by listening to all the world and also to ourselves, we may get into a place of understanding that is thoughtful and true, as well as open to the regenerative creativity that is love.

We are on the web all the time, and the web is more than the natural world. The web is all and all that there is, including our human creation. There is no way to be apart from the strands and strings vibrating and singing. “When words cease and the breath moves deep and slow, and the inner and the outer are as one for a time, I wonder.” How might we consciously and conscientiously join our actions to the song of the web, creating harmony and care? How might we, as a duty to our place in the web of human existence, listen and thus fully express love?

Responding to duty, though, is a challenge. Duty sounds like something you do when you **don’t** want to. Duty **doesn’t** sound like the self-care and the pleasure-seeking we often want most in our lives. Rather than asking the “hard questions that take a while to answer,” we might want, rather, just to return to the normal we knew before. We might feel more inclined to go shopping, as George W. Bush urged us to do after the 9/11 bombings. We might want to see the economy re-opened, as Donald Trump has been haranguing since before we realized how serious the pandemic is. Such desires could feel like the “most natural thing in the world.” A focus on economy, though, is a thin and unsatisfying kind of duty, and one hardly available to everyone, especially with the lack of a safety net.

Even if we know our duty is to listen with openness and imagination, that is often more than many of us can manage. In order to serve as co-creators in our communities, we all need to acknowledge and make room for many voices to participate equally. Co-creating a community that is good for all requires careful, open, deep listening, and so much gets in our way.

The unfamiliar gets in the way of listening, of being open to the creativity of love and the opportunity to co-create the web with integrity and wholeness. Maybe you don't like classical music. Maybe you don't like soul music or Japanese music. I don't like it, so I can't listen to it. I can't get anything from it. Maybe you don't like the way a person presents their identity. Maybe you don't care for their grammar or the language they choose to express themselves. Maybe you feel uncomfortable with the views that they express. And so, listening is hard. You struggle to remain open, and thus to love. And in this resistance, this distaste, this strangeness for you, what hurt will remain unknowable? Who will be cast down and feel low down? Who will save our souls, our ability to connect, if silenced stories remain outside our acts of listening?

The distractions of the world get in the way of listening, too, of being open to the creativity of love and the opportunity to co-create the web with integrity and wholeness. The incessant noise of social expectations and responsibilities block out our ability to slow down and listen. We are bombarded with the hurry and the bustle of work and domestic life. Our ears are filled, and our heads are stuffed with the fear and frustration of the political climate. We are overwhelmed with the constant threats to justice. We are confronted with the reality that justice is insufficient, that justice feels far from accomplished. We face existential crisis at the state of the planet, the loss of so many species. Hope shrivels within such loss and sense of impending ruin. What joy can remain since we can't get back the world as it was. We doom scroll through our social media feeds or flip channels, the overwrought political news blasted toxically from every corner. News that too often seems more sensational than grounded in facts. We shake our heads and ask, "why bother listening further?"

And our own worries get in the way of listening, too, of being open to the creativity of love and the opportunity to co-create the web with integrity and wholeness. Our relationships undergo change. Loved ones coming to the ends of their lives. Job insecurity. Housing insecurity. Our fears of failure. Our confrontation with our own shortcomings. Our longing for the company of those we dare not visit in person. Our desire to risk everything to see those loved ones.

So, what to do with all of **that**—external and internal, existential and personal—what do we do when all of **that** gets in the way of listening? We begin by recognizing what distractions belong to us alone, and then we might be able to give them a rest. We begin by listening to ourselves. And we begin with silence, a word with the same letters as "listen." The poet and speaker John Koenig has invented a new word to help us slow ourselves so that we might listen better. The word is "ambedo": "a kind of melancholic trance in which you become completely absorbed in vivid sensory details—raindrops skittering down a window, tall trees leaning in the wind, clouds of cream swirling in your coffee—briefly soaking in the experience of being alive, with dawning awareness of the haunting fragility of life." Ambedo offers another way to listen, to hear corn and seeds growing, to hear a lizard and a rock converse. To move from the reactive to the open. What can this look like in practice?

Let me now return to that offensive edition of *The Epoch Times*, the newspaper that so enflamed my sensibilities, bringing out with unlovingness my own dreadful capacity to be unloving. I am fortunate to

live with a wise partner, someone to reflect with, to consider more than what I alone can see and hear and sense. About this newspaper, my spouse observed that what underlies all of its unloving particulars is fear. Fear of no longer being a majority with power over all others. Now, why would someone be afraid of that? All the stories projected domination in one form or another, with opposing ideas worthy only of ridicule or silencing. So, it makes sense that those who have been in the dominant position can only think in the binary of dominant and dominated. And if the once dominated, the powerless, if they are granted power, well it stands to reason that they in turn will dominate. And the original dominators will become the dominated, and who would want that? Binary thinking—us and them—this kind of thinking leads to power as domination rather than co-creation, to power as silencing rather than listening and learning. It took me a bit of patience to get to this insight under the jarring and, in my view, false pronouncements. Maybe my analysis is not correct, but if I want to create more love in the world, I have a duty to listen. My act of listening is an act of love. It is in love and lovingkindness where I situate myself.

A familiar line from the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” There are times to be silent, and those times prepare the way for the time when not to be silent. To stay silent in the ambedo enables reflection rather than reaction, allows listening rather than argument. As when “the moon rests like a slim slice of lemon in the sparkling glass of the morning.” As when “I am overcome by the sheer reality of a communion of life connecting every woman, man, [person, child and being] on this one world earth” and then, “I give thanks in silence.”

I give thanks for the silence, as I listen for when I must raise my voice and be loud. The listening is not for the fearsome silence of streets when gunshot stops, the silence of rage, not the red-faced silence of frustration or the exhausted. Rather, this is the silence, this is the listening which leads me toward and into the co-creation of world and ways good and right, equitable and peaceful for us all. This is the silence, this is the listening preparing me for when I speak up for justice, when I speak out against war and systems of oppression, when I have the courage to move against the powers that be oppressing my siblings regardless that I am not being oppressed. I accept my duty to listen that I may love more fully.

May we listen for the underlying truth of connection, sensing it with all the senses we have. May we keep on searching for what will sustain us as our listening yields truth and knowledge. May we be ready for the moment when silence ends and the duty to love calls us to speak. All of this I pray, for myself and for us all, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, many it be so and may we say together, Amen.

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEDWHQr2Wjw>  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/john\\_koenig\\_beautiful\\_new\\_words\\_to\\_describe\\_obscure\\_emotions](https://www.ted.com/talks/john_koenig_beautiful_new_words_to_describe_obscure_emotions)