

## Listening to Others—UUFM

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When I picked our son up from school one day—long ago when he was in the first grade—his teacher gave me an earful about what a little Tom Sawyer he was—getting other children to do things for him, including toting his backpack around for him all day. As we walked home, I asked him to tell me what had happened, and he said “But are you going to listen? Don’t you already believe her side of the story?” At age six, our son had already gotten the idea that adults don’t really listen to children. And I, his mom, was one of those adults who don’t listen.

Listening to each other, really listening especially when we disagree, is one of the hardest and most impactful things we can do. Listening can change how people feel about themselves, moving from persecuted to cared-for through a simple act of attention. This kind of attending requires that we listen deeply. For the sorrows in each other’s hearts and minds. To locate a person’s interest rather than their position. Listening as if you have nothing to win. To engage in dialogue rather than to argue and debate. Listening deeply, anchored by larger questions where our common humanity can call us back to each other and minds can be changed. Listening for our own inner wisdom.

To listen deeply requires listening with responsibility, with an awareness of the power dynamics that underly difficult conversations. Some ideas are harmful. They erode the humanity of some, and listening ought not validate such harm. While acknowledging our shared humanity—all are wounded, all have homelessness within, all of us break our vows a thousand times—we know as well that some of us hold more privilege than others. When we hold privilege—because of gender, sexuality, race, education, able-bodiedness, age—it is our responsibility to be peacemakers. I don’t mean shushing disagreement, repressing or downplaying differences. I don’t mean simply quelling arguments. Rather, when we have privilege, we ought to use our powers to create the conditions of peace, which are the realities of justice and equality. Our world full of divisiveness and hatred, of destructiveness and pain, not a circus that we can opt out of. Listening deeply to others, we can see the precious humanity in others as in ourselves. By listening deeply to ourselves, we can find the inner wisdom to care and so to act.

In “Just Listen” from her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen writes, “I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. *Just listen.*” Remen goes on to say, “One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about them. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely.” It can be hard to admit, I know, but so often we listen for our turn to talk. We want to have our say, speak our minds, make our views and our stories known. We want to be heard. And too often we want to be heard when we ought to be listening.

In our Soul Matters Sharing Circles, we learn together to practice deep listening. We each speak our own truths. We listen receptively to the truth of others. We ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel. We offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter. Our purpose is not to teach anyone anything but to give the inner teacher a

chance to teach us. And in that silence of listening for the core truth of another's life, we might find that holy helper in our midst, that messiah who guides us to answers and healing rather than providing them. The one who invites us to learn and grow together. The one who speaks up for those who lack privilege or a voice.

Justin Lee is the founder of the world's largest LGBT Christian advocacy group. As a gay man and social liberal who is also an Evangelical Christian, Lee's lived experiences place him firmly within our divisive political climate. And from within his experience, Lee provides a frame of reference for our alienated reality. Lee describes the echo chambers we live within—amplified by social media searches that always give us more of the same, as well as by the consolidation of media ownership emphasizing niche viewership, with limited interest in presenting wholistic and robust perspectives. Increasingly we all inhabit “spaces where we can talk *about*, rather and *to*, the other side—where like-minded people echo our own beliefs right back to us.” And when we argue rather than listen, when we debate rather than dialogue, we end up protecting our egos and reinforcing our loyalties to certain groups at the expense of engaging with others. We come to value comfort over learning, and thus we spread misinformation. We hold onto our worldviews even when they are rightly challenged. Make no mistake, we all do this. And the more educated we are, the more likely we are to think that we cannot be wrong and everyone with less education or different information is wrong. Listening, according to Lee, is the solution.

A number of us have been exploring the potential of Braver Angels, a group dedicated to encouraging dialogue across the political divide. We attended a presentation by the group through the First Presbyterian Church's First Friday's platform, and our UU the Vote working group is considering if we might go forward with our own engagement here at UUFM. Braver Angels uses techniques from family therapy to build trust and grow relationships, imagining folk divided by politics as couples on the brink of divorce. Different opinions are a given, but acrimony needn't be. And we all want the best for the children, don't we? The point is dialogue, not debate. To better understand another's perspective in their own words. To move from arguing about beliefs to knowledge of the lived experiences of what brought someone to their belief or action. Listening, again, as the solution.

Yet why should anyone have to listen to harmful opinions? Why should I have to listen to the opinion that women are prone to be over-emotional because they have uteruses? Why should any person have to endure the opinions that one is lesser because of their sexuality or gender or appearance or color or race or ethnicity or physical or mental ability? Why should anyone have to endure views that dehumanize them? For the sake of understanding the position or acknowledging the conditions that brought a person to their dehumanizing belief? Why would a person under attack have to give more grace than is granted?

Respectful listening and acknowledgement of how life experiences have formed us is an important beginning. But the aim is not toward politeness culture. The objective is not to achieve civility at the expense of humanity. This is why it is entirely necessary that people with more privilege do the hard work of listening across the divide, to bear the weight of listening to dehumanizing perspectives to prepare for moving from understanding to action. If we are to live into our Unitarian Universalist values,

affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we still must aim to disrupt inhumanity even if it is perceived as rude or impolite or uncivil to do so. The strategy for that disruption, that can be one of invitation and empathy rather than argument, debate, and confrontation. Humane deep listening can disrupt inhumanity.

I learned about a strategy called Deep Canvassing when I was part of a Showing Up for Racial Justice white allyship group. Developed by LGBTQ rights organizer Dave Fleischer, deep canvassing is a door-to-door effort to invite potential voters to embrace political action that widens the circle of humanity and protects those most vulnerable to systemic oppression. Deep canvassing is always about protecting women's rights, voting rights, LGBTQ rights. It is always about speaking up for the unhoused, the food insecure, the vulnerable, the marginalized. But this work is done not by "listing facts or calling people out on their prejudicial views. It's about sharing and listening, all the while nudging people to be analytical and think about their shared humanity with marginalized groups." Deep canvassing is about "Giving grace. Listening to a political opponent's concerns. Finding common humanity. In 2020, these seem like radical propositions. But when it comes to changing minds, they work." "It is stories, not facts, that are most compelling to people when they're changing their minds." Rather than: "Here is why you should support this candidate or this position that I know is right," the canvasser invites the voter to think of how their own experience could be relatable. If the law is meant to end a discrimination, is there a time you felt discriminated against? "It's a real heart-to-heart between strangers." We all are resistant to changing our minds during an argument. Sharing narratives gets around that.

An invitation to be heard. Truly listening, in silence, without argument and confrontation. Both speaker and listener held in a bowl where justice-seeking is the container, the only reason for the exchange. And wisdom for right, for the good that is the inherent worthy and dignity within all of us, this emerges enough that hearts change, votes change, actions change. And so may we change our world. So may we create the peace from which justice and equality may emerge for us all. In the silence of listening, through the love that is our birthright and the only work worth doing.

Primatologist and environmental advocate Dr. Jane Goodall asks, "Can we overcome apathy?" Let me say again, can we overcome our apathy—our superior disinterest, our self-righteous unresponsiveness, our passive outrage—in the face of the wounds that divide us against each other, the wounds that prevent us from a lived harmony that would bind us to work for justice and care for our planet? Dr. Goodall, she says, "Yes, but only if we have hope." May we live in hope that we might treat our neighbors, all our neighbors as we each want to be treated. May we hear the weakness and the sweetness when we are able to listen and then hold, if only briefly, the perspective of another so different from ourselves. May we each open like roses unfurling, creating sanctuary for the homeless parts of each other, 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, may it be so, and may the people say together, Amen.

Soul Matters New Participant Guide

Justin, Lee. *Talking Across the Divide*. 2018

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