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The Ministry of Listening

By Sister Robin Stratton, O.C.D.

Several years ago I saw a picture that illustrates well what I mean by the “ministry of listening.” The picture is of an old man and a child seated across the table from one another. The child is talking, her face animated and bright. The old man is listening with total attention. His hands are folded and relaxed on the table in front of him. He is leaning slightly toward the child and observing her with great love. It looks as though he were embracing her with the whole of his being, without any need to touch her. And she is reveling in his embrace.

There are levels of listening. I can pay attention to a sound. For example: a baby cries and someone checks to see what is the matter. Or I hear a thud of a body outside my room (as I did on a winter night a year ago) and leap from bed to find out what has happened. I pay attention and respond to a particular situation. The baby is fed or changed. I run for help for Sister Martha. I respond to a need for physical care.

However, the listening I would like to explore with you in this essay is the listening of the heart, which I believe is a gift, a ministry, and a skill. Webster’s Ninth *New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *skill* as “a learned power of doing something competently: a developed aptitude or ability.” *Gift* is the word I use to express a quality freely given by God and freely shared with others. *Ministry*, as I will use the word, is a service of the heart offered to others in the name of Christ.

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Think, for a moment, of the person to whom you turn when you need to share—when you hurt—when you are bubbling over with some joy that anyone else might think merely foolish—when you have no words for the anguish you feel. If you have such a person in your life, you have the priceless gift of a “listener.” This kind of listening involves hearing much more than the words. A “listener” believes in the value of the other, and has resources of creative love that enable her/him to enter the world of that other. The *skills* of listening can be learned, but even when they are mastered, the extra dimension that transforms a skill into a ministry may not be present.

Have you ever had the experience of coming away from speaking with someone, only to say to yourself: “S/He really didn’t hear what I was trying to say”? You may have felt that your words had been heard, but not their meaning, for the other person never succeeded in entering your world. Perhaps you couldn’t let go of the smile that was pasted on your face even though you longed for the other person to see the torrent of tears that needed to be spilled, and to give some sign that it was safe for you to shed them. What you longed for was a “listener”—someone whose respectful and cherishing attitude would enable you to lay down your defenses and be as vulnerable as you felt.

Some time ago, a friend whom I’ve known since high school called me early one morning to say that her husband, in a fit of rage, had tried to murder their pastor. She begged me to come. When I arrived, knowing that I could only stay for a day, I was concerned to put Emily (not her real name) in touch with someone in her locality. I called someone whom we both knew and set up an appointment for the three of us. Ann received us graciously, as I had expected. I breathed a sigh of relief, feeling assured that Emily would have someone nearby to support her. However, my relief turned to disbelief when Ann suddenly shifted the conversation and became impersonal and uninvolved. She assured Emily that she possessed the wherewithall to deal with the situation, that she had great ego strength to have gone through so much, and so forth. I was furious! I had come to this meeting with a woman who had been raped, whose children had been sexually molested, whose husband had tried to commit murder; a woman who was hurting badly and hadn’t yet had the opportunity to deal with any of these feelings—and Ann was telling her in a matter-of-fact way that everything would be fine—that she would make it through with the help of God. What was going on? What kind of God was being preached! I left the appointment in a cloud of confusion. How could I have been so wrong in the choice of a helper? For some reason, Ann seems to have been too threatened by the situation. Perhaps she felt that it would demand more than she was able to give. Maybe she couldn’t risk becoming involved in so much horror.

If we truly listen, we will sometimes be asked to absorb more pain

than we ever thought possible. We will be invited and even challenged to stand with a person where s/he is most hurting and vulnerable, most afraid and threatened, most awkward and isolated. We will be involved in cherishing another person and enabling her/him to risk allowing us to share some of those feelings in order that s/he can be released from isolation and invited into community.

One important facet of learning to listen to others is learning to listen to oneself, being attentive to one’s own signals. I need to be able to monitor the selves I present to others, as well as the selves I am too shy, threatened, or frightened to reveal. For example, when I was pounding this typewriter a few minutes ago, I wasn’t just typing quickly. Rather, I was feeling angry with Ann for what I felt was a withholding of care at a time when it was sorely needed. Listening enables me to risk admitting my shadow-side to myself, even though it may be difficult at times, because I know that I’m learning to be non-judgmental with myself as well as with others. Perhaps the most precious gift that I have received in learning to listen to others has been the women and men who have listened to me—those persons who have been able to hear me—what I have said, no matter how outrageous; what I have not said, but have communicated in some way that could be heard by a person with a listening heart. Listening is a matter more of the heart than of the ears, I have come to believe.

Saint John of the Cross asks his readers to pray, when they come together, that Christ may be in the mouth of the one and in the mouth of the other. While John is speaking of spiritual direction, I believe that we can expand his meaning and ask that Christ reveal Himself through the whole being of both parties. Listening and being listened to are precious gifts that we can offer to one another in life. Listening is a sacrament with a small “s.” It is one way that God reveals Godself in life. God speaks to me when I truly listen to another person. I have heard the pain of God. I have listened to God’s heart. I have somehow seen the face of God. And I have been the ear of God, receiving burdens too heavy for any person to carry all alone.