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Listening Toward Understanding
By Ann Garrido

*“O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console,
To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved as to love.”*
(Peace Prayer, attributed to Francis of Assisi)

Recently after watching a news story on the challenges of interracial dialogue, a memory resurfaced in my mind. It involved an incident that I'd not thought about for over twenty years...an incident that had taken place shortly after my husband and I moved to South St. Louis from the southern tip of the island of Guam. We had awoken this particular morning to find a fresh layer of snow blanketing the lawn of the flat we were renting, and I was thrilled. As we looked out from our second story window, I could see that someone—probably a neighborhood kid—had already been traipsing about on the lawn and I went to bundle up our toddler so that he could join in the fun. My husband turned to me and said, “What are you doing? You can't take him out there. It's dangerous.”

“It's dangerous to play in snow?” I asked, befuddled. Granted, he was from Guam, but surely he knew that people could play in snow.

“Someone has carved KKK into our lawn!” he exclaimed.

I was even more befuddled. Admittedly there were lines like chicken scratch in the snow. Maybe they looked like a K. Maybe two K's. Or maybe they looked like the traces of a neighborhood child dragging a stick.

“You think that someone from a hate group came and carved two-thirds of their name into our front lawn?” I asked.

“They were clearly in the middle of doing so when probably someone spotted them and they ran away,” he replied.

“That is ridiculous,” I told him.

Which of us was right? There really was no way of telling. The only person who *would* know is the person who made the marks in the snow (assuming they were of a sentient age), and that person was nowhere to be found. So, twenty years ago, the conversation ended there.

Neither of us spoke of the incident again, and I'd long assumed that my husband had forgotten about it after realizing how preposterous his idea was. But that night, after watching the news story, I asked him, “Do you remember that time when we had just moved to St. Louis and it snowed?” He replied, “You mean that time when someone wrote KKK on our lawn?”

He had not forgotten.

The good news is that twenty additional years of marriage and a whole lot of learning (including learning in programs like Just Faith!) have taught us both to listen now at a deeper level. “Who is right?” may be an interesting conversation to have.... for about five minutes, but even when we disagree at that initial level of discussion, we can listen to each other at other, more promising levels:

We can listen for the other's logic

In my version of the story, I think my husband is off his rocker, but in his version of the story, he would never say, “You know why I hold what I do? It’s because I’m off my rocker.” In their own head, each person holds what they believe to be a reasonable conclusion that makes sense. If they didn’t believe it made sense, they wouldn’t hold it. So, the more important question isn’t “Who’s right?” but “Why do we each see this so differently?” Is it because we each have access to some information that the other does not have? Is it a question of us choosing different information as the information worth paying attention to? Does the difference lie in how we are interpreting the information? Any of these is a possibility.

I grew up in South St. Louis. I wanted to move back there because I remember my neighborhood as a friendly and safe place to raise a kid... the kind of place where children can still run freely up and down the block and drag sticks in the snow. I’d read about the KKK in history books, but never thought of it in the present tense. My husband grew up in Guam. He was one of the only persons of color for blocks around. He had not found St. Louis to be warm and welcoming but suspicious and hesitant. He enjoyed watching the History Channel and thought of the KKK as something very much in the present tense. Deep listening means trying to figure out why the story the other is telling makes sense to the other person based on their knowledge and experience.

We can listen for feelings

Whether we agree with another’s conclusions or not, we can listen to the feelings that lie underneath the story for this person. Seeing the marks in the snow was alarming for my husband. If I was in his shoes and thought that someone was intentionally marking KKK into the lawn, I’d be frightened. I’d feel unwanted and outcast. I’d feel angry. I’d feel disgusted. I’d wonder why I had moved half way around the world to live in a place that did these sorts of things. I’d want to go home.

One of the most helpful ways we can listen to another person is to name the feelings undergirding what they are saying. We can do this gently. We never know exactly how another feels. The best we can say is, “It seems like you are feeling....” or “if it were me, I’d be feeling....” We want to be particularly careful not to tell someone how *to* feel. (In the history of time, “Calm down now,” has never actually made someone feel calm.) But we can bring the conversation to a new level by affirming the feelings that people have. Deep listening is not afraid of feelings but moves with courage into the realm of listening for another’s emotions.

We can listen for meaning and importance

The stories we tell, especially those that remain in our memory over a long period of time, are part of our life story. They often symbolize larger intangible themes in our lives. They represent something bigger to us. In the case of my husband the marks in the snow were a sign of the experience he had since arriving in St. Louis six months earlier. They were something concrete he could point to representing the myriad times when he'd been made to feel unwelcome in the neighborhood: when people had crossed to the other side of the street with their dogs rather than walk past him; when cashiers kept an eye on him with suspicion; when persons stopped him in the grocery store aisle assuming he was a stocker rather than a shopper. It was important for him to tell me that there were aspects of his experience that I was not privy to and he needed for me to take those seriously and not brush them aside by labeling them "ridiculous." As leadership educator Stephen Covey describes it, in deep listening, "You listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behavior. You use your right brain as well as your left. You sense, you intuit."ⁱ

The Mennonite theologian David Augsburger once noted, "Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people cannot tell the difference."ⁱⁱ If the sole aim of conversation is to figure out who's right, we end up having frustrating, truncated conversations. But if we listen as a way of trying to express love for another we can discover marvelous new things about each other.

I wish that I had listened better twenty years ago. Since that time, much more has been peeled back revealing racial tensions in the St. Louis area I was blind to as a young adult. While I still doubt the intentionality of the marks in the snow, I *don't* know for certain that they were not intentional, and my husband's conclusion makes more sense to me now than it did then. Even though we will never know the origin of the marks, we have different set of questions to ask each other now that has led to a more satisfying and meaningful conversation. I can acknowledge that, whether I like it or not, he's "onto something" regarding my beloved neighborhood. And he knows that, even though I'm not sure I agree, I've heard at a deeper level what he has to say.

Divine Creator, at the dawn of time, you fashioned an earth overflowing with life.

*For six days you labored and on the seventh you stood back,
and you listened to the echo of all creation.*

You have been listening ever since.

We praise and you receive our worship.

We cry and you hear our prayer.

We lament and you remember us.

Your ear is never deaf to our voice; your face never turned away from us.

And now, Creator God, I should like to learn to listen like you.

*In times of tension, lament, and complaint, keep my ears open to the rumblings of emotions and meaning just
under the surface of what the other is trying to say.*

*May the Spirit swirl freely through my conversations that I may hear all that you would have me to hear and
understand all that you would have me understand.ⁱⁱⁱ*

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ⁱ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989) p. 241.

ⁱⁱ David Augsburg, qtd. in Kay Lindahl, *The Sacred Art of Listening* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002) available at www.sacredlistening.com/the_listening101.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Ann Garrido, *Redeeming Conflict* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2016) ch. 3.