

Listening as Healing Shambhala Sun, December 2001 Margaret Wheatley

You are reading this in December, but I have written this just a few days after September 11th, 2001. I have tried to imagine what the world feels like now, two months later, what else might have happened, what has changed, how each of us feels, if we are more divided or more connected. In the absence of a crystal ball, I look to the things I believe to be true in all times and for most situations. And so I choose to write about one of these enduring truths: great healing is available when we listen to each other.

Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don't have to do anything else. We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen. If we can do that, we create moments in which real healing is available. Whatever life we have experienced, if we can tell our story to someone who listens, we find it easier to deal with our circumstances.

I have seen the healing power of good listening so often that I wonder if you've noticed it also. There may have been a time when a friend was telling you such a painful story that you became speechless. You couldn't think of anything to say, so you just sat there, listening closely, but not saying a word. And what was the result of your heartfelt silence, of your listening?

A young black South African woman taught some of my friends a profound lesson about listening. She was sitting in a circle of women from many nations, and each woman had the chance to tell a story from her life. When her turn came, she began quietly to tell a story of true horror--of how she had found her grandparents slaughtered in their village. Many of the women were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain, they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix, to make it better, anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up, as if to push back their desire to help. She said: "I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me."

She taught many women that day that being listened to is enough. If we can speak our story, and know that others hear it, we are somehow healed by that. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa, many of those who testified to the atrocities they had endured under apartheid would speak of being healed by their own testimony. They knew that many people were listening to their story. One young man who had been blinded when a policeman shot him in the face at close range said: "I feel what has brought my eyesight back is to come here and tell the story. I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now it feels like I've got my sight

back by coming here and telling you the story."

Why is being heard so healing? I don't know the full answer to that question, but I do know it has something to do with the fact that listening creates relationship. We know from science that nothing in the universe exists as an isolated or independent entity. Everything takes form from relationships, be it subatomic particles sharing energy or ecosystems sharing food. In the web of life, nothing living lives alone.

Our natural state is to be together. Though we keep moving away from each other, we haven't lost the need to be in relationship. Everybody has a story, and everybody wants to tell their story in order to connect. If no one listens, we tell it to ourselves and then we go mad. In the English language, the word for "health" comes from the same root as the word for "whole". We can't be healthy if we're not in relationship. And "whole" is from the same root word as "holy."

Listening moves us closer, it helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy. Not listening creates fragmentation, and fragmentation is the root of all suffering. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes this era as a time of "radical brokenness" in all our relationships. Anywhere we look in the global family we see disconnection and fear of one another. As one example, how many teen-agers today, in many lands, state that no one listens to them? They feel ignored and discounted, and in pain they turn to each other to create their own subcultures. I've heard two great teachers, Malidoma SomŽ from Burkino Fasso in West Africa, and Parker Palmer from the United States, both make this comment: "You can tell a culture is in trouble when its elders walk across the street to avoid meeting its youth." It is impossible to create a healthy culture if we refuse to meet, and if we refuse to listen. But if we meet, and when we listen, we reweave the world into wholeness. And holiness.

This is an increasingly noisy era-people shout at each other in print, at work, on TV. I believe the volume is directly related to our need to be listened to. In public places, in the media, we reward the loudest and most outrageous. People are literally clamoring for attention, and they'll do whatever it takes to be noticed. Things will only get louder until we figure out how to sit down and listen. Most of us would welcome things quieting down. We can do our part to begin lowering the volume by our own willingness to listen.

A school teacher told me how one day a sixteen year old became disruptive-shouting angrily, threatening her verbally. She could have called the authorities-there were laws to protect her from such abuse. Instead, she sat down, and asked the student to talk to her. It took some time for him to quiet down, as he was very agitated and kept pacing the room. But finally he walked over to her and began talking about his life. She just listened. No one had listened to him in a long time. Her attentive silence gave him space to see himself, to hear himself. She didn't offer advice. She couldn't figure out his life, and she didn't have to. He could do it himself once she had listened.

I love the biblical passage: "Whenever two or more are gathered, I am there." It describes for me the holiness of moments of real listening. The health, wholeness, holiness of a new relationship forming. I have a T-shirt from one conference that reads: "You can't hate someone whose story you know." You don't have to like the story, or even the person telling you their story. But listening creates a relationship. We move closer to one another.

I would like to encourage us all to play our part in the great healing that needs to occur everywhere. Think about whom you might approach--someone you don't know, don't like, or whose manner of living is a mystery to you. What would it take to begin a conversation with that person? Would you be able to ask them for their opinion or explanation, and then sit quietly to listen to their answer? Could you keep yourself from arguing, or defending, or saying anything for a while? Could you encourage them to just keep telling you their version of things, their side of the story?

It takes courage to begin this type of conversation. But listening, rather than arguing, also is much easier. Once I'd practiced this new role a few times, I found it quite enjoyable. And I got to learn things I never would have known had I interrupted or advised.

I know now that neither I nor the world changes from my well-reasoned, passionately presented arguments. Things change when I've created just the slightest movement toward wholeness, moving closer to another through my patient, willing listening.

note to editor: I'd like to add the following reference to the end of this article. This column is adapted from Wheatley's new book: Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future, January 2002.



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her

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