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LISTENING: A CATALYST FOR LASTING CHANGE

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Don't you sense me, ready to break into being at your touch? – RM Rilke

Although liberal arts institutions often express a desire to move toward racial equity and justice, actually accomplishing this task presents many difficulties. This paper describes how deeply listening to one another can be a catalyst for lasting change. After describing the need for better listening, I offer one case study which is instructive for thinking about bringing healing and justice within a racialized society. I then look at the connection between listening and inner silence. I argue that the honesty, humility and vulnerability needed to facilitate helpful interactions across racial lines is best achieved through spiritual practices that involve encounter with one's self and with God.

The Problem of Racial Conflict

Although many attempts have been made to move the United States to be a society that is not defined by racial divisions, it continues to be deeply segregated. One must only shift the topsoil slightly to find the rot that lies underneath.² Rather than moving toward reconciliation, the national conversation seems to be only retreating further into well-established battle lines, with no one willing to listen or consider the other's perspective.³ Rather than being seen as a socially constructed reality, race is taken as an irreducible category. Therefore, whites become defensive and threatened even at mention of racial inequalities. People of color must resort to absolutism, demanding that change be realized.

¹ Rilke, RM. *Rilke's Book of Hours*, p. 81.

² See Benjamin, "Confronting Segregation In the 21st Century" and Hannah-Jones, "Segregation Now."

³ "CNN Exit Polls" and Tyson and Maniam, "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education."

What is the end for which we aim? Is it an uneasy *détente* which involves slightly more visibility and equity for a few neglected groups? Is it hostile states, with a semblance of non-conflict, a carefully controlled demilitarized zone but closely guarded by high walls and machine guns? Or, are we looking for something lasting, a deeper seeing and understanding of the other and her experience that leads to genuine peace? My view is that this loftier aim is necessary and possible, but is often not even hoped for. True peace and justice are possible and crucial to the health of our society; a mere cease fire will never be sufficient. My confidence is built on the necessity of a skill that can and must be learned if we are to move toward true connection, understanding and justice.

There have been strong trends in the past five decades to resolve the conflict, but that have done little more than the policies of “separate but equal” to address the problem.⁴ Many of these attempts have led to deeper entrenchment. Civil rights leader Ruby Sales offers a helpful description of the current dynamics: “This whole business of demonization, I’ve been deeply concerned about it, because it does not locate the good in people. It gives up on people. ... And I have had deep problems with the anger, the vitriolic rage that has come out of the right and the left.”⁵

When trying to trace some of the reasons for these dynamics, it can be helpful to think about them both on the societal level as well as on the personal. When pointing at a structure upon which a comfortable life has been built, a white person quickly becomes defensive when the structure is called into question. A person of color has been so often beat down and told to be quiet that the only possible mode of change seems to be shouting. In this fraught situation, everyone seems to be reacting out of threat and trauma.

⁴ See Rothstein, *The Color of Law* and “Effects of the Racial Integrity Act of 1924.”

⁵ Sales, “Where does it hurt?”

There is a kind of wrongdoing which is possible only *after* you've convinced yourself to believe certain things—that a greater good is served, that the people you're mistreating somehow deserve it (or aren't *really* persons at all). ... As Mike Martin explains, 'Evading self-acknowledgement of our faults enables us to avoid painful moral emotions. ... Above all, we maintain a flattering self-image while pursuing immoral ends, often in the name of virtue.'⁶

Before being able to dream that change can actually happen in an area such as systemic racism that is so deeply embedded in the historical DNA of our country,⁷ first one must find the courage and ability to face this self-deceit.

And how is this to be done? Though each person has a false self that is projected both internally and externally, self-deception is something that cannot be combatted directly. As a shadow flees from light, in its very nature self-deception is something that scurries away the moment one's gaze nears it. Daniel Goleman puts it this way: "There is a peculiar paradox when it comes to confronting those ways in which we do not see. To put it in the form of one of R.D. Laing's 'knots':

The range of what we think and do
Is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice
That we fail to notice
There is little we can do
To change
Until we notice
How failing to notice
Shapes our thoughts and deeds."⁸

In order to make progress toward actual peace, we must first learn to listen—to the truth of our own being and to one another. Although when scrolling through media today it may seem

⁶ Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So*, p. 8.

⁷ See "Segregation in the United States."

⁸ Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, p. 24.

like an impossible and far-fetched goal, I will begin by sharing a case-study which is instructive for thinking about how listening might be used as a tool.

Cultivating Listening Spaces Across Color Lines

So, how can space be made for entering this struggle together? As John Perkin's book *One Blood* exhorts, "True leadership starts with listening." Leaders must exemplify and cultivate this kind of genuine listening, establishing ecosystems where it can thrive. Through a personal friendship that invited many conversations flowing in and out of silence, my former colleague Toya Cooper and I slowly wondered together how we might cultivate an environment of silence and listening as a way to confront and wrestle with racism: personally, across a college campus, and systemically. As an African American woman and a white woman, Toya and I were able to invite others into conversations, because we first became willing to enter this challenging space with one another, wrestling through issues, lamenting, offending and forgiving.

My hope is that by sharing briefly about the program that grew from this companioned silence, *Across Color Lines: Conversations about Race* can serve as a model and stimulate new ideas for collective listening and growth. The following description offers a sense of the program's tone: "In *Across Color Lines*, we're on a journey toward greater awareness of the American experience from a range of perspectives. Through a conversational journey we talk about the things we say we don't see but that loom in the background of our lives. What *does* it mean to live and make our homes in this racialized place?"

Objectives for *Across Color Lines* are as follows:

- Educating and equipping staff members with language to discuss issues of diversity

- Offering new perspectives and teaching critical thinking through thought-provoking films and discussions
- Sparking a desire in participants to join the greater dialogue around these issues
- Spreading awareness, competency and conversation around issues of diversity at Westmont College

Over time, a main program was developed, requiring a substantial commitment, as well as one-time or shorter programs to invite varying levels of engagement. Because lower commitment programming involved adaptations of the larger program, I will focus on describing the five-week series here.

Up to ten staff members from different races and perspectives, as well as from various divisions across the college campus are invited to participate. Before accepting, invitees must commit to attending five evening sessions. This allows for a) trust and friendship to begin to be established across five weeks and b) for the material and discussion from each week to build on the previous. Hosted in a home, each session begins with a meal, a time to receive hospitality and connect casually with one another. Then a film is shown and discussed. The group agrees to five commitments to foster trust: value for one another; respect for one another's opinions; commitment to the endeavor and to one another; maintaining confidences; and communicating openly and honestly.

Typically, a portion of the PBS documentary *Race, The Power of An Illusion* is shown the first week to give historical context. The following weeks, dramas are shown that touch on various aspects of racism in the United States, such as *American Promise* and *Bajo La Misma Luna (Under the Same Moon)*. By collectively listening to stories through film, the stakes begin as slightly less personal and then can the conversation can naturally move to more personal sharing as participants feel able. Because silence is vital to being able to listen, the discussion is

designed with ample space free of words. This silence is described and modeled in the first meeting, since it is foreign to most participants at the beginning. The conversation is then continued between meetings through a private blog. This also allows for silence and quiet reflection to inform sharing throughout the week as well.

Across Color Lines models the importance of trust and listening to validate the voices and experiences of people of color while also gently guiding majority white participants to deeper self-awareness and awareness of racial injustices, both personal and systemic. Through this experience, the group can move a little closer to collective healing.

Dealing with self-deception: Moving from defensiveness to openness

In order for a program like *Across Color Lines* to make genuine progress, a person must first grapple with the problem of isolation in self-deceit. The poet David Whyte puts it this way: “To inhabit silence in our aloneness is to stop telling the story altogether. To begin with, aloneness always leads to rawness and vulnerability, to a fearful simplicity, to not recognizing and to not knowing, to the wish to find any company other than that not knowing, unknown self, looking back at us in the silent mirror.”⁹ The self seems to need some aid in moving beyond its self-obsessive and destructive habits. We are familiar with the way self-deception can have catastrophic repercussions for one’s self and close community, as in the case of addiction. It can also lead to tragic consequences for the entire society. Whyte continues, “One of the elemental dynamics of self-compassion is to understand our deep reluctance to be left to ourselves. Aloneness begins in puzzlement at our own reflection, transits through awkwardness and even ugliness at what we see, and culminates, one appointed hour or day, in a beautiful unlooked for

⁹ David Whyte, *Consolations*, p. 4.

surprise, at the new complexion beginning to form the slow knitting together of an inner life, now exposed to air and light.” This surprise comes through encounter with Reality.

Confronting self-deception can only be done by entering into silence and into solitude. Henri Nouwen says, “Over the past few decades we have been inundated by a torrent of words...Words, words, words! They form the floor, the walls, and the ceiling of our existence. It has not always been this way.”¹⁰ In a time so inundated with words it is hard to begin to describe this silence. It is like describing the color red to someone who has never seen color. When silence is first experienced, it can be a bit like a key theme in Lois Lowry’s youthful novel *The Giver*. Her protagonist Jonas moves from only seeing in black and white to gradually recognizing color. As she describes, “Jonas stood for a moment beside his bike, startled. It had happened again: the thing that he thought of now as ‘seeing beyond.’ ...He ran it through his mind. It was clearly beginning to happen more often. First, the apple a few weeks before. The next time had been the faces in the audience at the Auditorium, just two days ago. Now, today, Fiona’s hair.”¹¹ Just as Jonas finds he cannot make sense of color without the help of the Giver, it is impossible to see one’s self clearly without help.

The Christian tradition can offer helpful guidance here. After having entered aloneness, one comes to find that it is not the absence of something, but rather substance, that there is a very real Presence guiding in aloneness. Before one can begin to listen to another person, especially someone who is very different, it is vital to become honest before God and one’s own being. As the early Christian ascetic, John Cassian says, “...Beyond sound or voice or movement of the tongue or any uttered word, when the mind is narrowed by no human speech, but...all its senses gathered in one round, leaps like a fountain toward God, discovering in one brief particle of time

¹⁰ Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 45.

¹¹ Lowry, *The Giver*, p. 114.

such things as cannot easily be spoken, nor can the mind traverse again when it comes back upon itself.”¹² Cassian speaks of this same moment of surprise, of encounter that Whyte describes. It is here that the self begins to find truth. It is through encounter with Reality that humility begins to be cultivated.

The desert fathers and mothers, beginning in the third century, help us to see the substance that is found in such practice.¹³ One hermit says, “In any case, as far as I can see it, it is good to be silent, for silence is humility.”¹⁴ It is this very humility that enables one to begin to see clearly. Another desert father, Arsenius, says, “I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent.”¹⁵ Even as I write this, I am tempted to end here. I can only hope that any other words I offer will not impinge on this silence but only lead us into it. *This* is the starting place for listening.

As we move from this expansive internal space, where one is seen in true form without deceit, it then becomes possible to offer generosity to another. Watching a child can give a hint of this kind of generosity. When a small child looks in the mirror, he quickly smiles at himself, not having yet learned the art of hiding nor the need for it. As one observing this pure interaction, it is impossible not to be drawn in.

David Whyte describes it this way:

To be alone is not necessarily to be absent from the company of others, the radical step is to let ourselves alone, to cease the berating voice that is constantly trying to interpret and force the story from too small and too complicated a perspective. Even in company, a sense of imminent aloneness is a quality that can be

¹² Cassian as quoted by Bluma, *Weaving Ropes*, p. 140

¹³ Ward, *The Desert Fathers*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Ward, p. 167.

¹⁵ Ward, p. 69.

cultivated. ...aleness can measure togetherness even through a sense of distance.¹⁶

As one begins to emerge from moments of complete aleness, maintaining this inner quiet becomes essential. Only by continuing to carry the lessons of aleness can trusting, personal (not token) relationships be developed. As I found with Toya, this kind of relationship can then offer continued opportunities for growth and justice.

Once we become comfortable in the silence we can begin listening to one another without quickly jumping to defensiveness (on the part of the wounder) or bitterness (on the part of the wounded). In a similar mode, Chris Hall describes the task: “Listening will not come easily. We will struggle to overcome deep-set suspicions. Past prejudices will need silencing. Some of us will be tempted to react too quickly to perceived error....And yet the effort will prove rewarding if we persevere....My counsel is to...(enter) with humility, self-awareness, a listening ear, prayer and a sense of humor.”¹⁷

Attentiveness to another comes through self-awareness and humility, cultivated in solitude. I am struck also by Hall’s last encouragement, to humor. At this point, one might sense the seriousness of the task at hand. However, humor can often be a balm on aching wounds, bringing connection even before understanding comes.

Unless one learns to be truly present first with self and God in silence and then with another person, the internal and external noise will drown out anything resembling attention. David Benner says, “Presence begins with attentiveness. This demands that I focus on the other person and his or her experience. ...This attention to the other involves setting aside my own interests and preoccupations. ...It also involves resisting the impulse to solve problems or fix

¹⁶ Whyte, *Consolations*, p. 4.

¹⁷ Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, p. 36.

things that appear broken.”¹⁸ There is a cyclical nature to internal and external listening. What one learns in solitude is offered in companionship and what is learned in companionship is brought to solitude. In describing this dynamic, Father Greg Boyle says, “Our common human hospitality longs to find room for those who are left out. ...Perhaps, together, we can teach each other how to bear the beams of love, persons becoming persons, right before our eyes. Returned to ourselves.”¹⁹ Once I have cultivated even a little bit of openness in aloneness, I then allow the other person entrance and am changed by her. This then gives me courage to move back into aloneness.

Signs of true peace

In practice, *Across Color Lines* has helped cultivate long-term understanding of and commitment to continued engagement with racial injustices, both on campus at Westmont College and more broadly. Three illustrations show the impact of the program: One white participant was instrumental in championing and developing training around racial justice for resident assistant student leaders. Another white participant moved to a migrant farming community and began working toward offering fair financing and loans to disadvantaged minority clients. Several participants of color became less isolated in their roles and more connected to staff across campus, developing a greater sense of belonging and access to previously unknown resources.

However, the road has not been hazard-free. Participants are intentionally chosen who are in very different places in their understanding of racial identity and issues of racism. Some come ready to learn and grow in greater understanding and others quickly retreat into

¹⁸ Benner, *Sacred Companions*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Boyle, *Tatoos on the Heart*, p. xv.

defensiveness or disengagement. As I have argued, I believe this is in large part due to how much each has been willing to face her own self-deception. However, even for those not fully ready to engage, the hope is that through collective practice of silence and engagement each will move forward on the journey and may become more able to listen when the opportunity next arises.

Conclusion

The roots of racial injustice are deep, twisted and often hidden. Many have tried and failed to address the problem, while a few have made real progress. Through honest encounter with self, God and others, these roots can be carefully excavated and brought to the light. This then provides a pathway for true change and justice to be realized within a community.

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