

Hearing Each Other into Speech
Sunday May 24, 2015

Do you ever listen to StoryCorps? Every Friday morning National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* broadcasts a person telling a story from his or her life. These stories are recorded all over the country and cover the full range of human experience – I've heard fathers telling children how they met their mothers; former students telling their former teachers what they meant to them; soldiers telling about their war experiences in Germany, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In honor of Memorial Day, on Friday morning, an army officer whose father was killed in Vietnam when she was five interviewed the only survivor of the attack that killed him, and yesterday, in a special broadcast, a Navy Casualty Assistance Calls Officer told about the pain and the connection of her work of notifying a mother whose son had committed suicide. The stories, like our lives, all differ, but they have one thing in common (actually two – the first being that it's good to have Kleenex handy when you listen). The second is that even when two voices aren't broadcast, there are always two people involved, one to tell the story and the other to invite it to be told. And often at the end of the story, the speaker says, "Thank you. I've never told this to anyone before." Without the person hearing, the story might never have been told.

Hearing each other into speech. Had you thought about this as a spiritual practice before? Usually when we think of spiritual practice, we think of emptying ourselves of thoughts, words, and desires, as in the practice of meditation, that we might receive wisdom, insight, or peace. I at least tend to think of those qualities as already existing in some pure form waiting to be poured in to my receptive space, as the Zen master poured water into the cup, but what if those qualities don't exist out there somewhere? What if it is our very receptivity which brings them to birth?

Today Jews and Christians are both celebrating holy days which invite us to think about holy listening – H-O-L-Y – and listening wholly – W-H-O-L-L-Y. In the Jewish calendar, today is Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. Though it began as a harvest festival celebrated 50 days after Passover, it became a celebration of the gift of the Torah, or the Law. We often hear them called the Ten Commandments, but the Hebrew word might be better translated as the Ten Utterances. The festival remembers the time when the ancient Israelites had fled slavery in Egypt and were now 50 days into their sojourn in the desert. This is the time when their identity shifted from being slaves running from Egypt to being a nation moving towards the Promised Land. This is the time they became a people.

As the book of Exodus tells the story, they were camped near Mount Sinai and Moses went up the mountain to open his ears to the voice of the Eternal. He returned to the people and told them that they also should prepare themselves to hear that voice. So for three days they prayed and fasted – they put aside their daily concerns and opened their hearts and their minds to receive deep truth – and on the third day, there was thunder and lightning and Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke and out of the smoke, and the people heard ten words to live by.

Rabbi Jonathan Kligler, Senior Scholar of the Lev Shalem Institute in NY, wrote about Shavuot:

In the Jewish tradition, the voice of God is the silent letter aleph (AH-lif), the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is the sound before sound, the “still small voice.” And it is the first letter of the first word of the Ten Commandments: “Anochi” (Ah –NO-khee)– “I am.” Jewish tradition teaches that the children of Israel camped at Mount Sinai and prepared themselves to hear that silent opening that we usually miss, and were therefore able to receive the Torah, the moral and spiritual teaching that has since guided the Jewish people.

On the festival of Shavuot we celebrate – and reenact – that moment when revelation occurs, when deep insight that has been hidden from view is revealed. Jewish tradition teaches that the revelation at Mount Sinai was not a discrete moment in the ancient past, but rather a timeless experience that is always available to those who seek it. The aleph is always silently reverberating; our challenge is to learn how to receive it.

And it was thousands of years later on another Shavuot that tradition holds the Christian church came into being and again, by listening, a scattered people became one. In that story, fifty days after Jesus’ death and resurrection, his friends were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot, also known as Pentecost, Greek for 50 days. Jews from all over the known world had come for the festival, and suddenly each heard the wisdom and example of Jesus being proclaimed in his own language. They asked:

“Don’t all these people come from Galilee? How come we can all hear them speaking our own native languages? Some of us are Parthians, some Medes, others Elamites. There are people visiting here from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the Cyrenene occupied parts of Libya. There are immigrants from Rome, both ethnic Jews and converts. Some here are even Cretans and Arabs! But these Galileans are speaking all our languages and telling us about the extraordinary things God has done.” Usually when this story is told in Christian celebrations of Pentecost the emphasis is on the power of the holy spirit speaking through the disciples. But the disciples couldn’t possibly have been speaking all those languages at one time – no one can speak two languages at once. The miracle wasn’t in their speaking, but in the hearing. Having made themselves receptive to hear again the Torah, the people gathered in Jerusalem heard into speech a new gift of utterances from the Eternal. As Nelle Morton wrote later on in her essay *Beloved Image*: “The Pentecost story reverses the going logic and puts hearing before speaking as the work of the spirit.”

And this is a reversal of our usual model. In our Protestant tradition especially we tend to put on a pedestal – literally – the one who speaks. But how could I, or any other preacher, speak if it weren’t for you who listen? And you do more than listen from the pews on Sunday morning, for as he prepares his sermon, the preacher contemplates those who will hear his words and what they might need to hear this week. And sometimes even in the speaking of it what was going to said changes because of the power of the hearing.

But our church community is about more than your hearing me into speech. It is about each of us hearing one another into speech so that each of us may realize the piece of the truth we hold and offer it to our common life. It is about each of us offering to each other a holy space to move towards wholeness. As the Unitarian poet e.e. cummings wrote, “We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.” We sometimes do not believe we have a word worth hearing until someone invites us to speak it.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever found yourself on either side – saying something you did not know you knew, did not know you felt, but something which was needed for the moment you were in? Have you been on the other side, the one who through your generous silence helped to birth that utterance? Did you feel the holy power of that connection?

Church is a place to practice that generous listening, so that we can offer it beyond this safe circle to people who are not so like ourselves. For speaking truth and listening to it across differences helps to change the space between and the terrain going forward. As the ears of the spirit brought together Jews of different countries and concerns long ago in Jerusalem, so today the ears of the spirit are bringing together people who are pro-life and pro-choice to collaborate on issues of poverty and health care; it brings together mothers of African American sons and mothers of white sons to talk about the different lessons their sons must learn to stay safe and to thrive; it brings together Israeli and Palestinian people to imagine a larger vision of home and peace.

These don't seem like natural conversation partners. You would think each side would be jumping in, cutting off the uncomfortable story, saying, “but hear my side...” or “you think you've got troubles...” or even the seemingly sympathetic “I know just what you mean. Here's what happened to me...” Listening is hard. Perhaps that's why the receiving of the Torah and the understanding of the Spirit are regarded as miracle stories! But it's a miracle anyone can encourage with some practice.

Here are some tips for listening with love:

Notice the cues indicating that the other person is ready to talk. People don't usually announce their story with three days to prepare as Yahweh did. Instead they ask “Is this a bad time?” “Do you have a minute?” “Can I bounce something off you?” Then once they begin to tell the story, don't try to make them feel better. Sometimes we think we're helping if we minimize their feelings of sorrow or frustration or anger: “It's not that bad.” “I'm sure it will all be fine.” Just listen and open yourself to their feelings. If they are feeling pain or fear or guilt or anger – or joy, acknowledge that. Make those sounds that encourage people to keep talking – mmm, yes, I see. Paraphrase what you're hearing and make sure that's what they mean. Sometimes there is nothing to be done after the story has been shared. Sometimes there should be a next step. Let the speaker invite your

collaboration. But sometimes the whole point is the telling of the story. Be quiet and let the story settle between you. There is nothing to do, nothing to say. Just sit. This is a holy moment.

For the voice of the holy doesn't just thunder down from Mt. Sinai. It doesn't just speak through the voices of clergy or gurus or Zen masters. The voice of the holy is within each of us, waiting to be spoken, waiting to be heard. Each of us can offer the sound before sound needed to hear and receive; each of us must be offered the chance to speak into that silence. The ancient Israelites heard Yahweh into speech. Those gathered to celebrate Shavuot thousands of years later heard Peter and the other disciples into speech. And the speech they heard changed the speakers and the spoken to. Listening and speaking can't exist separately. We must hear each other into speech.

How might you be changed by holy listening? How might you be changed by being heard wholly? How might the silence and the speech reverberate through this church? How might the holy words sound through our world?

I invite you into silence before our final hymn.

- Pamela M. Barz

Reading for *Hearing Each Other into Speech*

from her 1977 essay "Beloved Image," reprinted in the book *The Journey is Home* by Nelle Morton

It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that I first received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: "I hurt... but... I don't know where to begin to cry." She talked on and on. .. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one moved. No one interrupted. Finally she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. "You heard me. You heard me all the way." Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: "I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story." I filed this experience away as something unique. But it happened again and again in other such small groups of women. It happened to me. Then, I knew I had been experiencing something I had never experienced before. A complete reversal of the going logic in which someone speaks precisely so that more accurate hearing may take place. This woman was saying, and I had experienced, a depth of hearing that takes place before the speaking – a hearing that is far more than acute listening. A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech – a new speech—a new creation. The woman *had* been heard to her own speech.

While I experienced this kind of hearing through women, I am convinced it is one of those essential dimensions of the full human experience long programmed out of our culture and our religious tradition. In time I came to understand the wider implication of this reversal as revolutionary and profoundly theological. ... Hearing in this sense can break through political and social structures and image a new system. A great ear at the heart of the universe —at the heart of our common life— hearing human beings to speech—to our own speech.