

Listening from the Heart

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The allegory of living from the heart has been around since forever. Writers and thinkers have employed it to communicate (among other things) a more complete and compassionate way of being. Brother David Stendal-Rast describes the heart, as it is used in spiritual disciplines, as the most essential aspect of who we are. The use of the heart in this context is to describe ourselves as outside of the limits of the brain. That is, outside the limits of rational mentation. That which is beyond what we think of as our identity.

Lovers speak of loving with all of their heart to connote with their entire being. More than can be logically explained. Beyond all reason. All of my heart doesn't mean with all of the organ commonly referred to by medical science as that which pumps our blood. We mean with all that we are, and perhaps with a little hope, beyond the confines of who we think we are. We don't think "I love him with all of my heart but my liver is equivocating".

Is there a way to differentiate listening with the heart and with the head? Is there a way to discuss it without sounding too new age? For me it is the language of the poets that speak most clearly on such topics.

*When
The words stop
And you can endure the silence
That reveals your heart's
Pain*

*Of emptiness
Or that great wrenching-sweet longing,
That is the time to try and listen*

*To what the Beloved's
Eyes*

*Most want
To*

Say.
(Hafiz)

Without the constraints of linearity poets can weave a narrative about the heart that slides right into the heart without inflaming too much resistance.

The brain is a demanding audience; critical, judgmental, exacting and arrogant. Do not get me wrong. I am not negatively judging the brain's judgmental qualities. I actually enjoy that playground. But the problem with analytic thinking is that it (thinking itself) typically isn't sufficiently self-reflective regarding its own filters and limitations. Rather it prefers to find evidence for beliefs it has previously established as true. And it finds succor in the belief that it knows and is already aware of what is going on around it. The world remains nicely organized that way.

Our brain takes itself a bit too seriously. It typically thinks it is, in fact, "all that". Unless of course it is going in the other direction and is using all of its critical analysis to point out how inadequate one is or unread, or not smart enough or inarticulate or too slow or too fat or too conventional or not belonging or not quite as something as someone else is, or not as....well you get the point. Whether we are judging ourselves negatively or grandiosely, we can, ironically, be comforted in these judgments. Typically these are attitudes we have carried for decades. They are well trodden paths. We know them well. The brain would prefer to conclude something negative rather than remain open to new possibilities. The brain is soothed by coming to premature conclusions even if that conclusion generates anxiety. And although we may suffer and be limited by these cognitions we find that we focus on them rather than hold the tension of not knowing. A teacher once remarked that given the choice between the

unknown and catastrophe the human mind will choose the catastrophe. We long for the known.

Nothing gets in the way of listening like the brain. We are, of course, dependent on it for specific tasks but the brain finds great consolation in labeling, categorizing and perhaps most seductive, understanding. Now I am a big fan of understanding but the brain demands understanding even during moments that are beyond understanding. The brain anxiously waits for understanding when it is not yet time to comprehend what is being heard. The brain is a bit compulsive. It can obsess when it doesn't understand something, going over and over the same material demanding and /or begging for resolution, and conversely it can avoid something for decades. Both of which have their value. But both of which speak to the organ's limitation, and by the way, isolation.

Having been trained as a Psychologist (please note the important capital "P") I was taught, and studied on my own for over 30 years, theories, diagnostic codes and various schools of thought that together created a cache within which I could typically and neatly place the individuals to whom I listened. If a new client was waiting for me in the waiting room I could frequently tell if they were borderline or narcissistic by how they looked at me. Then when sitting and listening to them I would wait for the confirmation which would come in the first few minutes. And it typically would.

Are you judging me as you read this? Does this seem arrogant? Well it is. But the fact remains I was usually correct. That, again, is what is so seductive. The problem isn't that the categories are wrong. It is that they are filters. Which, by their very nature, filter information. They are not inaccurate, they are limited. Now I do not want to polarize. These categories can be extremely helpful for numerous reasons. I am not developing a polemic. I am interested in how those categories impact listening.

I have frequently played a game with myself. I will listen to someone with my brain and employ all the theory and understanding I have about

psychology and then sit back and watch how and to what I am hearing. Then I will switch to my heart (and I do mean the actual beating organ and sometimes my body in general) and witness how and what I am hearing differently. I will go back and forth and marvel how the same narrative is received so differently. I invite you to try this. When you are sitting with a friend, shopping at the supermarket, walking down the street, or eating a meal try this and notice what happens to your perceptual field. I invite you to tell me what you notice.

When I listen with my mind all that I perceive comes to me as if through a narrow channel. Visually I see their face and maybe the upper chest and perhaps movements the body makes. When I listen with the heart my peripheral vision expands. I see their entire body, their breathing and nuances of change that moments ago were undetectable. I see the philodendron to the left and how the green of its leaves complement the brown of the wall. I see the colors of their clothes and how they blend or contrast with the couch. I see the slight waves of the white curtains out of the corner of my eye, and so much more. Perhaps most importantly I am listening with an internal sense of quiet that allows me to really listen. I am not judging the relative health of the philodendron (which under different circumstances is a good idea) I am simply receiving that which is in my field of vision.

Our brain truncates perception too quickly. But we shouldn't judge him. He is, after all, a very lonely organ.

The heart on the other hand receives and responds moment to moment and is not lonely. It isn't interested in figuring out historical correlates and developmental patterns. But it is compelled by the slight variations in energetic frequencies. While listening to someone I am often surprised when I will begin to feel something, say sadness, when it doesn't appear to be part of their expressed narrative. My brain may want to rush to figure out why. My heart is content to feel the sadness and let it move through me and not necessarily understand what it means. That is a very important distinction; the heart does not need to rush to understand. It is quite content with feeling what it feels. When discussing this process of feeling a

sadness which had not been expressed a psychologist friend once suggested I was experiencing a counter-transferential reaction. I am sure she was right. I am equally sure she was right in a limited; one might say filtered way. If I am in my heart it is impossible to have a reaction that is solely an isolated construct. The heart, by its very nature, is intimately connected to what is going on in the other.

The heart doesn't know how to work in isolation. The heart can not work in isolation. The heart has dependency issues.

*The
Heart is right to cry*

*Even when the smallest drop of light,
Of love,
Is taken away.*

*Perhaps you may kick, moan, scream
In a dignified
Silence,*

*But you are so right
To do so in any fashion*

*Until God returns
To
You.*

(Hafiz)

My brain does not bring me to presence. My heart knows nothing but to be present.

The Catholic Mystics have the expression, “tears of grace”. It is such a beautiful saying. They speak to the tears which arise when we connect to

what we thought was beyond us. For me that may be the divine. It may also be the tender vulnerability of another. These tears bring us home to who we are. That is, interconnected and interdependent beings. The deeper I settle into the wisdom of the heart the clearer this becomes. And not surprisingly, the tears come more easily and more frequently. And I welcome them and am grateful for them as each one reminds me that there is no pain that is mine alone. There is no emotion that I alone feel. Right now there are thousands of people crying out of sadness. It is and can only be *our* sadness.

If one listens from the heart there are moments of not knowing. That is the anxiety zone of the brain and the comfort zone of the heart. Therefore one gets nervous only when one is residing in the brain. “What is going on?” “What am I supposed to do now?” This is a primary distinction between psychoanalysis and intuitive listening. Psychoanalysis analyses the psyche. The brain figures things out. Intuitive listening...well... listens intuitively. This is the domain of the heart. The intuition in intuitive listening is not mysterious. It is what occurs when one is present, doesn't prematurely come to conclusions, and keeps their perceptual field open. Intuitive listening does have its presumptions. But they happen to be presumptions of which I am quite partial.

One is faith. I have an abiding faith in the people with whom I work. There is nothing airy or ungrounded in this statement. I know them to be at core the same as me. Sure the accents that make us different in this incarnation are real and distinct. In fact the more I embrace listening from the heart the more I see and find how deliciously uniquely we are. I recognize that sounds contradictory, but the heart sees continuity where the brain can only see contradiction. But our tears are not ours alone. Your tears are mine. My fears are yours. We hope for the same things even if we long in different forms. This awareness allows me the quiet I need to listen from the heart. Even if someone has experienced a trauma which I have not, the heart can empathize. The heart can resonate. The heart can surrender to the experience. My brain may not comprehend it all. There may be specifics I never completely understand. But connection can occur.

And here is the resolution to the great mystery. The mystery of what the hell does it mean to listen from the heart? It isn't an allegory. It isn't a metaphor. We can place our attention in the heart. Try it now. Feel the sensations in your chest, the actual beating your heart. Keep your awareness on those sensations. Notice what happens to your thought process if you stay attuned to those sensations. Notice what happens as you come back to the more familiar forms of thinking. The answer to the great mystery is in our body. We simply need to place our intention and our attention there. The rest will follow. It has been said that enlightenment is an issue of attention. And so it is.

For me this is the biggest element that distinguishes psychotherapy from intuitive listening (or pastoral counseling). We are engaged in a spiritual practice. We are engaged in a spiritual practice with members of our spiritual family. Unlike psychotherapy whose origins reside in medical science, intuitive listening comes out of the mystical, religious traditions. Medicine looks for illnesses; spirituality is grounded in that which connects. Medicine speaks of the heart as a pumping organ. Spirituality speaks of the heart as that which accurately perceives, feels and yearns. And it is that heart which connects us all. And it is this heart that knows the secrets of listening.