

Perspectives
November 29, 2009

Fran Peavy, the author of our first reading this morning and who is a woman I greatly admire, has spent a lot of time sitting on park benches around the world holding a sign that simply said: "Willing to listen." She is not a therapist but a communications expert. She has no intent on fixing problems other than gaining – through what she calls "dynamic listening" – a new perspective on matters.

In the reading, the reference to the Ganges River, where her questioning and listening led to a complete shift in perspectives offers a case in point; that you can begin a revolution with dynamic listening. In her case, she **heard** the shift from "the river is polluted – there is nothing I can do about it" ...to "we are not taking care of the river the way it's supposed to be taken care of and no – we are not preparing our young people to clean up the river.

Albert Einstein once said: "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I knew the proper question I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes.

I cannot help but wonder if strategic questions posed to (let's say) our governor and other influential people who refuse to take responsibility for global warming, might not be more valuable than screaming facts and statistics at them. And the same might be true for health care reform where a change in perspective might be derived if we hear opponents acknowledge after posing the right question: "We are neglecting the care of far too many people." Or even further, "we are not helping our children tend to a crisis that will explode exponentially over time.

The Barbara Kingsolver reading was a great demonstration in poor listening. The missionary girl in the Congo was not about to change her perspective on the value of money. Even Jesus seemed irrelevant to her because she wanted lots of money and if Jesus lived in today's world why he would certainly understand that...and even preach that. Is she any different from our friends on the religious right who want to rid any and all regulations controlling the accumulation of individual wealth; to accumulate so much that it begins to stink like fish, but you don't notice the stench because you really want to be rich.

How well do we listen? This question came up a few months ago in our small group ministry, and although we all thought we knew how to listen, we really didn't listen well except for hearing when it was time for us to jump in and talk.

How well do we listen to the holidays...to advent...to Christmas? Listening is probably the last thing on our to-do list. I don't need to remind you of everything that takes precedence before we stop...and listen...which enables us to shift perspective.

And yet if we don't take even a moment to listen, how will anything ever change? Isn't the world trying to deliver a message to us? Don't you feel it? Is anybody listening? Is anybody listening to the cry and pain and anguish of our global neighbors? Is anybody listening to the urgent call to live with less and to hear the common heartbeat pulsating through all humanity?

Advent is a time of great expectation or anticipation. The birth of the Prince of Peace and redeemer of humankind and all those great stories. But what is it that advent and Christmas say to us in the 21st century...say to us who have little faith in the actual narrative of the story but who still feel "anticipation" in our hearts?

May I venture a guess – purely speculative, extrapolated merely from my own personal feelings? This season now begun speaks to me like no other period of the year...that we need to set the world right. We must listen to what the world is saying and then begin setting it right. I am filled with expectation that the light will find its way into the darkness of our lives. And the light comes with clear stipulations: Be responsible and acknowledge your accountability to the ages of the past and the ages yet unborn.

I am filled with expectation during Advent because (perhaps foolishly) I expect that we will ultimately HEAR the message that the child born in Bethlehem delivered during his ministry. He was preparing us, guiding us, giving us the basic tools for setting the world right. Early on Jesus made it clear that self-preoccupation will gain you no access to the kingdom. He addressed the plight of the poor and that our accumulated riches become consumed with moth and rust. And then we're filled with anxiety that someone will steal them away from us. Jesus mocks the farmer whose harvest yield was so great that rather than give food to the poor he intended to build a bigger barn to store more food for himself.

I believe the gun lobby, the healthcare lobby, the pharmaceutical lobby are all about building bigger barns to house their personal wealth. We don't share very well, do we? I imagine we don't give "alms to the poor," as Jesus phrased it, because we don't even smell the stench, which like fish that gets accumulated beyond what we need, will rot and stink to high heaven.

Jesus proposed a radical love: To one's enemies, and to those who are sick and helpless and targets of mainstream judgment. And yet on Tuesday we'll probably hear about the deployment of 35,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. The healthcare bill to be debated on the senate floor is laughable. And we still push the LGBTQ community out towards the margins of society that preclude full civil rights. What is the perspective on love, then, held by our Christian nation?

Somehow we just don't hear the message: Love, compassion, peace, and selflessness. If we listened, we would gain a different perspective. Nonetheless, don't we enter this season with a bit of anticipation? What is our expectation as Advent marks the

“countdown,” one might say, to Christmas? A new truth perhaps? A radical love, perhaps? An awakening to our own self-absorption perhaps? A new pathway for the world, perhaps?

Advent may well relate to the Christian liturgical calendar, but let's be clear that Jesus was not the first to invent compassion. Four Hundred years before Jesus there was Socrates trying to awaken people from their ignorance with an entirely new perspective. He tried to propel people on a journey of thought, believing that truth will be disclosed through the perseverance of questioning. (Strategic questioning, one might say. Determine the proper question and the solution to the problem will come more easily). Truth and wisdom, Socrates maintained, will transform the world.

A hundred years before Socrates there was the Buddha whose awakening enabled him to see the human blind lust for accumulation that only leads to suffering. We hear the same perspective offered by different prophetic voices throughout the ages...but nobody listens.

Fifty years before the Buddha we find Confucius telling people the way it really is. It doesn't get any clearer. Confucius simply divided the world between Superior man who is concerned with justice and Inferior man who is concerned with profit. Five hundred and fifty years before the common era, we find the same issue on the senate floor today that conflicted society in the time of Confucius. Healthcare for all will undermine the profit of some. Justice for **all** is inherently in tension with profit for **some**. Wouldn't you love to ask the American people, the tea-baggers and town hall criers: “Are you Superior Man or Inferior Man. The distinction is most clear.”

Long before Jesus, Confucius noted that the Inferior man is filled with anxiety about his profits while the Superior man finds serenity. Going further, he says: “The Superior man is dignified without arrogance; the Inferior man is arrogant without dignity.” Has anything changed over the last 2500 years?

Confucius offers three very simple principles to transform the world through a new perspective. Unitarians may be advised to reduce their seven principles to just these three:

- 1- Obey the moral obligation to live in harmony with everything around you. (The premise is that goodness dwells in all of us, even Sarah Palin. However, there can only be strife and not harmony unless we obey the moral obligation which is always focused toward those in need and not upon our selfishness)
- 2- Display benevolence to others; promote welfare of others. (In essence he's talking about a kindly disposition...offering goodwill to others. That perspective alone can transform the world).
- 3- Wisdom. (What he's saying is that we need to strive for knowledge and understanding of the world around us. To know of the starvation in Africa, to know the history of the Middle East, to know the injustice and anguish and

pain of our immediate neighbors leads to UNDERSTANDING. Wisdom makes us compassionate. We are indifferent to our neighbor because of our ignorance.)

Advent means to me the beginning of a season dedicated to listening. By listening we hear a new perspective. For Socrates it meant transforming how we think. For Buddha it meant transforming our life path. For Jesus it meant transforming how we love. For Confucius it meant transforming how we educate people to become superior human beings.

The darkness that lies in the midst of this season, which is dispelled by the light coming from advent candles ... the darkness always suggests that the moral obligation to live in harmony on this planet has been ignored by prevailing self-interests through the ages and in all cultures: In China, In India, in Greece, in Palestine, in the west. Responding with compassion towards others, by definition, means I will have less.

But if we listen to the divine call through the ages, we will have a revolution of the heart. The hope is that we can set the world right by listening to what has been spoken forever. I hear the message to say: We are responsible for the mess we're in. We are accountable to the generation who will follow. We need a new perspective.

I wonder if any message so old can be considered radical? But it is, because human beings are human beings with the same proclivities, always. It feels dark. Ignorance plunges us into the dark more deeply. And quite frankly, I don't often think about this in times other than now, where in the spirit of Advent and preparation for Christmas – spiritual preparation - we think in terms of a new light splitting the darkness. And we pose tough questions to ourselves about our life choices and priorities. And we begin to hear the messages of old so relevant in our current time of darkness.

The message has really always been about personal accumulation in the face of the tremendous need of others. It's less about you, and more about your neighbor. And if we stop long enough to hear the message, however faintly, we remain hopeful that a new perspective will seize our hearts and transform the world.