

# **Listen, Listen, Listen To My Heart's Song**

## **February 9, 2014**

### **Lane Campbell**

#### **Opening**

We are here,

*Coming out of the cold into the warmth of this place,*

Clearing our minds and hearts as we begin,

*Open to gratitude for this day and every day,*

Knowing that each life is precious,

*And that our lives are worth listening to.*

**And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.**

#### **Singing #1010 We Give Thanks**

#### **Ingathering**

Teacher Appreciation Litany

*DRE:* Do you know what day it is? Today is a day when we get to thank the people who have volunteered their hours, their creativity, and their passion to make our church a better place. Today is a day we get to thank our Religious Education Teachers. And I want to invite everyone here to join us in a celebration of the many gifts our teachers bring to this church.

Will all of our Religious Education and Adult Enrichment teachers please rise to be recognized?

*Minister:* Today, I bring to you gratitude for your creativity. For your artistic talents, for your quick thinking, for the ways you bring people together to consider fresh ideas and perspectives. Thank you.

*RE Council:* Today we bring to you an appreciation for your boldness. For your leadership, for stepping forward to guide people of all ages along the path of lifelong learning, for the courage it takes to be a teacher. Thank you.

*AEP Committee:* Today, we bring you gratitude for your innovation. For creating new ways to teach, for facilitating the classes that connect this community, for inspiring and off-the-cuff moments that have moved us towards transformation. Thank you.

*Children:* Today, we thank you from our hearts for being our teachers. We have laughed together, grown together, played together, and learned together. Thank you.

*Adults:* Today, we also thank you for being our teachers. For the compassion you have shown us, for the generous gifts of time, talent, and knowledge shared with us. For your dedication to our growth and to our community, we thank you.

*Minister and DRE:* Today, we bring you appreciation for your stewardship. For the responsibility you hold as an integral part of this congregation, for your eyes and hearts ever-watchful of safety, for your service to this church and to our community, and finally for your thoughtful offerings. Thank you.

*RE/AEP Teachers:* Today, we renew our commitment to the ministry of teaching. We covenant with you all to continue on the path of lifelong learning, to lead you with justice and compassion towards creating and re-creating the beloved community.

*Congregation:* Today, we renew our commitment to support the teachers of this community. We bring to you our promise that we will encourage you and continue to learn from you. We appreciate the gifts you bring to this church and we value you. Thank you.

## **Greeting**

## **Chanting**

Words from Paramahansa Yogananda, the founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship, an early yoga master to bring yoga to the West. For those of us that have experienced yoga practices, it is an opportunity to listen to our bodies and to listen to ourselves. Let us join in chanting once through together, then twice in a round.

Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song (2x)

I will never forget you, I will never forsake you. (2x)

## **Communing**

### **Sequence**

A moment to breathe in and out, a moment for reflection, a moment to hear our own stories play back through our minds – one precious moment. Our bodies move slightly up and down with the breathing, relaxing into our chairs, perhaps closing our eyes. This time, this listening time that belongs to just us. Lay your back into that chair and continue to breathe with me, to share in our humanity, to share in this simple act of breathing in and out. Open your heart that it may be fed by the richness of shared silence together. A hallowed moment to sit in silence with one another and to just be. Let us join in this silence together now.

### *Silence*

As we continue to sit, our hearts are drawn to those that rest heavy within them. The people who have touched our lives throughout this week and beyond, who have flitted through our days, or been that consistent presence for us. We remember those this morning who are sick, who have sat with us when we needed them, who had been there,

but now are gone. Our hearts grow heavier in the remembering, so we join in releasing those names silently or aloud into this space. We call out the names held within, that we may be heard.

### *Naming*

This moment, this one moment, is ours for the listening. We open our ears and our spirits to recognize beauty in the joining of voices, in the strumming of a guitar, in the midst of this precious moment.

### **Reading**

*Just Listen* by Rachel Naomi Remen from Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal.

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give to each other is our attention. And especially if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they're saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it. Most of us don't value ourselves or our love enough to know this. It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of simply saying, "I'm so sorry," when someone is in pain. And meaning it.

One of my patients told me that, when she tried to tell her story, people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely. We connect through listening. When we interrupt what someone is saying to let them know that we understand, we move the focus of attention to ourselves. When we listen, they know we care.

Many people with cancer talk about the relief of having someone just listen. I have even learned to respond to someone crying by just listening. In the old days I used to reach for the tissues, until I realized that passing a person a tissue may be just another way to shut them down, to take them out of their experience of sadness and grief. Now I just listen. When they have cried all they need to cry, they find me there with them.

This simple thing has not been that easy to learn. It certainly went against everything I had been taught since I was very young. I thought people listened only because they were too timid to speak or did not know the answer. A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words.

### **Reading**

Soulidarity Ep. 00: Life-2:25-6:27

Today, we will be listening to one of our readings via podcast. The podcast is called *Soulidarity* and it comes from a Unitarian Universalist community out in Washington DC. These words are the beginnings of a conversation between Rev. Eric Martinez Rezly and his colleague, Osa.

## Sermon

### *Listen, Listen, Listen To My Heart's Song*

For the remainder of this 24-minute podcast, these two men, Rev. Erik Martinez Resly and Osa tell their life stories. They talk about where they have come from, about what their lives have been telling them. It is a compelling listen and I encourage you to find out more about them. Both Osa and Rev. Erik are part of a new young adult Unitarian Universalist community out in Washington, D.C. called *Sanctuaries*. When I visited their Facebook page this past week, their cover photo reads, “Our stories matter.”

In the introduction to this podcast entitled “*Soulidarity*,” the quote goes: “Soulidarity is more than just a name. It’s the radical idea that every story holds a profound spiritual truth about the world we share.” This group of UU young adults have taken on a spiritual practice of listening deeply to each other’s stories, of listening to the profound spiritual truth contained in what each one of us and each person has to share.

For a long time, I have wondered how to live a spiritually devoted life as a Unitarian Universalist. Does it mean daily prayer? Does it mean meditating more? Do I need to go on a spiritual retreat? Spend more time in silence? It’s a question I wrestle with often and the answers are rarely the same. And this morning, I am here to give you a small glimpse into one of the ways I believe each of us can live a more devoted life as Unitarian Universalists – through listening.

This morning, I want to own with you all just right up front that I have not always been the best listener. Call this a confessional moment (ha! In a UU church!), call it a moment of actually being responsible for the way I have acted. I have not always been the best listener. Listening has taken me some practice. It has taken me time to pay true attention to what others are saying and it has taken me a while to learn to listen to myself.

It is life-saving to hear the experiences of others. I am going to say that again because I believe it matters- it is life-saving to hear the experiences of others.

A few years back, I was part of a sharing circle with some other women in my community. Each week, we would pick a topic to share on and go around in a circle, taking turns, sharing for seven minutes, uninterrupted on various topics that were relevant to our lives. We shared parts of our stories – our histories, our cultural experiences. Oftentimes, people shed tears in articulating what had been held inside of them for so long, and actually being listened to while they shared it. It is a difficult practice to devote your attention to another person for seven minutes straight. I had to get used to the experience. But when I did, I recognized, that, in listening to others, I was given a gift. In listening without feeling the pressure to respond, I was able to just be there with someone else, to truly, fully be there, and to be present.

Do you know what I am talking about? Have you ever had the experience of listening to another person and truly hearing what they are saying?

I join with the opinion shared in the reading from this morning from Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. The most basic and powerful way to connect to another human being is

just to listen to them. To open our ears and our eyes to what another person is saying, that we can fully take in what is being shared, and that someone feels fully heard. When I listen to someone, I benefit in hearing them out. I benefit in understanding them. There is a part of our core that is touched, transformed in the experience, just the same as the person being listened to.

When I have felt fully listened to, it has been a healing experience. It is at the center of pastoral care and many therapeutic practices. When we are listened to, there is a sigh of relief within. We are recognized. Our words and feelings are validated by this sacred act of expressing what is inside of us, and experiencing connection with another person. It is an act of the heart, one where we open up when we know we are being listened to.

Theologically, listening is one of the vehicles that binds us together. It is an act that connects my human experience with yours. It is a practice that brings us into further knowing each other, and possibly knowing ourselves, but I will get to that a bit later. Even if we cannot physically hear, we can recognize body language, recognize shared experience, recognize when we are being understood. Sharing our stories puts us in touch with the humanity of another person.

Today, as you were listening to the story Osa shared of what his life has been telling him he should do, I wonder if there was a point of connection for you. I wonder if there was a time where you heard a spiritual truth- perhaps that making music is important, perhaps a value of diverse voices and perspectives, perhaps another aspect of his story rang true to you. It is amazing to me that someone can share their story from another part of the country, sometimes from another part of the world, and it can ring true to us.

Listening to someone else is an act that takes practice for some of us – we do not begin listening in this way overnight. Remen writes about listening, “The simple thing has not been that easy to learn. It certainly went against everything I had been taught since I was very young. I thought people listened only because they were too timid to speak or did not know the answer. A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.” We must first unlearn our interpretations of another’s silence. We must first unlearn our kneejerk response to react and to say something that conveys we are listening or we know the experience of another.

How many people here have had a similar experience to the one described by Rachel Naomi Remen’s client in our reading today? An experience of telling your story and being interrupted, only to hear that person say they have been through the exact same thing? How did you feel in that moment? When this has happened to me, I experienced hurt- no one knows exactly what has happened to me. I experienced anger that my story was cut off. I experienced a jarring shift of gears that made me want to give up also.

To go back to the experience of listening to Osa’s story, if there was a point of connection, we know still that his story is his story and our stories are our own. There are shared experiences to be heard between humans – it speaks to a common thread that runs through us all. However, listening to someone and fully hearing them also means

allowing another person's story to belong to them, to refrain from the impulse to interject my story, which communicates that I am not fully listening. My attention is now elsewhere. This listening can be difficult stuff.

I wonder what it would be like if each one of us engaged in group or paired listening practices, like sharing circles or covenant groups. If we took intentional times here in church or elsewhere to just practice listening to others. As a church we host covenant groups because we know the importance of listening, we value the connections that can be formed between people in the act of listening and sharing with each other. This can happen in any myriad of spaces and places, though the opportunity must be intentionally created.

To switch gears here for a moment, there is another aspect to listening as a spiritual practice, as a way to connect, and that is in a deeper connection with ourselves. Remen reminds us, "We connect through listening." I think this applies to listening others alongside ourselves. Each Sunday, when we hold space for silence in this room, I can feel the energy that is created by just taking a silent moment to listen to ourselves. I feel the importance of this practice each Sunday when I am able to partake in this moment of silence with you all.

In my attempts to live a more devotional life as a Unitarian Universalist, I always turn back to one of the first tools in my toolbox. It is a book, one that was given to me when I graduated high school in a Unitarian Universalist church where I had grown up. The book is called *Awakening the Soul* by John C. Morgan. It is a book of daily readings, no longer than a paragraph, with a question and a meditation or prayer. It has been my strongest, most tangible tool that is rooted in Unitarian Universalist values and identity.

I have had an "on and off" practice of regularly reading through this book. One evening, when my daily reading was on an upswing, there was a passage about the little time we spend listening, sitting in silence in our daily lives. In the place of a question was the challenge to sit for five minutes and just to listen. To quiet one's mind, to open our ears and just to listen. At first, I read it and was like, "You have got to be kidding me." I don't have time for that. But I decided to make time that day, just that once, and it transformed the rest of that day. I heard things outside of my window that I had not stopped to listen for, and, in Oakland, California, there can be many interesting sounds outside of one's window. I heard birds whizzing by, the hum of cars, the breeze against the window. I heard the shifts in my house, the quiet hum of the lights that were on, paid attention to my breathing. There were so many things going on right there, where I was standing, that I had not taken the time to notice before. Listening to one's self is about deepening our awareness of what surrounds us and what is within us.

Today, I want to encourage you, to challenge you, to do the same – to take just five minutes to listen to yourself, to listen to the world around you. It can happen in your car, before bed, when you first wake up in the morning, it can happen anywhere. Just take five minutes to listen. I'll be interested to hear about what you experience.

What is your life telling you you should do? I love this question inspired by Parker Palmer's quote, "Before you can tell your life what you want to do with it, you

first have to listen to your life telling you who you are.” What is your life telling you you should do? A worthy question and one that deserves intentional time to listen for an answer. This doesn’t need to be solely about grand scheme life direction (though that is important), it can also be about what the next step is, what decisions need to be made. We all – each of us – always have the option to stop and to take a moment to think about what we are going to say or to do next. That option is always available and it brings more thought and intention to where our lives are headed.

The key is to listen to ourselves. Last week, Rev. Mark talked about listening to our consciences, about hearing with our whole selves, about listening to others even when it is painful, even when we feel resistance. It is time for us to take this practice inward. To listen to what is going on inside each of us, whether it is painful, joyous, afraid, exhausted, or any number of feelings or sensations. We can be better in touch with both our hearts and our heads by just listening.

In listening to our inner selves, we build a relationship with our inner-knowing, that voice that resides inside every human being. The voice that helps us choose between right or wrong, that instinct of where to go next or what to decide. A voice of justice, propelling us forward into further action, a voice of kindness when we are in need of care, a voice of questioning when we are uncertain. Inside each of us is a spark of truth, a piece of knowing that only we have – perhaps that profound spiritual truth they refer to in the Sanctuaries movement.

Listening is at the center of many religious traditions in the meditation of Buddhist and Hindu practices, in the moment of silence following a prayer in the Christian tradition, in sharing sacred texts as people engage in the practice of hearing stories told over and over again. So it is both in listening to others and listening to ourselves that we can take one more step along the path of living a more devoted Unitarian Universalist life. As we continue to practice listening, we grow deeper in our connection to others and in our connection to ourselves.

That is what spiritual practices are all about – growth, maturity, deepening our connection to ourselves and each other. We deserve to be listened to by others and by ourselves. We deserve that gift of attention that we may live more full lives. May our hearts and ears remain open to the beauty that surrounds us and is within us. Take time to listen and may you always be heard. Amen

## **Offering**

With this offering today, our church may continue its work toward justice and fairness for all. With this offering today, our church continues to provide a home for many community events, bringing people together for laughter, fun, and deeper engagement. With this offering today, our church continues its commitment to offering a spiritual home to people of all ages. With this offering today, we re-commit to being a part of this beloved community. The offering will now be received, in gratitude for all you have given to help continue the work of this church.

## **Returning**

Spirit of wonder and growth, ever inviting us into connection,  
We lift up gratitude today for the gifts we have been given,  
For moments of quiet where we travel down deep to our hearts,  
For the people who share their stories with us, and for the opportunity to share our own,  
For this precious life, in all its hardships, opportunities and surprises,  
We are truly grateful.

**A Very Special Celebration-** Jackie Angelino's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday

**Singing #128 For All That Is Our Life**

**Blessing**

Here in this place, in this community, let us go forth this week ever listening, devoting our attention where it needs to be, caring for ourselves and each other. Go in peace, blessed be, amen.