

## ON THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF HOLY LISTENING

### COMMENTS FOR THE CLOSING CELEBRATION

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Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer, compares the soul to a wild animal: it's resilient, resourceful, savvy. And shy! It's all of those things because as our connector and doorway to the Holy, the human soul is of ultimate value, worth protecting, and not easily domesticated. It would rather go into hiding than be caged in an ill-fitting life.

The soul not only reminds us of Whose we are and contains our many experiences, it also holds everything yet to be revealed about *who* we are beneath the accretions of ego layered on top. At Bread of Life we don't see ego as the enemy but as a necessary structure for moving in the world. It's just not ultimate. Left to its own devices, the ego fears what it cannot control. And so hidden safely in the depth of each human soul beneath the ego's many agendas is the particular gifting we are created to offer into this world of God's heart for mutual benefit. To be whole, each human person needs to discover and offer our particular contribution. And to be whole the world needs to engage that offering.

So how can we access this treasure buried in the shy, wild soul? Palmer goes on to say that if you want to meet the shy soul, the last thing to do is go stomping through woods hollering and screaming for it to come out. It is better to sit quietly under a tree in stillness and receptivity like we would if hoping to catch a glimpse of a doe. And then when it appears and approaches, the friend-making response is to listen in the way Douglas Steere describes when he says, ***"To listen another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest gift one human being can offer another."***

It's what spiritual direction – also called spiritual companioning – is all about.

*Listening another's soul into disclosure and discovery* is not about telling or teaching, but about a wide-open listening of mind, heart and will that brings us to what we honestly don't know – *together* - and then evokes more of the hidden human experience with open-ended questions. It's not what passes for listening most of the time in culture, which is more about listening just enough to get your point in or to give advice fixing a perceived 'problem'. Nor is it listening with the absent-minded "Uh-huh, uh-huh" that is merely a filler pretending connection.

Ego-based listening is soul-numbing at best, and soul-killing at worst. So much of our public discourse right now is like stomping through the woods hollering as we listen just enough to

position ourselves in ways that prove ourselves right and the other wrong. Case closed. That kind of ‘listening’ refuses to honor the presence of God in the depth of the other person, leaving everyone impoverished. And, it makes the soul run in the opposite direction. While there is a time for engaging genuine differences, the soul first needs to become enough acquainted with itself to know the deeper perspective it has to offer. Holy listening – *listening to evoke another’s soul* – is a vital work for times like these because it offers a rare place of reflection, disclosure, and discovery that is infinite in opening. It’s also soul-nourishing.

The ‘More’ of God is very different than the insatiable consumer ‘more-more-more’ of culture that satisfies for a moment but leaves us starving. Junk food – whether for body or soul - is highly addictive but empty. It keeps us ramped up, scanning for ‘something’, seeking but never finding or letting ourselves be found. Spiritual direction is a covenanted process that helps a soul notice what it really wants and is made for, and encourages taking time to notice, savor and respond to the myriad ways God moves through our lives every day. It’s an invitation to the banquet table where we ‘break open the bread of our lives’ together and discover ourselves fed by the Living Spirit.

What does it require of a person to engage this kind of work and calling? Willingness and courage. Mark Nepo says this about real listening: “To listen is to lean in softly *with a willingness to be transformed by what you hear.*” It’s the opposite of listening to push an agenda including a well-intentioned agenda of ‘helping’. It’s listening in trust for how God is present, moving beyond what we think we know in anticipation that we will be fully met. And it’s listening with tacit consent to being changed by the encounter. Because this is a calling to be permeable to the Holy Spirit, a director leaves each encounter different than she or he entered it. It means one’s own soul keeps deepening and broadening and becoming freer to be of service to the things of God. That takes courage and some very particular capacities.

There are several qualities we look for in those preparing to walk this path:

- Deep grounding in one’s own living, growing relationship with the Holy
- The capacity to be open to surprise
- Reconciliation with being unfinished as a human being growing in God
- Willingness to be in loving mutual accountability in community (spiritual direction is not a lone ranger ministry)
- Willingness to engage adult public learning *with* others

- The cultivation of a contemplative attitude or capacity to take a long, compassionate look at whatever is being opened in trust that God is present
- The ability to be compassionately reflective, listening in stereo with a discerning heart to what is moving inside while attending to another's story on the outside

We are proud to witness the depth of your 'Yes' to this calling and to welcome you into the colleague community. We began this morning with a poem on thresholds that you heard when you first entered your preparation years back. Thresholds are part of every life, but when we pause to give conscious assent to them as crossing places for the next phase of a journey, they have genuine power. We now end with a poem about your next threshold as you move from this particular process of depth formation and preparation to re-turn to the world of God's heart, a world which needs what you offer.

Receive these words from Gunilla Norris in her book, "**Becoming Bread: Meditations on Loving and Transformation**" as blessing for the journey ahead:

### **At the Threshold**

Stand at the kitchen door with me.  
Honor the heart of transformation.  
Honor your own heart  
where everything is  
always changing.  
It is the very same dwelling.

Pause at the door.  
Your heart needs this.  
My heart needs this time  
for recognition or it will go astray.  
It will forget to reach for  
Its real joy... its true becoming.

Pause at the door.  
This is good and necessary  
for this room is every room.  
The world lives here.  
Pausing each day helps us know  
nothing is outside of us.

Honor the heart that can feel  
the joy and the terror of  
the world in you and me.  
Only what is truly human  
can walk this path, walk through  
and be constant. Bow to *that* heart.

Hold my hand. I need you for courage.  
We become who we are together,  
each needing the other. Alone is a myth.  
The path leads through this door.  
I cannot go to the kitchen without you.

Let us enter together.

