

***Listen***  
**A sermon delivered at the**  
**Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario**  
**Sunday, March 11, 2012**  
**By the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk**

Listen!

What is it that you hear? Listen!

We each of us live in a familiar stew of sounds.

Favorite songs: love songs, lullabies, sounds blaring from a boom box or ringtones from a cell phone for all to hear, or sound from a CD player pouring into your ears alone. Hymns. Muzak. The news, from radio or television. The low-level, constant hum of our computers.

We each of us live in a familiar stew of sounds.

Our children, partners, friends, classmates, co-workers. Lectures and conversations and just plain talk.

The sounds of this city – Thunder Bay – its streets and skies, its lake and streams.

We each of us live in a familiar stew of sounds.

Our breath, in and out through nose or mouth. Heart sounds – the slow and rhythmic ba-BUM, ba-BUM is immediately familiar and comforting. A faster pace produces anxiety, or fear. A slower pace elicits calm. Our pulse is a silent metronome of regularity, normality, continuing life.

This cacophony of sound has made me wonder – to what do I listen? What is it that I hear?

When do I use sound as an emotional curtain?

In Montana my familiar sounds included the magpies croaking loudly in the morning. A dozen or so would come to our birdfeeder, jostling each other for the day's scraps. My youngest brother, visiting for a few days, asked how we could stand all that racket.

Shortly after I arrived in Chicago for seminary I asked the same thing. How could they stand all this racket??! How could anyone bear the noises of cars, buses, trucks, of the Metra [the city rapid transit], of fire engines screaming up and down the street where I lived. And then there was the outrageous clang of garbage cans every morning at 5 a.m.

You get used to it, I was told. You simply don't notice it after a while. And it's true. I simply didn't notice it – as much.

[In Duluth there's the traffic along Highway 61. Rumbling & grumbling & vibrating.]

So, I've been thinking: what do I hear these days? What don't I hear?

I hear birds. Every morning when I wake, there is a chickadee or a crow, a magpie, sometimes a cardinal or a downy woodpecker. The birds chirp and squawk, they peck and

cheep and sigh.

I didn't always hear birds. My parents' home was near a parkway filled with the sound of robins, cardinals, blue jays. I don't remember any of those sounds in my childhood.

But, one clear, bright, spring afternoon, hiking on a fir-tree-covered hillside – a couple dozen years ago – I was startled by a soft “thwap” sound – I looked up, and then out. I saw the eagle flying away from me, slowly flapping its wings, flying below me. That soft “thwap” opened up the sounds of nature to me. I've been trying to listen to Her ever since.

In *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Random House 1990; 175) Diane Ackerman writes: “In Arabic *absurdity* is not being able to hear.” A “surd” is a mathematical impossibility, the core of the word “absurdity.” “Surd” we get from the Latin *surdus*, meaning “deaf or mute.” “Surdus” is a translation from the Arabic *jadr asamm*, a “deaf root,” which in turn is a translation from the Greek *alogos*, “no word” – “to be speechless or irrational.” Latin to Arabic to Greek; “deaf” to “deaf root” to “irrational.” Ackerman writes: “The assumption hidden in this etymological nest of spiders is that the world will still make sense to someone who is blind or armless or minus a nose. But if you lose your sense of hearing, a crucial thread dissolves and you lose track of life's logic. You become cut off from the daily commerce of the world, as if you were a root buried beneath the soil... Sounds thicken the sensory stew of our lives, and we depend on them to help us interpret, communicate with, and express the world around us. Outer space is silent, but on earth almost everything can make sound.”

Sound is vibration, so deaf people, too, can hear. The young deaf woman in the movie *Children of a Lesser God* sways and dances to the music she hears through the soles of her feet. Helen Keller “listened” to Enrico Caruso sing by placing her fingers on his neck.

Listen! What do you hear? (spoken and signed)

But with too many sounds our listening may become selective, true hearing may stop.

I didn't always hear pain.

I'd been working at the local community hospital for a number of years. A tiny community hospital, we boasted 24 beds. It had been a busy week. An 86-year old woman whom I'd been caring for, a woman in rapidly failing health, a woman who was dying, had died on my shift. I called the doctor and prepared her body for its wait in the morgue.

Later in the week a little girl, just 3 years old, in remission from leukemia, was rushed to our emergency room. She had gone into respiratory arrest while she and her mother were on an Alaska airliner. Though a doctor on board had initiated CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation - there was nothing we could do in our emergency room to infuse her with life again. I had remained calm and professional throughout. I had followed procedures, started IVs, injected drugs. I remained calm and professional throughout. And I remained deaf to her mother's unbelieving shock and rising grief.

At the end of the week, our radio told us of a 56 year old man in cardiac arrest, coming in to us from his fishing boat. Coast Guard helicopter also brought his 34 year old daughter, who had been doing CPR, trying to resuscitate him, following the radio operator's instructions. Again, there was nothing we could do to revive him, to infuse him with life again.

His daughter held her father's hand, crying and repeating "Why?" "Why, daddy?" while the doctor tried to console her. Me, I left. I walked back to the nurses' station, stopping in an equipment room along the way, because I could not myself stop crying. The sounds of grief, bereavement, pain had cracked open a chink in my well-armored chest. The vibrations of inconsolable loss unsettled my inner ear, disturbing my balance. I still wasn't listening well, but at least I could hear a little better.

Listen! What do you hear?

Kathy Thompson, who teaches courses on conversation at Alverno College in Milwaukee, was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that we have become a nation of interrupters. "At our house," Thompson says, "we warn new friends to be careful because we treat conversation like a competitive sport. The first one to take a breath is considered the listener."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*. Cambridge MA: Crowley Publications 1998; p. 15.)

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus told us over 2000 years ago that "God gave humans two ears, but only one mouth, that they might hear twice as much as they speak."

I wonder? Do we follow that ratio – in our relationships, in our communities, or in our congregations.

Listen! What do you hear?

Listening to silence can be filled with meaning. Context is everything. The silence of a monastery in meditation. The silence of a room filled with listeners. The silence of the pulpit, before I speak. The silence of illness, and its long stretches of persistence. The silence of hearing loss. Or the silence of a house after divorce, or death. (Taylor, 32-33.)

In *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, author Kathleen Norris writes of her days as an artist in elementary schools. She made a deal with her students: first you get to make noise, all the noise you want, and when I lower my hand, you stop. She needed to explain *silence* to the children. Silence meant breathing normally, and sitting so still that you made no noise at all. She writes: "We always had to try this more than once. A pencil would roll down someone's desk, or someone would shift in a seat. But in every case but one, over many years, I found that children were able to become so still that silence became a presence in the classroom. Some kids loved it. Others weren't so sure. 'It's scary,' a fifth grader complained. 'Why?' I asked, and I believe that he got to the heart of it when he replied, 'It's like we're waiting for something – it's scary!'" After hearing an exceptionally unruly class whose teacher shrieked commands at them, Norris concluded, "Listening surely is a prerequisite for silence."

Silence undergirds listening. Silence opens the door for listening. As one of Norris's students, a little girl from a tiny town in western North Dakota, offered: 'Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go.' 'Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go.'

(Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. New York: Riverhead Books 1998, pp. 16-17.)

Silence may be tranquil, filled with awe. Silence may be fathomless. Silence may indicate despair, grief, death. The silence before a storm, no bird sounds, no leaf sounds, screams "Danger!" to those in the know. Life is full of silences to be listened to. Silence is scarier to listen to, and much harder to find. Yet, we try to find it in our congregations – if not our daily lives – for fifteen, thirty seconds at a time.

Listen! What do you hear?

Unitarian history speaks about people who want to discover the truth – small "t" or capital "T" – they want to hear that voice of truth. We listen for that still and small voice within us, or hear it calling out to us from the world. Listening for truth takes a lot of time. Truth comes in whispers, in shouts, in song and poetry, in stillness.

Truth comes in listening, to the vocalized and non-vocalized strains of the world.

Universalist history tells us that we all have a place at the table. That's a lot of voices to listen to. Some of those voices tell us what it is easy to hear – that you are loved, that you are competent, that you are needed.

Some tell us what it is difficult to hear – that injustice and cruelty and evil persist, and that we may be guilty in some direct or indirect way.

Some voices give you a message that you may hear but that you cannot or should not listen to – that you are unlovable, that you are hopeless, that you are shameful, that you have no home, no haven of safety, on this earth.

Universalism speaks a message of love and hope, of grace, of moments of unasked for and unexpected serenity of mind and clarity of purpose.

Listen! What do you hear?

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest writes: "I am wondering about the place of listening in a preacher's life. Where do you go to listen for God's silence and God's speech? Who taught you to do that and whom have you taught to do the same thing? Silence and speech define each other. One is the inhale. The other is the exhale. Like prayer and proclamation (or meditation and preaching), they perfect each other, although in our day their ecology is seriously out of whack." (Taylor, 95-96)

I have been thinking that here, at Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, we are charged – by our covenants, our promises to each other – to learn how to speak with one another. [think non-violent communication] We are also called to learn how to listen.

Sometimes I'm pretty good at listening. Sometimes, I'm not. Sometimes we are pretty good

at listening. Sometimes, we're not.

Listen! What do you hear?

May we hear these sounds: that we are challenged to bring truth and beauty to our lives – through words, through good work, through right relationship, through art and music and dance.

May we hear these sounds: our own breath, breathing easily; our own hearts, beating steadily; our own bodies, doing the best we can in an often cacophonous world.

May we hear these sounds: the sweet, poignant, agitating stirrings of the world – whether of cars and sirens and garbage cans, or of chickadees, children, a waterfall.

May we be blessed in our listening and in our response to what we hear. May our inner ear, our metaphorical gyroscope, bring us balance, steady our course, tell us which way is up.

This faith we have been called to has much listening in it – listening to stories, listening to fears and joys, listening to our inner workings, listening to silence. Listen long. Listen deep. Listen rich and messy.

(Listen! What do you hear? – in sign)

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. Amen.

**Reading: “Use Your Senses”** by Marion Woodman [in *Conscious Femininity*]

William Blake says the body is “that portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses.” I live with that idea. I sit and look out my window here in Canada and the [~~autumn~~] trees are [brown] [~~golden~~] against the blue sky. I can feel their “food” coming into my eyes and going down, down, down, interacting inside, and I fill up with gold. My soul is fed. I see, I smell, I taste, I hear, I touch. Through the orifices of my body, I give and I receive. I am not trying to capture what is absent. It's that interchange between the embodied soul and the outside world that is the dynamic process. That's how growth takes place. That is life.

**Readings: “The Sounds of the World”** by Frederick Buechner;

The swallows, the rooster, the workmen, my stomach, all with their elusive rhythms, their harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoint, became, as I listened, the sound of my own life speaking to me. Never had I heard just such a coming together of sounds before, and it is unlikely that I will ever hear them in just the same combination again. Their music was unique and unrepeatable and beyond describing in its freshness. I have no clear idea what the sounds meant or what my life was telling me. What does the song of a swallow mean? What is the muffled sound of a hammer trying to tell? And yet as I listened to those sounds, and listened with something more than just my hearing, I was moved by their inexpressible eloquence and suggestiveness, by the sense I had that they were a music rising up out of the mystery of not just my life, but of life itself. In much the same way, that is what I mean by saying that God speaks into or out of the thick of our days.

**“The Beauty Speaks to Me”** by Chief Dan George & Helmet Hirschall in *My Heart Soars*

The beauty of the trees,  
the softness of the air,  
the fragrance of the grass,  
speaks to me.

The summit of the mountain,  
the thunder of the sky,  
the rhythm of the sea,  
speaks to me.

The faintness of the stars,  
the freshness of the morning,  
the dewdrop on the flower,  
speaks to me.

The strength of fire,  
the taste of salmon,  
the trail of the sun,  
and the life that never goes away,  
they speak to me.

And my heart soars.