

To Hear a Broken Heart

Sometimes the holiest messages come from the most mundane of places and just when we don't expect them. For instance, "listening" is one of the foundations of Benedictine life. In fact, the very first word of this ancient 6th century Rule is, "Listen." "Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions...." Ho, hum. More of the same.

Until Beyoncé says it. Then suddenly we understand. Suddenly, the place of listening in life becomes crystal clear. Listening is the glue—or the downfall—of every relationship, she sings to us. If you want a New Year full of good relationships, listening is the key.

Better yet, she outlines the process in straight and painful terms. She leaves no doubt where the problem lies. She sings in "Listen":

*Listen to the song here in my heart
A melody I start but can't complete
Listen to the sound from deep within
It's only beginning to find release...*

*You should have listened
There was someone here inside
Someone I thought had died
So long ago....*

Listen to the song here in my heart....

The singer is crying out to have her own voice heard, to have her own needs recognized, to become her own person rather than the shadow of another.

When we stop listening to the other people in our lives, not only do the relationships deteriorate but we become separated from the well of Wisdom around us. No matter how together we look, we have become hopelessly separated.

The problem is that in our own desire to be listened to, to be really heard and understood by another, we miss one of the basic messages of life: It's not just about me. It's about the other person, too. Anything else is not communication, it's manipulation.

Jesus listened to people. In the bonds he forged with the poor, the sick, the outcast, the foreigner, lay compassion, truth, support, and growth. First, he listened to what people were saying. Then he

The Monastic Way

Joan Chittister



Listen with the ear
of your heart.

—Prologue, Rule of Benedict

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cured them of what they wanted to have cured rather than what others might have decided they most needed—like faith or patience or trust.

To talk without listening to the other is simply chatting. It fills time but changes nothing. In self-centeredness, friendships end, marriages dissolve, relationships become sterile. Most of all, Wisdom, Holy Friendship, the sharing of insights that come from experience, evaporate.

Friendship, marriage, and lifelong relationships come from listening to one another.

Clearly, when the Rule of Benedict calls for "listening," it's not calling for some kind of hollow obedience, it's calling for real relationships.

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Tuesday, January 1: Here's a quick test to tell us how we interact with people: What are you doing when the other person is talking? In his leadership courses, Steven R. Covey gives us a clue. "Most people," he says, "do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." And that leads where?

Wednesday, January 2: The desire to have our ideas and dreams heard is the foundation of discernment. We make better decisions when we can compare our own assumptions with the experiences of others.

Thursday, January 3: People who listen to us, who help us hear ourselves and our motives without condemning us for having them, give us a chance to grow. How? By giving us the opportunity to think things through in all their dimensions from all directions.

Friday, January 4: Asking a person to defend or justify what they haven't yet done—as in "You're going to change jobs again? That's ridiculous!"—is not communication. It is argument. And poor argument at that.

Saturday, January 5: Communication ends when I cease to hear the cry, the need, the unspoken pain of the other. "No one is as deaf," the Jewish Proverb teaches, "as the one who will not listen."

Sunday, January 6: If there is any ministry on earth worth being part of it is the ministry of those who can hear a broken heart. "Fixing" a problem is a final act of mercy. Understanding it is the first.

Monday, January 7: All the great saints bent their lives to hear the stories of the sad and lonely, the forgotten, and the accused. It is that kind of "loaves and fishes" that we are all able to give the starving. If only we will.

Tuesday, January 8: The genius of holy communication lies in listening to a problem before we decide to fix it without really understanding it. Then, as Scripture says, "the last evil is worse than the first." Or as Louise von François writes, "We never listen when we are eager to speak."

Wednesday, January 9: To make friends, all you need to do is to listen to them. To have a friend is to have someone who is really listening to you. "Attention," Anne-Sophie Swetchine writes, "is a tacit and continual compliment."

Thursday, January 10: Society's great, unremitting question is always, "To whom do we listen?" When was the last time we saw conferences of inner-city representatives who were invited to tell their elected representatives what it would take to make their neighborhoods peaceful, beautiful and safe?

Friday, January 11: It is easy to cover up unhappiness with security in "things," but the pains of the lonely

and the unfulfilled wealthy are no less debilitating than the pains of the insecure and the poor.

Saturday, January 12: The technology of "global ears" has done nothing it seems to calm our anxieties. On the contrary. Obviously, technology connects us electronically. It does not necessarily give us anyone to really talk to. "It seems rather incongruous," Erma Bombeck writes, "that in a society of super sophisticated communication, we often suffer from a shortage of listeners."

Sunday, January 13: Unhappiness comes with feeling abandoned, alone, unaccompanied through life. Happiness comes if one other person really cares whether we come home at night or not. "Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world," Simone Weil wrote, "but people capable of giving them their attention."

Monday, January 14: Electronic contact is no guarantee of love and listening. It's just a means of finding love and care if, of course, it's really there to be had. It's important not to confuse the two. "Listening," Krista Tippett reminds us, "is about being present, not just about being quiet."

Tuesday, January 15: Everyone needs someone who cares enough to hear them through, to support them as they take their next moves through life.

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Wednesday, January 16: Listening isn't just about helping someone else. It is also about being willing to learn from someone else. As Plutarch says, "Know how to listen and you will profit even from those who talk badly."

Thursday, January 17: When friends or couples drift apart, two things are at work. The first is that talk has taken the place of attention. The second is that distance has filled the relationship with foreign noise.

Friday, January 18: To be a good listener, it is necessary to ask the right questions. Then, of course, we must have the patience to permit the other person to answer them.

Saturday, January 19: To feel unheard is one of life's greatest deprivations. Which is why solitary confinement can be so painful, so inhumane. Only by stretching ourselves to speak the real truth can we ever really grow beyond ourselves.

Sunday, January 20: The person who listens to the other perceives the person that cannot really be seen otherwise. "After all," George Eliot says, "the true seeing is within."

Monday, January 21: Interruption is the enemy of friendship. It gives no chance of listening to the person within the person who is trying to be heard. It is the message of disinterest, the end of possibility.

Tuesday, January 22: Relationships are not about the bond of common activities. They are made of common understanding and an uncommon depth of attention.

Wednesday, January 23: Life is made up of the stories we tell and the stories we have never told. Friendship and love are fed best by the stories we have never told being told to the one who wants to receive them. “One of the most valuable things we can do to heal one another,” Rebecca Falls writes, “is listen to each other’s stories.”

There are no gifts as precious as the gifts of time and listening.

Thursday, January 24: Those who are full of themselves are always too noisy inside, too busy outside, to listen to anyone else. They are a world unto themselves whose attention is superficial and whose love satisfies only themselves. As Calvin Coolidge said, “It takes a great person to be a good listener.”

Friday, January 25: Scripture is clear about God’s relationship with humans. “God hears us,” the Scripture points out over and over. God is the Great Listener. It’s we who must learn to listen back.

Saturday, January 26: Listening is as much a personal strength as it is a skill. Larry King explains the point when he says, “I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I’m going to learn, I must do it by listening.”

Sunday, January 27: Prayer is dialogue with God, the ancients taught. We pray; God listens. The hard part comes with learning that God is talking to us, too. The measure of our spiritual growth lies in whether we are willing to listen back in order to understand the real message there, or not.

God is the Great Listener.

Monday, January 28: The quality of listening depends on the degree of interest we bring to the person and the conversation at hand. It’s easy to nod and look interested at someone. What is difficult is to care enough about what we hear to truly want to continue the conversation. Both for their sake and for ours.

The Monastic Way is for people who lead busy lives and long for greater spiritual depth. In the 2019 issues, Joan Chittister will explore monastic values sorely needed in our times—holy leisure, community, vision, nonviolence, prayer and solitude, stewardship of creation....

Tuesday, January 29: When we listen to a person, we take them into our lives. We welcome them and all their concerns, all their interests, all their openness. “Listening,” Henri Nouwen wrote, “is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends....”

Wednesday, January 30: There are no gifts as precious as the gifts of time and listening. They are the only real signs of care and interest, of concern and delight we have to bring to a relationship. They invite the gift of mutual self-giving. “Our listening,” Rachel Naomi Remem writes, “creates a sanctuary for the homeless parts within another person.”

Thursday, January 31: Listening is the ear of the soul. It is alert to everything and everyone in the universe. Abel Herzberg tells the story of a rabbi who saw his son deep in prayer while in the corner stood a cradle with a crying baby. “Can’t you hear the baby crying?” the rabbi asked. And the son answered, “Oh, Father, I was lost in God.” But the rabbi said back, “One who is lost in God can see the very fly crawling up the wall.”

For a Listening Heart

Listen with the ear of your heart.

—Prologue, Rule of Benedict

Spend a few minutes with this quote and then ask yourself:

- What do these words say to me? What feelings or memories do the words evoke in me?
- What do these words say about my spiritual journey?
- My journal response to this quote is:

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