

Reading:

Every human being
Has a great,
Yet often unknown gift:

To care,
To be compassionate,
To become present to the other,
To listen,
To hear,
And to receive.

If that gift
Would be set free
And made available,
Miracles
Could take place.

– Henri J.M. Nouwen

Listening Post Sermon

Last spring, I read an article in *Presence*, the journal of the Spiritual Director International organization, which I receive because I am a spiritual director. It was entitled “*The Art of Listening Deeply with the Vulnerable and Marginalized*”¹ by a spiritual director named Marcia Wakeland. It talked about how she and another person started a “listening post” in a poor district in Anchorage, Alaska where people could come and get “a good listening to.” Their visitors were “primarily the vulnerable of Anchorage who are homeless, working poor, addicted, mentally ill, recently released from prison, visiting from the villages in the Alaska bush, and physically handicapped.”²

I thought this was a very intriguing and thought to myself, “If I could find someone to work with, I’d like to try something like this as part of my mental health ministry.” Not long after this, I went to a meeting of East Bay Spiritual Directors and met another spiritual director named Karolyn Stenlund who I hadn’t met before. As we were introducing ourselves, I discovered that she had also seen that article by Marcia Wakeland, in fact had made several copies of it and handed it out to others. She had the same thought that I had: “I’d like to try this with someone else.” It turns out that she had been a volunteer at a project in San Francisco called the Gubio Project which lets homeless people sleep on the pews of a church during the day time, and like me felt called to serve vulnerable populations. A kindred spirit! So, we decided to embark on a joint adventure.

¹ The Art of Listening Deeply with the Vulnerable and the Margialized, by Marcia Wakeland, *Presence*, Volume 23, No. 2, June 2017, pp 27 – 33.

² *Ibid*, p 27.

One of the first things I did was to contact my old ministerial internship site, The Faithful Fools Street Ministry in San Francisco, and ask if this was something that they might like to sponsor as a volunteer project under their umbrella. I sent them a copy of the article, and set up a meeting. They were very enthusiastic about the idea and at their next board meeting it was proposed and approved. We agreed that we would try it for at least 6 months as a pilot project and then evaluate what to do next.

As we investigated the possibilities we talked with Marcia Wakeland, the author of the article and got a lot of helpful suggestions and had many of our questions answered. She was very encouraging.

Then we learned of another similar project which started in San Francisco called "Sidewalk Talk." Sidewalk Talk first launched in San Francisco in May 2014 by two therapists. Co-founders Lily Sloane and Traci Ruble, along with 28 trained volunteers, set up chairs and "free listening" signs in various public spaces throughout the city, offering to listen to anyone passing by. Their goal is not to act like a professional offering solutions, but instead empathizing and "trying to relate from a place of purely being in it with them." Sidewalk Talk's mission is "to nurture human connection by teaching and practicing heart-centered listening in public spaces. By engaging a diverse and inclusive community of volunteers our culture, relationships and the world are transformed."³

Learning about this practice, I could recognize that it held elements of Emotional CPR and of Spiritual Direction, two of the areas central to my mental health ministry. Wow! What a find!

³ <http://www.sidewalktalksf.com/mission.html>

Sidewalk Talk founder Tracy Ruble says, “The goal is really about de-stigmatizing mental health.”⁴ Today, Sidewalk Talk has 700 volunteers world-wide in 19 cities around the globe. They have a website where people can sign up to be “listeners” and can be trained in an excellent on-line training. The training states that we are there just to compassionately listen to others, without giving advice, without interrupting, valuing them as the precious human beings that they are.

Karolyn and I went to one of the Sidewalk Talk events and watched as two listeners sat in chairs and talked to people who had gathered for an event offering services to homeless people. We said to each other, “We can do this!” We took the training, got the t-shirt and became official Sidewalk Talk listeners. We were able to get a grant to cover expenses of getting chairs, signs and brochures, a carrying kart and other items. We are officially a program of the Faithful Fools and therefore covered by their liability insurance. We decided to start our practice on the sidewalk next to a park across the street from Faithful Fools on the corner of Hyde and Turk, and alongside tables of a couple of other agencies passing out information about city services to people on the street. On Thursday, October 19 we started our adventure.

Every Thursday, Karolyn and I set up our operation on the sidewalk from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm. After we finish, we go back to the Faithful Fools to debrief and figure out what we have experienced and what changes we will make for the next time. As of now, we have been out for five such Thursdays. The Faithful Fools have been very helpful to us, letting us store

⁴ <http://ww2.kqed.org/stateofhealth/2015/05/08/therapists-target-mental-health-stigma-with-sidewalk-talks/>

our chairs and materials at their office, helping us administer our grant, sometimes helping us set up and debrief.

This section of San Francisco is quite poor. Most of the people we meet on the street are African American with some Latinos and Asians and only a few European Americans. If they have half of their teeth they are lucky. Drug and mental health problems have an obvious presence. A lot of people are on the street sitting, talking or walking around.

At first, they were wary of us, wondering why we were there. But the last couple of times, people have started to share some in-depth stories of their lives. When I explained to one man that we weren't selling anything or trying to convert anyone, he asked, "Then, why do you come? What's in it for you?" I said, "I have the satisfaction of knowing I am helping to make the world a friendlier place." He said, "OK then, I'll talk to you," and proceeded to tell me about his life after leaving Ethiopia for Russia, Germany and finally the United States. He spoke five languages and had many jobs and adventures. He landed in this poor neighborhood because he developed a mental illness and is on disability. In some ways he was not unlike some of the people with mental illness who I meet in my job at the Life Reaching Across to Life organization in Fremont.

Another man wanted to talk to me about a near-death experience he had when he was a boy. He never could find anyone in his friends or family who wanted to hear about it and was grateful that I would listen. He had a very active spiritual life and felt that he was in the presence of angels. He asked about me and was surprised when I told him I was a minister. He told me maybe I would meet him in heaven some day and we would talk

about how we met on the sidewalk in San Francisco and had this conversation.

Marcia Wakefield talks about the meaning of “just listening” to people. She says, “*Just listening* implies it is not enough. Yet in listening at the edges of society now in this and other outreach ministries, I have come to understand it on two different ways. It is the gift of just listening in the sense that there is no other agenda. We only listen. To a population that is ignored, shunned, hurried along, turned away, and feared, there are few times that people are heard and accepted just as they are – and even more rarely that what they say is valued. And *just listening* now also means to me listening that is just, in that it is the bringer of justice; this justice states that each individual is of inestimable value to the world community.”⁵ I personally think of it as “sacred listening.”

Wakeland speaks of the spiritual knowledge that the relationship created in sacred listening makes her feel that we are all one. She relates this example of her experience of this spiritual knowledge.⁶ It came when a young man met her at the table where she was preparing tea for someone. He was jumpy and his eyes swept the room continually. He wanted to know what she did here. When she explained it was a quiet place where people could tell their story, he replied,

“Well you wouldn’t want to hear mine; I’m what you’d call a hardened criminal. I’ve done bad things.”

Wakeland waited.

⁵ Wakeland, p 28.

⁶ Wakeland, pp 31-32.

He continue, "I just got out of prison after seventeen years, nine of them in solitary."

"You spent nine years in solitary confinement," she said, to let him know she was listening, but not judging.

"Yeah, well, I grew up in the projects, and if I'd told anyone my story like you say, or had any emotion, well, I'd have been beaten up or killed," he said.

She just held him in presence, as there did not seem to be words for this.

"Well, I just came up to say...", he said, tearing up, "I'm still a human being."

She looked at him and said with all the affirmation she could muster, "*You are* a human being." He then fled out of the door and she didn't see him again. But she knew the oneness of the relationship with him.

There is something sacred about people having authentic conversation about the important situations of their lives. There is no small talk, no jockeying for relative position. Just sharing from one heart to another.

So a little over one month has passed since Karolyn and I started this adventure. I'm not sure what will happen after our six-month pilot test is over. Maybe we'll stay there, maybe we'll expand to other locations, even other cities, maybe we'll ask others to join us, or something else. Stay tuned...

May we all be enriched by the conversations we have with others.

So may it be. Amen.