

The Power of Being Heard



When I was 17, I joined some friends to watch the Academy Awards. Driving home at midnight, my car broke down in the middle of an abandoned intersection in an industrial district in Hollywood. A car pulled up behind me and pushed my car to safety. A man got out and said, "Pop the hood; I'll see what's wrong."

He fiddled with the engine for a while, then declared, "You're out of transmission fluid. Hop in and I'll take you to an all-night Pep Boys" [an auto supply store].

I said, "No thanks, I think I'll call AAA." He retorted, "That's what's wrong with the world. No one trusts anyone anymore." I hurt his feelings!

So, I got in, not wanting to hurt his feelings again.

He ran every red light and sped towards Mulholland Drive, while drinking whiskey and sniffing glue. I said nothing; didn't move a muscle, while newscasts ran through my mind about a serial rapist who was killing women in L.A. I realized I was now quite possibly in his clutches!

I prayed fervently: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, help me!

A profound calm came over me and a voice inside my head said, "Listen to him."

I thought, "But, he isn't saying anything."

“Ask a question,” the voice replied.

I turned to the man, “You seem upset. What happened? Who hurt you?”

Suddenly, his life story poured out: he was a long-haul trucker who’d lost his job, his rig, his girlfriend and his home. “That’s devastating,” I empathized. He couldn’t resist feeling heard, so his stories kept pouring out ... for three hours.

At last, he was tiring. He pulled over next to the guard rail at the top of the mountain on Mulholland Drive, grabbed me by the hair and got me in a chokehold.

“Will you get in the back seat with me?”

“Yes,” I wheezed.

As he opened his door, I grabbed my purse, flew out of the car and jumped over the guardrail. I tumbled, rolled and sometimes ran to the bottom of the mountain. I heard the man crashing through the brush above me, but he was drunk, spent and confused by his own unexpected vulnerability.

At the bottom of the mountain, I found my feet again and saw a house with its lights still on. I sprinted to the house and banged frantically on the door. A woman let me in and bolted the door behind me. I was safe again.

To save my life, I had to listen.

To find the magic questions, I had to reach beyond my fear, past news reports, the inevitability of imminent death, and beyond the heavy layers of his criminal intent, to discover some kernel of humanity within this man and then—to touch it with my ears.

In the noisy echo-chambers of our siloed world, where the cries of the un-heard are reaching the breaking point, can we listen to one another as if our lives depend on it? Because they do.