

University of Newcastle

Journal #3: Importance of Listening to Personal Stories in Social Justice

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I have come to understand that in authentically pursuing social justice at various levels, I must start by listening to the personal stories of the underprivileged, vulnerable, wounded, and poor. Here is why this has become so critically important for me.

Such listening to the experiences of the deprived will enable me to be reflective and discerning about the movement of the Spirit within, in relation to my relationship with the poor – and to hear the voice of love and compassion within, prompting love-based actions.

Furthermore, truly listening to the stories of the needy will allow me to hear previously unfelt and unheard whispers, as well as silent groans that can have a tremendous influence on the outer condition. Such awareness and loving monitoring of the inner state is the starting place for future betterment.

Third, in the heartfelt hearing of experiences of the unfortunate, I can journey with them back to their own heart and woundedness. My hope then lies in our mutual experience of the fact that we are not abandoned in our woundedness, but as Maher expresses, “that our wounds become the places of encounter with the wounded, compassionate heart of Jesus.”¹ – and that this becomes a place of transformation and new growth.

Fourth, I believe that it is only in listening to the stories of the poverty-stricken that I will truly *understand* their plight. And, if I understand, and can show that I understand, then I can also love. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that “when you understand, you cannot help but love . . . And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of

¹ James Maher, *The Way of the Heart* (Kensington, NSW: Chevalier Institute, 2003), 2.

people”.² I realize that unless my listening leads to compassionate love, nothing real or lasting will come of it.

Fifth, in the compassionate listening to the experiences of the impoverished, I can detect if there is any underlying victim mentality, veiling a spirit of violence. Gently, I can aim for reconciliation of hearts through showing, for example, that their struggle is not against people but rather, as Wright states, “structures of evil that enslave the oppressors as well as the oppressed.”³ Any desire for revenge, therefore, becomes a mute point.

Sixth, only in patient listening to the stories of the poor, I may also discern a deep, underlying meaninglessness and emptiness in their lives. This can be the consequence of a life led under the dictates of the ego. At this juncture, I may be able to gently nudge those so afflicted in the direction of the journey back home to God.

Seventh, in hearing the stories of the oppressed – in this case, women in a Middle Eastern nation where I taught at a tertiary level – I was made deeply aware of the heartlessness of the patriarchal society, the invisibility of women, as well as the male authoritarianism, dominance and control.

Eighth, in compassionately engaging with the underprivileged – in listening to them from my heart – I come to understand what *respect* means, because, in the words of Van Breemen, “respect is the heart of love”⁴. Such respect is not aloof and detached; rather, it acknowledges the worth of others, relates to them as they are (not what I want them to be or think they should be), and accepts them as they are (even with their defects).

² Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path to Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, ed. Arnold Kotler (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 79-80. Hanh also states that “the essence of love and compassion is *understanding*, the ability to recognize the physical, material, and psychological suffering of others, to put ourselves “inside the skin” of the other” [emphasis mine] (p. 81).

³ Wendy Wright, *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 77.

⁴ Peter van Breemen, “Spirituality of Liberation”, *Review for Religious* 49:6 (1990): 832.

Ninth, among the poor in society, I consider those most vulnerable – including the elderly and the disabled. Regrettably, these people often suffer rejection, ostracization, and alienation. Listening from the heart to these people is crucial because, only in extending the gifts of love and gentleness in this manner, can I come to understand their deep frustrations, anxieties, and sufferings of not being loved and valued as persons with a heart.

Finally, in listening to the weak at a deeper level, I may also hear another reality within their self, the indwelling soul – crying for God and yearning for the fellowship of the Spirit. With such receptive listening, I may in time be able to guide them to their heart's sacred Presence – God within, who is their hope of glory.

Bibliography

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