Why Explore Multiple Kinds of Listening Practices?

Practice & Reflection Essay - Liam M. Hooper, MDiv; 2024

In his book *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage*, Choctaw Nation elder Steven Charleston proposed that "community is how we respond to injustice" (p 83). Specifically, Charleston expounded this idea by saying:

> Once we recognize one another as related, as members of the same family, we cannot rest easy as long as we see some members of our family being treated unfairly. Our social action does not come from a desire to be politically correct, but from an awareness that when one suffers, we all suffer ... Community is how we hold diversity in equilibrium. It is how we maintain balance (p 83).

When I first read this some years ago, I highlighted the passage, flagged it with a dog-eared page, and copied it by hand into the pages of a journal I keep for noting my own thoughts and reflections on things that seem to matter, alongside insights from other thinkers. As I did then, I continue to find resonance between these ideas Charleston expresses about community and my own long-held, ever-evolving beliefs about the importance of communal relationality and the role of relationships in a long, sometimes sluggish striding toward meaningful social change and some measure of liberative justice.

To this day, there is much in these few sentences that captures my curiosity and attention.

Once we recognize one another as related, as members of the same family...
When one suffers, we all suffer;
The possibility that *community* is a place which *holds diversity in equilibrium*;
That *community is how balance is maintained*.

While it may be true that we humans are, indeed, members of the same family and in fundamental ways the well being of each of us is woven into the well being of others—expressly, those who are most vulnerable, neglected, and marginalized among us—in practical, fundamental ways our sociopolitical world is not built on values rooted in the belief that we are all connected. And broadly, in my observation, it is clear that things are most surely not in balance.

The daily experience of far too many people belies a society built not on shared membership in one, interdependent human family, but on contrived systems of separation. That is, our prevailing society is organized by systems built on contrived privileges, spurious meritocracies, entitlements, exploitations, and exclusions.

Within such a system, many people suffer in multiple and multiplicative ways. And while many among us travail under various marginalizations and outright oppressions, there are also significant groups of people who, owing to their positions, are exempt from such sociopolitical

suffering. Moreover, notable numbers of people actually profit from the distresses, hardships, and worries imposed in multiple ways upon a diverse majority of people, with equally diverse measures of proportion and severity.

Because societies are complicated systems, and the workings of entitlement and exclusion are not fixed or unilateral, it is possible for individuals—even, entire groups of people—to be privileged in one way and significantly disenfranchised, or overtly oppressed, in other ways. In short, power intersects persons and groups in interlocking, often simultaneous ways, some of which are protective in one context but not in others.

It could be said that one way privilege-and exclusion-based systems hang onto and maintain power is through the diversification of marginalizing and oppressing processes. That is, power is often maintained by policies, structures, and systems—many of which are intentionally crafted— which converge with other existing and subsequently emerging ideologies and practices that function by design and happenstance to diversify who is disenfranchised or oppressed, when, and by what means.

Considering these realities, Charleston's assertions invite me to continue questioning, even as I share core elements in the underlying beliefs he posits. Some of the questions that come to mind for me are: firstly, who is this "family" to which we all belong?

What are the core, common characteristics that make us both homo sapiens and particularly differentiated, individual humans?

By what processes—or activities, behaviors, or practices—are these shared features made recognizable?

What is it—what kind of personal experience, observation, or event—that creates awareness of and compassion for the suffering of others, especially those persons with whom we are not connected, with whom we perceive we have nothing in common?

Doubtless, there are as many specific answers to this last question, especially, as there are now, ever have been, or ever will be human persons. Nonetheless, my own experience has led me to believe that there are certain fundamental elements, experienced in uniquely personal ways, that are necessary to developing meaningful compassion for others—and certainly, for developing a belief that all of us homo sapiens matter equally, and precisely, because we are ultimately all one family. While entire books could be, and have been, written on such questions, I believe there are *two core attributes* that, however they are stimulated, seem to be requisite to apprehending some measurable sense of connectedness with persons (or groups of people) different from ourselves.

At the most basic level, *these two core attributes can be framed as*:

~ an ability to openly and nonjudgmentally listen to, and hear, another person across apparent differences and to recognize them as human in ways that we, ourselves, are human;

~ an ability to intentionally and openly bear witness to another person, to see them as they are, while holding regard for notable differences and perceived commonalities, and to do so in such a way that we come to recognize something of ourselves in them.

Whether the precipitating factors that culminate in such deep listening and witness-bearing are intentionally organized and cultivated or whether such revelatory moments are due to randomly fortuitous happenstance matters far less than the fact that these transformative experiences

happen. Likewise, whether listening inspires witnessing, witnessing stimulates hearing, or these revelatory openings occur simultaneously also matters less than the profound activity of listening and bearing witness to another person so deeply that their humanity and our own are laid bare and beautiful before us. By whatever means they come about, these encounters can change us so thoroughly that there is a fundamental transformation in how we live, and move, and have our being in the world thereafter.

Because I have borne witness to such life changing experiences happening with others, because I have personally experienced encounters that transformed me and my world view, I believe that such relational exchanges are not only possible, they just might be the very practices that save us from the calamitous neglects, exploitations, and erasures that stymie the fullest collective expressions and appreciation of a shared humanity. In this belief, I stand on the ground prepared and gifted to us by so many who came before, and I abide alongside a host of others who labor in the work toward freedom for all of us.

That is, I am aware I am accompanied in my belief that *our hope for liberation lies in our capacity as human beings to enter into relational communion with one another—and there, to find something of our common humanality made real and appreciable, specifically and expressly, in persons who are different from ourselves.*

Consider, as an example, the collective Aboriginal wisdom passed down by liberation-seekers like Lilla Watson, who teaches: "if you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound together with mine, let us walk together."

Likewise, in his book *The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves*, Shawn A. Ginwright proposes that this kind of empathy and concern for others is fundamental to meaningful work for justice. Specifically, Ginwright observes:

> "Our movements for justice are fundamentally about how we collectively have concern and empathy for one another. Care is our collective capacity to express concern and empathy for one another. It requires that we act in ways that protect, defend, and advance the dignity of all human beings, animals, and the environment. This gets at the core of what justice is about: the act of caring for the well-being and dignity of others ... Care requires an emotional commitment and psychic investment that takes time, vulnerability, and deep concern for each other" (p 121).

In addition to the investment of time, psychic energy, and attention, such communal care requires the willingness to take note of, sit with, and hold regard for our differences—to seek out difference, over apparent similitude, with intention, curiosity, and respect. In my understanding, it is appreciation—perhaps even, reverence—for our differentiated, individual particularities that aids us in beginning to describe what it is to be members of our species. Along this line of thinking, *in Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks posits that:

> "Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community."

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Assuming as I do that there is some meaningful measure of truth in all these hopeful positions returns me, again and again, to the primary questions posed above:

> Who is this "family" to which we all belong?
> What are the core, common characteristics that make us both homo sapiens and particularly differentiated, individual humans?
> By what processes—or activities, behaviors, or practices—are these shared features made recognizable?
> What is it—that is, what kind of personal experience, observation, or event—that creates awareness of and compassion for the suffering of others, especially those persons with whom we are not connected, with whom we perceive we have nothing in common?

Working with the idea that there is some truth in the idea that our hopes for liberation are directly tied to how well we, collectively, develop the capacity to be relationally engaged with one another, learning to discover something of our common humanality made real and appreciable in others, I keep striving to pay attention. It seems to me that, even though I alone can't save the world, I am sure to save myself in meaningful ways by learning again and again how to appreciate and revel in the wonder of individual human particularities—in others and in myself.

Invitational Practices for Deepening the Capacity for Listening & Bearing Witness

In an ongoing search for objective, correlated activities that can aid individuals (and groups of persons) in developing and growing relational capacities and practices, I am offering the following exercises that focus on the specific capacity for listening. These exercises are meant to serve as beginnings, perhaps even as points of departure for developing personal practices. Each can be engaged individually or in groups.
These are only suggestions. Invitations of a kind. I hope you find them useful.

Invitation 1 - Listening Intently Outdoors

Find a place/space outdoors where you can quiet down – as much as possible – away from the noise and distractions of day-to-day life and commotion. This can be any space where you can sit down, walk, or both, without unwanted distractions. The main thing is to try to locate a place that allows for multiple sounds and, if possible, moments of internal silence.

~ Begin by engaging in some type of centering practice
This can be anything that helps you become quiet in yourself and able to focus; such as a reading, breath work, guided meditation, a walk outside, or some other calming, centering activity.

~ Listen to the sounds around you; try to separate and identify the sounds you hear:
Note the different sounds (write them down if possible) and consider:
What is distinct about these sounds? In what ways, if any, are the sounds similar?
What do you hear between the sounds in your environment?

~ Listen for breaks in the sounds, for silences, for isolated/distinct sounds:
Is there a true silence - a ceasing of any sound? If so, what qualities do you notice?
Do some sounds remind you of other sounds? Of other experiences?
How would you describe what you hear in a fullness of sounds? In modulations? In silences?

~ Lastly: In this listening, what do you experience? What feelings, emotions, sensations, perceptions do you experience?
What, if anything, did you receive from this practice?
How might developing a practice of listening in this way create a kind of body-memory that can be accessed and entered into for listening to others? To yourself? To the world around you?

Invitation 2 - Listening, with Intention, to Instrumental Music:

Open, or locate, two different pieces of instrumental music (to avoid the distractions of lyrics)—one with which you are familiar, and a second piece that you do not know very well, or at all.

~ Begin by engaging in some type of centering practice
This can be anything that helps you become quiet in yourself and able to focus; such as a themed reading, breath work, guided meditation, a walk outside, or some other centering activity.

~ Listen, intently, to the familiar/known piece of music and consider:
What sounds—instruments, notes, rhythms, etc.—do you notice most (if any)?
What (if any) sounds are present below the more dominant sounds?
Notice rests in the music – their qualities, durations, functions in the music. Are these completely silent?
What do you hear below the melody? Notice harmonies, modulations, crescendos, decrescendos, rhythms, etc. What captures your attention?
What emotions arise for you?
Do you hear sounds and/or movements you had not heard before?

~ Listen next to the piece that is not familiar and consider the same questions (above).

~ Now, consider your experiences with both.
What differences do you notice between the two experiences?
What do you notice about your experience of listening closely to the familiar piece?
What do you notice about your experience of listening deliberately, intently to the unfamiliar piece?
In which listening setting do you feel you were the most attentive, that is, listening to the fullest? What did you hear?
What if anything did you receive from this practice?
What are ways (if any) that listening to music in this way can help you be a better listener to other persons, to the world around you, to yourself, to circumstances and experiences unlike your own?

Invitation 3 - Listening to the Familiar in Unfamiliar Languages

This practice invites listening intently through the experience of a different language– entering into listening in ways that cultivate deeper intuitional sensations and perceptions. Additionally, accepting this invitation offers a way to explore what– if anything –is opened up in our listening when what we are hearing is rendered in a language that is unknown to us, freeing us (perhaps) from the automatic and habitual expectations and assumptions we make when a thing, heard or seen, is familiar. This exercise could be done with music, with recitations of poetry or stories, or could even be done with television shows produced in different languages.

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In this case, I chose to use music and decided to offer engaged listening sessions with a classic: "What A Wonderful World" (Bob Thiele, aka George Douglas, and George David Weiss)

~ Begin by engaging in some type of centering practice
This can be anything that helps you become quiet in yourself and able to focus; such as a themed reading, breath work, guided meditation, a walk outside, or some other centering activity.

~ Listen, first to a version in a language that is not known to you. Below are two versions, one in Hebrew (by Beit Tefilah) and another in French (Marquis Morin).

Link - https://youtu.be/J_-5pXRbgII?feature=shared
Beit Tefilah Israeli . Atalya Lavi, Yonatan Niv, Assaf Armoza, Esteban Gottfried, Noam Israeli, Eitan Gofman

Link - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgNt5_nm2B4&t=4s
Marquis Morin

Which version did you choose (French or Hebrew) or both? What prompted your choice?
What was it like hearing the song in a language other than your own?
What did you notice about the qualities, intention, and/or experience of this listening?
What feelings, emotions, and/or thoughts arose in your listening?

~ Next, listen to the original version of the song, Louis Armstrong's version:
Link - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqhC0ZaH4Vs

In what ways, beyond the language differences, was the listening experience different this time?
What, if anything, do you notice about the levels or types of intention in your listening when you know the language? When you do not know the language?
What insights, perceptions, and/or sensations did you receive from this exercise?
What, if anything, did you notice or learn about your own listening abilities?
How might these learnings/discoveries help you be a deeper, more intentional listener?

Invitation 4 - Listening to Yourself

This final invitational practice offers possibilities for listening to oneself more intentionally. Using some type of recording device or application, record your own voice, listen to yourself, and reflect on what you hear.

~ Over the course of a single day or a couple of days, record yourself speaking for 1-2 minutes, at different times and in different contexts. (When talking with another person, please be sure to ask for permission and record only your own voice as much as possible.)
For example: you might record yourself engaged in general conversation with your partner/housemate, or family member; then, record yourself talking about a particular thing with someone. Then, record a couple of minutes of yourself in other contexts, such as reading aloud. In short, record yourself in more than one setting/type of speech.

~ Once you have a few different recordings of yourself, listen to yourself speaking, and consider:
What do you notice about your tone, inflection, phrasing, and emotionality when speaking?

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How do these qualities or characteristics differ when you are talking about different things?
What identifying patterns or notable characteristics do you note in your own voice? (How is your voice distinct from others? Similar to others?, etc.)
How do context and circumstances affect the tone and tenor of your speech?

~ Going deeper: whenever possible, when you are conversing with another person(s), try to be aware of your and your conversation partner's speech and effects on your interactions.
What do you hear, beyond the words, in yourself and in the other person(s)?
What patterns of speech, tone, and tenor do you notice in yourself? In others?
In what ways does listening closely to yourself and other persons, as you converse, impact, shape, or inform how you speak as you engage listening more intentionally?
What ways, if any, can this listening practice shape how you listen to others?

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Resources and suggested reading:

Charleston, Steven. *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage*. Broadleaf Books, 2021. www.broadleafbooks.com/store/product/9781506465739/Ladder-to-the-Light

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. Continuum, 2005. https://envs.ucsc.edu/internships/internship-readings/freire-pedagogy-of-the-oppressed.pdf

Ginwright, Shawn A. *The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves*. North Atlantic Books, 2022. https://www.northatlanticbooks.com/shop/the-four-pivots

hooks, bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Routledge, 2003. https://bellhooksbooks.com/product/teaching-community

"'Liberation" and You Are On Aboriginal Land.'" Sovereign Union, 2022. http://nationalunitygovernment.org/content/liberation-and-you-are-aboriginal-land