

May 1, 2008

Dear Friends of Cornerstone,

It was children's Sunday in our little faith community – the Sunday each month when everything in the service is geared toward children. Unfortunately there were only two kids present. So the astute teacher directed her remarks specifically to the eight year old girl present. Eventually this girl felt so comfortable and engaged that she came to the front and pulled up a chair so she could stand next to the teacher at eye level and give commentary on what was being taught. At one point toward the end of the teaching, she tapped the microphone to be sure it was working – evidently wanting to be certain that everyone would hear what she was about to say. Then she cut off the teacher mid-sentence and stated with confidence: **“Big people know a lot, but they don't hear very well.”**

All of us big people present (at least this writer) knew that we had just been blessed with a profound and challenging prophetic utterance from this “little one.” A truer word could not be spoken to a culture of “big people” (those with the power, position and privilege) who often do not listen to and sometimes actually avoid and insulate themselves from the “little ones,” the ones Jesus referred to as the least of these – not least in value but those less noticed and empowered. So many in our world needing to be heard, but so few truly listening with love.

In our community at Cornerstone attentive listening is one of our deeply held values. It is one of the primary ways we care for each other and encourage growth. As psychiatrist Karl Menninger said:

"Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."

In fact, I believe that the place where deep listening and true hearing occur is a truly sacred space. How often we hear about how our technologically frantic culture has “made the world smaller;” how our computers and Black Berries and cell phones have enhanced and broadened communication. Yet, how often I see couples walking side by side in beautiful Rock Creek Park – with one talking intently to someone on their cell phone while ignoring the person next to them – squandering that sacred space of natural beauty and relational presence. Or, more personally, how often have I been meeting with someone face-to-face and felt it necessary to take an “important” call – at that point making someone I am not face-to-face with more important than the treasure in front of me. True listening is so important yet so rare.

But at Cornerstone, we believe that relationships are our “specific therapy.” So the gift and art of listening must be our core practice – creating a sacred space for community to be nurtured. And there is so much to hear. You may have heard the Cuban proverb: *"Listening looks easy, but it's not simple. Every head is a world."* And when we take the time to listen we discover so many captivating worlds in our little community!

There are many places where this miraculous act occurs in our community – around the table at a meal, sitting on the porch swing, walking, playing cards, during our weekly community meeting – so many different places. Just this last week in our weekly community meeting, one of the community members felt free to share some of his deep feelings – anger, fear and deep

depression about the community and about his life right now. Everyone listened, some acknowledged his pain, all affirmed him, but most important we all listened without judgment or answers from “experts” (though there were those present who could be considered experts – a certified addictions counselor, a master of social work and a preacher – well maybe not the preacher!) Just the week before this resident had been frustrated in his first meeting with a case manager from another organization that just fed him “stuff from her books, but really did not even know him.” This man’s feeling of safety in our meeting and his openness and vulnerability in sharing his deep pain was a precious gift to the rest of the community and some deep listening was a gift to him. That was a sacred and healing space.

One unusual place of listening has developed with one resident over the last year because of physical limitations. He has a difficult time climbing the not-quite-up-to-code stairs to my office (in most places known as an attic), and I was limiting my trips down the stairs because of my knee problems. So we met on the stairs – he sitting on the bottom steps and me at the top. There on the steps we have heard each other deeply. I have heard about troubling dreams and dashed hopes, pain and disappointment, loss of health and ability not to mention some truly horrifying and traumatizing experiences from prison. He says he has shared more with me than with anyone else and most of it on those stairs. He calls those times psychotherapy, but all that happens is listening. So together, there on the stairs, we have created a sacred space – a healing space – a place where we have become dear friends. That feels satisfying to one who has been expected to be a “proclaimer” for a good portion of his vocational life. The stairs have become such a sacred space that we now sit there even when one of us feels better! Listening – such a sacred and healing space in our community.

"We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit." ... e.e. cummings

My wish for us at Cornerstone and for you is that we will take the time to nurture the sacred space of deep listening in our lives and communities. It is so crucial to the peace and healing in our violent and hurting world. As James, the brother of Jesus, wrote: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger” (James 1:19) ... Or, as a sign under a mounted fish over the fisherman’s mantelpiece decried: “If I had kept my mouth shut, I wouldn't be here.”

Your love, prayers and gifts make it possible to make sacred space for these marginalized treasures who have only rarely had anyone truly hear them. Thank you.

Peace and love,

Tom Copps
Community Leader