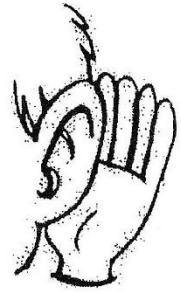


The Good Listener

Hugh Lavery



If I were asked to name the person I most admire, I would say the good listener. Most listening is half-listening. That chattering ape inside the head is so persistent that we hear little of what is being said.

"Listen to me", the teacher cries to her pupils.
"Listen to him" the Father says to us all.

Jesus echoes this request.

"He who has ears, let him hear".

This remark is worth pondering. It suggests that the good listener is a rarity, one in ten, one in a hundred. For listening is hard, speaking easy. Speech comes naturally, listening has to be learnt in the school of interior quiet. Listening is creative silence. Only the heart poised and at peace can be an instrument of reception. And how few have unanxious hearts.

Jesus spent much of his time over evening tables with the lost and the lonely. They were restored by his words which warmed like good wine. Yet, first, he was a listener. Notice how he knew everything that went on. Knew the wage for work in the vineyard, knew sparrows could be bought two for a farthing. He knew all about the money-changing fraud in the Temple forecourt and knew all about the rackets. People told him. He listened.

Many die of an overdose simply because there is no-one to listen to them. The Samaritans have saved many simply by listening. For listening is the grammar of love and love is expensive. For the listener does something exceptional. He honours the other person and disowns his ego.

We complain of the silence of God and resent his reticence. Yet the silence of God is golden. It is not indifference, not coldness, not egoism. God has good hearing and, when night fell, Jesus would walk to the foothills, to speak and listen to his Father.

Silence is the music of love, a song without words. Lovers share silence and find there both healing and holiness.

Good prayer begins with words and ends in silence. God speaks to the listening heart and we experience his reply as peace. We feel loved. And worthwhile. No weight is harder to carry than a sense of worthlessness, of being a nobody, just an abscess on the body of humankind.

And if no-one will listen to me then I am waste-matter, a worm and no man. This is lostness and a search for the listener. He restores my self-esteem and evokes release through the flow of words and the rise of locked emotions. For man is a voice and speech takes two. One who speaks; one who listens. Listens creatively and recreates a lost and lonely soul. This is a divine therapy and the listener is God's doctor and disciple.

Lord, you listen to those who speak with faith and in affection. You ask us to listen to those troubled and in travail, those who can find no ear open to their sorrow. Give us ears that receive the call of distress that we may be agents of health and restoration.

