



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Whispers of the Spirit

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, October 11, 2020

It's hard to imagine a year that compares to 2020 as the most difficult in our lives. For me, 1987 is a close second. Francis and I had just moved from a cold and forbidding life in upstate New York where we had been struggling to feed our young family, resorting to delivering telephone books out the back of an old pickup truck in freezing rain for 5 cents a book.

I had finally heard my call to ministry and we packed up our meager belongings in a U-Haul and trailing our 1968 Volvo behind us landed in Northern Indiana, where we would live for eight years, the four years I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago and four more serving the South Bend UU Church. We managed to buy a ramshackle Victorian for \$35,000 cash we had borrowed from family and in between fixing the roof and leaking pipes I commuted four days a week by train to Hyde Park in Chicago to go to school. On the weekends I insulated houses for a living.

The one bright spot of that year had been a new friend I had made in my next-door neighbor John Nellens. John was an innocent soul, not a mean or bigoted bone in his body as far as I could tell. He lived alone, 30 something, like me and worked for the city driving a street sweeper. Because the city had not provided him hearing protection he had lost much of his hearing and I would have to yell to make myself heard.

John welcomed us and our unruly family with open arms. He brought over cake and coffee and we would sit on his porch and share stories. At one-point John convinced me to ride behind him on his Harley so we could travel West.

My studies in Chicago were not going well. I had been out of college for ten years, scored miserably on the Graduate Record Exam and I wasn't even sure how I got into graduate school. I had trouble following the curriculum and the readings were a challenge to say the least, with two teenagers and two toddlers at home in a small house.

In November of that year while walking along the icy sidewalk from the train station to class, I slipped and sprained my ankle. It took forever to heal. And then came true tragedy. John Nellens had stopped his street sweeper by the side of the road to get out and check the brushes and when he came out into the street from the front of his sweeper, a car slammed into him killing him instantly. He hadn't heard the car coming.

I was despondent. What was I even doing in seminary? I needed to get a real job and feed my family. I was grieving. I realized that John was one of the truest friends I had ever had

and now he was gone. One cold morning as I was hobbling from the train station to class in Chicago, I heard a voice. A whisper and a feeling along the wind, I heard as clearly as I saw the low sun that day: “you must go on.”

“I must go on? Who said that? On to what?” I yelled.

As the writer Madisyn Taylor put it, “There is beauty and power when we listen to the whisper. You may have noticed that if you want to speak to someone in a noisy, crowded room, the best thing to do is lean close and whisper. Yelling in an attempt to be louder than the room’s noise generally only hurts your throat and adds to the chaos. Similarly, that still, small voice within each of us does not try to compete with the mental chatter on the surface of our minds, nor does it attempt to overpower the volume of the raucous world outside. If we want to hear it, no matter what is going on around us or even inside us, we can always tune in to that soft voice underneath the surrounding noise.”

There are whispers to the spirit all around us. In the laughter of children, in the pause between our inhale and exhale, even in the space between a righteous chant, “No Justice,” whispers go on, no peace.

There are whispers we hear in prayer and meditation, in the silence and in the wind. Have you heard these whispers? Some call it intuition; that sixth sense we have when something is or isn’t right. You know this feeling, don’t you?

Let the sky above me unroll like a scroll,
and let me read upon in today’s text for my life:

“You are alive, here and now.

Love boldly and always tell the truth.”

Let the wind arrange the naked branches
of the maples and aspens and oaks
into letters which proclaim this sacred text:

“Your heart beats now,
not tomorrow or yesterday.

Love the gift of your life and do no harm,” wrote the poet Mark Bellentini.

Intuition, what I often call the Holy Spirit, is within us. It is always listening. We don’t always pay attention. I know I had a hard time paying attention in those early years of ministry, caught as we all are in worries about money, our image and whether we do enough, or even are enough.

But of course, we learn one way or another that we are enough. We all are enough. That is the whisper of the Spirit I hear these days. “Tell your people they are doing fine. Tell them they are doing all they can to live with this disease, in this struggle of money, politics and relationships strained beyond tolerable. Tell them,” says my spirit, “that they are enough as they are.” This is what I hear now. Beloveds, you are enough.

Francis and I are living in a seasonal rental by the shore. Every morning I have the privilege to walk out of that small cottage and walk along the ocean and hear the wind and the waves. At first, I felt guilty about this, fearing I was retreating into myself. But even as the spirit assures me that we are enough, she stills calls me on to do more. Because we need both listening and acting.

Richard Rohr, the Catholic priest and mystic, calls his center in New Mexico: The Center for Action and Contemplation. He says the most important part of that title is not Action or Contemplation, it’s the word “and.”

When the spirit whispers to us in our struggles or joys it is both an assurance and a call to act. It doesn’t have to be done all at once, but it must be done. I say this about racial justice work: we don’t have to achieve it all, but we have to move forward even as we are being renewed with the love that our faith, friends, family and this congregation give us.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sat at his kitchen table with his head in his hands. It was late, his wife and children asleep and he had just hung up on another white supremacist warning him that they weren’t going to put up with his mess no more and threatening him with his life. As King tells it:

“I was ready to give up... In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God.... I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.... At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying ‘Stand up for Righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared and I was ready to face anything.”

As Dag Hammarskjöld once said:

“The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. Only they who listen can speak.”

Listening is at the beginning of our spiritual practice as faithful Unitarian Universalists. My colleague Scott Taylor says that the three sacred practices of listening - to each other, the world and our deepest selves - add up to a more intentional and authentic life. “It’s a journey back to connection, and ultimately a journey back home.”

The journey home to Contemplation and Action. We listen in order to find the strength to act; that is the way of our spirit, our faith as UUs. Contemplation shows us who we are, our actions show us what we can do.

In my code of the spiritual life, listening to the whispers of the spirit is found mostly in silence and meditation, while addressing the spirit is found in prayer. Both are part of the contemplative life this time of pandemic is inviting us to consider, as we wait out the storm in the monasteries of our homes.

Silence is not always easy. I don't know about you, but I am often uneasy in silence, preferring the melody of music, the call of singing or the sounds of nature. Still though, silence is often our best channel to the whisperings of the Spirit. Over the summer, I attended both in person and virtually several spiritual retreats in my ongoing call to spiritual direction. I had to admit to a cohort of my peers after two days of silence that I found all this silence maddening. What could I possibly hear except the chatter of my own monkey mind? Naturally, my teacher, a retired minister and Zen master said, "what of your silence makes you afraid? Where is the pain in this silence?"

"What pain!?" I wanted to shout back. "Oh, yeah. I get it." And so, I listened in those long silences for what the spirit might tell me, and lo' the image of my parents fighting came to mind. Not exactly fighting, my mother would yell at my father, and my father would turn silent and walk away. I remembered how that silence filled me with dread. What if he didn't come back? What if it was my fault?

Suddenly, the power of contemplation became clear. This is what so many of us fear in silence; we fear what the silence represents in the darkness. Can you hear me? And yet it is only in the darkness of silence that we are led to action, to change and to hope.

As the poet Marge Piercy puts it in her poem "Councils":

"Perhaps we should sit in the dark.

In the dark we could utter our feelings.

In the dark we could propose

and describe and suggest.

In the dark we could not see who speaks

and only the words

would say what they say."

Part of our calling in this time of pandemic is to become deeper listeners, to hear the whispers of the Spirit as they help us come out of the dark, and to act in a broken world. And it is our reimagining of small group ministry. While our existing small group ministry

continues, many have been joining us in our new ministry, the Soul Matters Sharing Circles. Scott Taylor says “Realizing we are in the soul’s backyard. Grasping the rope that leads us back home. This ultimately, is why one joins a Soul Matters small group. Yes, you will encounter meaningful discussions and a stimulating exchange of ideas. Yes, you will discover new friends. But in the end, this is about recovering wholeness and the journey back home.”

Soul Matters Circles are facilitated monthly meetings that go beyond just sharing what we think and take us into hearing more deeply from those we have yet to know. The circle meetings include using other spiritual practices beyond discussion to open us up into new ways of hearing the Spirit. About thirty of us are now in these new Soul Matters Sharing Circles. I am inviting you to join us as new circles will be forming throughout this church year. To be in a Soul Matters Sharing Circle you are required to participate in our Starting Point course, a four-session introduction which I lead about every other month. The next one is on Saturdays in November. Please contact me or Linda Lubin our coordinator if you are interested.

Needless to say, I answered the call of the spirit delivered to me on the icy streets of Chicago those many years ago. I like to believe that John Nellen is speaking to me still. I am thankful for that and all the times I still hear the whispering of the Spirit.

The poet John Saxon and “Listen! The Spirit is Calling”:

“It’s calling to you and to me. It’s calling us to greater wholeness, greater connection, greater service, greater love. It’s calling us to heal the brokenness within ourselves, in others, and in the world... It’s calling us to live courageously and kindly, to speak our truth in love, and to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. It’s calling us into community....”

Whispering still, it is calling. Amen.