

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation

From the Center for Action and Contemplation



Week Thirty: Holy Listening

Courageous Listening

Sikh activist Valarie Kaur has made a commitment to listen to those with whom she disagrees. Here she describes some of the practices that make it possible:

Deep listening is an act of surrender. We risk being changed by what we hear. When I really want to hear another person's story, I try to leave my preconceptions at the door and draw close to their telling. I am always partially listening to the thoughts in my own head when others are speaking, so I consciously quiet my thoughts and begin to listen with my senses. . . . The most critical part of listening is asking *what is at stake* for the other person. I try to understand what matters to them, not what I think matters.

Sometimes I start to lose myself in their story. As soon as I notice feeling unmoored, I try to pull myself back into my body, like returning home. As Hannah Arendt [1906–1975] says, “One trains one’s imagination to go visiting.” [1] When the story is done, we must return to our skin, our own worldview, and notice how we have been changed by our visit.

Kaur understands the complicated nature of listening to those we see as our religious, cultural, and political “opponents” and the emotional toll it takes:

It turns out it is extremely difficult to draw close to someone you find absolutely abhorrent. How do we listen to someone when their beliefs are disgusting? Or enraging? Or terrifying? . . . An invisible wall forms between us and them, a chasm that seems impossible to cross. We don’t even know why we should try to cross it. . . . In these moments, we can choose to remember that the goal of listening is not to feel empathy for our opponents, or validate their ideas, or even change their mind in the moment. Our goal is to understand them. . . .

When listening gets hard, I focus on taking the next breath. I pay attention to sensations in my body: heat, clenching, and constriction. I feel the ground beneath my feet. Am I safe? If so, I stay and slow my breath again, quiet my mind, and release the pressure that pushes me to defend my position. I try to wonder about this person’s story and the possible wound in them. I think of an earnest question and try to stay curious long enough to be changed by what I hear. Maybe, just maybe, my opponent will begin to wonder about me in return, ask me questions, and listen to my story. Maybe their views will start to break apart and new horizons will open in the process. . . . Then again, maybe not. It doesn’t matter as long as the primary goal of listening is to deepen my own understanding. Listening does not grant the other side legitimacy. It grants them humanity—and preserves our own.

[1] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43.

Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (New York: One World, 2020), 143–144, 156, 157.

Image credit: Claudia Retter, *Caroline’s Porch* (detail), photograph, used with permission. Claudia Retter, *Lynn’s Tomatoes* (detail), photograph, used with permission. Claudia Retter, *Micah’s Room* (detail), photograph, used with permission. Jenna Keiper & Leslye Colvin, 2022, triptych art, United States.

This week’s images by Claudia Retter appear in a form inspired by early Christian/Catholic triptych art: a threefold form that tells a unified story. This year we invited a few photographers, including

Claudia, to share their vision with us in an artistic exploration for the Daily Meditations. The inspiration questions we asked each artist to create from were: How do you as an artist connect to and engage with (S)pirit and/or tradition(s)? How can we translate deeper truths through a lens? and How can we show our inherent connectedness (of humans, nature, other creatures, etc.) through imagery?

Image inspiration: *Our eyes are so often drawn to grand majesties - a vivid sunset or an expansive landscape - but the smallest of things has value, a story of its own, a place in the world.* —Claudia Retter