

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



**Two Sermon
by
Rev Sarah Tinker & Rev Gillian Peel**

Issue 229



June 2013

Registered Charity 1040294

Introduction

Rev Sarah Tinker is the minister at the Essex Church in Kensington, London. Rev Gillian Peel is the minister at the Unitarian Church in Clover Street, Rochdale. These two sermons were preached at their churches.

Inner Peace

by

Rev Sarah Tinker

Do you have certain words or sayings that stay with you for years and years?

I remember back in the 80s reading a book by Wilhelm Reich called Listen Little Man – not a book I would probably recommend to most of us now.

It's Reich at his most damning about us humans and how we restrict the life force within us all by restrictive child rearing practices, through our education systems, our work and relationship patterns – it's not the most cheery of reads.

And it's not the most cheery of sentences that stayed with me from that book. It stated that "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." and that has stayed with me ever since.

What interests me these days is that this sentence can seem more or less true according to my own state of mind. A walk along the pavements of Notting Hill, or a journey on our delightfully crowded London Tube system, even listening to the news on the radio or TV can cause me peace or despair depending on how I am feeling. That process is what this address is all about.

The other interesting thing about Reich's judgement that "most men" and we'd better include us women – "most women and men lead lives of quiet desperation" is that they weren't his words at all. He was apparently quoting Henry David Thoreau – the American transcendentalist who famously wrote the book 'Walden', about his time of retreat by a lake in the woods of New England.

But whoever wrote those words did not write this second sentence, written at the end of our order of service, which I have borrowed from 'A Course in Miracles'.

We may at times live lives of quiet desperation but the Course in Miracles tell us "we could see peace instead of this."

Anyone who has created a worship service will know the secret truth about this privileged position behind the lectern - which is that the speaker is generally speaking what they most need to hear. It isn't really for your benefit at all. Every word of what I'm about to say needs to be etched somewhere inside me because, when it comes to inner peace, I still have a lot to learn.

That's probably why back in the 90s when I first was given a copy of our reading, 'Symptoms of Inner Peace', it so touched a chord with me (copied at the end).

The line that says that "the loss of the ability to worry is a very serious symptom" in particular has great appeal. I wonder which lines touch a chord with you?

It was only as I was doing research for this service that I found out who had written these words that we're looking at now – Saskia Davis. She wrote them back in 1984 when she was working as a nurse with peer support groups for people with chronic or life

threatening illnesses.

She describes how she sat down to write, not at all sure what she wanted to say, and the words came pouring out of her onto the page. She describes them as a “gift of grace”. And as sometimes happens, this piece of writing ‘The Symptoms of Inner Peace’ took on a life of its own.

I’ve found it in so many places and in so many forms. I’ve collected several versions and it’s been translated into different languages. But what you have today is its original form. And Saskia Davis wrote it with some humour but also with an awareness of our human anxiety about infectious diseases.

She was writing at the time when the so called AIDS epidemic was arriving in public awareness. People were very frightened. We now have swine flu to worry about and are being endlessly reminded to wash our hands and throw hankies in the bin.

It is human to be anxious isn’t it, yet there are also steps we can take to counter-balance that tendency towards worry. Wise beings throughout the ages have been pointing the way towards inner peace. It’s a sign that something is important to humanity when there are lots of teaching stories about it in the world’s faith traditions and I was spoilt for choice when it came to choosing stories for today.

The tale of the thief who brought back the bag of stolen jewels that we heard earlier on is a good reminder that even the most desperate of people can recognise the priceless jewel that inner peace represents. It is a gift that money cannot buy.

Our inner peace, or lack of it, reflects the state of our mind, the

number and the quality of our thoughts.

Many of you know the story of two Buddhist monks walking by a river. They noticed a young woman was having difficulty crossing the river as the ford was flooded, so one of the monks stopped and carried the woman across the river. Later in the day, the other monk spoke saying,

“You shouldn’t have carried that woman. We monks are not supposed to get involved with woman.’

The first monk replied, “I just carried her across the river, then let go of her. By contrast, you have been carrying her around in your mind ever since”.

How human it is to carry a great weight of thoughts with us through life, unable to put down our mental burden and experience lightness once more.

A Hindu story tells of a great sage who spent many years meditating in a cave. Over the years he developed tremendous inner peace through his meditation. Once a great King came to visit and spoke to the sage about the turmoil of his earthly kingdom.

The sage asked the King “why not come and meditate with me in the cave. Then you can have peace”.

The king replied, “What would the use be? If I came here, I would still be thinking of my Kingdom. I would be building imaginary castles in the sky and fighting imaginary battles”.

That King, at least, realised that the path to peace lay within his own mind and nowhere else.

To become aware of the quality of our thoughts is for most of us the first important step on the path to inner peace. And finding a way simply to accept what is in life, rather than railing against it, is often the second step needed to discover inner peace within ourselves.

Again you may know the story of the general, notorious for his cruelty, who led his army through the territories of his enemy. People fled from the towns and villages up to the safety of the mountains – desperate to escape from the cruel general and his soldiers who were free to maim and kill all they found in their path. The army arrived one night in a village that was deserted, except for a Zen monk who had stayed to take care of the monastery. On hearing that there was someone who did not seem to be afraid of him the general marched into the monastery where he found that small man sitting in his saffron robes in solitary meditation.

“Don’t you know who I am?” shouted the general, brandishing his sword as he approached the monk.

“I am the one who could kill you with his sword without giving it a second thought”.

“And I am the one”, replied the monk calmly, “who can let you kill him without giving it a second thought”.

And on hearing this, the general bowed and left.

And bowing and leaving is what I should do – this address has been long enough. But may I leave you with this contradictory thought.

Probably most of us would agree that finding inner peace is a ‘good thing’. But would you also agree that at times an inner discontent is

also healthy – the discontent that encourages us to improve conditions in our world, the discontent that spurs us on to make a difference. It's been described as divine discontent and for me that captures something of its creative energy.

Inner peace does not need to be passive; inner peace allows us to assess what needs to be done, from a place of calm within us, based on the situation that we are now in.

So may all our levels of inner peace and divine discontent be just how we'd like them to be today for we are the only ones who can make that choice. What will it be? A little more quiet desperation or some of that inner peace!?

Symptoms of Inner Peace by Saskia Davis (written in 1984)

Be on the look out for symptoms of inner peace. The hearts of a great many have already been exposed to inner peace and it is possible that people everywhere could come down with it in epidemic proportions. This could pose a serious threat to what has, up to now, been a fairly stable condition of conflict in the world.

Some signs to look for:

A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.

An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.

A loss of interest in judging other people.

A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.

A loss of interest in conflict.

A loss of the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom)

Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature.

Frequent attacks of smiling.

An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.

An increased susceptibility to the love offered by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it.

Be aware! If you have some or all of the above symptoms, please be advised that your condition may be too far advanced to turn back. If you are exposed to anyone exhibiting any of these symptoms, remain exposed only at your own risk. This condition of inner peace is probably well into its infectious stage.

Postscript:

Services at Essex Church are available as podcasts online and I was delighted to receive an email from Saskia Davis who had listened to the podcast and who wrote to say how pleased she was that we had credited her with writing 'Symptoms of Inner Peace'. She sent us her blessings for continuing wisdom and inner peace.

The Art of Listening

by

Rev Gillian Peel

"The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear or the mind. Hence it demands emptiness of all of the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind." - Chuang-Tzu

"When you talk you repeat what you already know, when you listen, you often learn something." Jared Sparks - Born 1789

Two books by Kay Lindahl informed the following address. 'The Sacred Art of listening' and 'Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening'.

I am going to begin today by asking you a question.

Are you listening?

Are you really listening?

If I asked you this question in the course of the day then generally the answer will be yes – but it will only be yes because my question has prompted you to pay attention and I would wonder if you were really listening before I asked the question.

Of course when I ask the question from here in the pulpit then I expect the answer to be yes because this is the beginning of my address and I would hope that it is the one bit that you would actually be listening to if not all the way through.

But, I ask you to consider the scenario of a couple at home, maybe after one or both of them has come in from work and wants to unburden some of their day. How often does the partner really listen, how often do they only appear to be listening – and how often are

those words uttered, possibly with an exasperated tone –
‘Are you listening to me?’

Have you ever asked that question? Or, more importantly have you had the question asked of you?

What was it Kay Lindahl said in my second reading? “Perhaps one of the most precious and powerful gifts we can give another person is to really listen to them, to listen with quiet, fascinated attention, with our whole being, fully present.

How often do we give that gift to another person, especially to the ones we love? It is not always easy, to listen in such a way, and yet it is something that we really should endeavour to try and do. Listen, and listen fully.

One of the ways in which we show that we are not really listening is when we jump in with an answer inappropriately – maybe at the wrong time or with the wrong words. We don’t only have to think about listening but we also need to think about the words we use and the way we use them.

Kay Lindahl says about words and conversation:

“Words, words, words, words. When we talk with each other, you may think we are having a discussion, when what I expected was a dialogue.

Dialogue comes from the Greek dia, which means 'through,' combined with logos. Dialogue literally means words flowing through. In a flow of conversation, new understandings emerge that might not have been present otherwise. Dialogue, conducted in a spirit of enquiry and a genuine desire to understand, is an open-ended exploration.”

Discussion though is rather different, Kay says:

Discussion comes from the Latin 'dis', which means 'apart,' and 'quater', 'to shake'. Discussion has the same root as percussion and concussion, meaning to break things up. In a conversation each person is analysing the subject, looking for answers, results or agreement.

There is another way to distinguish these words. Discussion leads from the intellect. Dialogue leads from the heart. Each can certainly be based on either heart or intellect, but the overall context is different. One is not better than the other - both are valid means of communicating. It's simply useful to know where you are.

Most of the time we dance back and forth between discussion and dialogue. We make no distinction, which often leads to misunderstandings. If I think we are having an open-ended exploration and you think we are going to resolve a problem, we are really in two different kinds of conversations

Distinguishing which type of conversation we are having leads to greater understanding.

There are also topics that seem to be nondiscussable. No one mentions them - they are just there, underneath the surface, blocking deep heart-to-heart communication. The dialogue process provides a safe space for these conversations.

We live in a world that blurs the lines between dialogue and discussion.”

There is too, the time when words themselves hold a hidden meaning. Often in the Jesus story we hear how Jesus taught by using parables – disguising his real message within a story so that ‘Only those with ears to hear’ would truly understand. (Those words appear at least on nine occasions in the gospel stories.) And how often did Jesus have to admonish his disciples for not understanding.

We too disguise our feelings and our messages by not always articulating them clearly, in fact by just plain hiding them. How often the question, 'How are you today?' is answered with 'Well, I am okay – but how are you?' That okay can hide a multitude of things, it can mean 'well physically I feel alright but when it comes to my feelings well I'm not okay, in fact I'm really depressed.' Or conversely 'I feel okay in my head but the pain my arthritis is causing is really not good today.' But rather than go into it we gloss over it with – 'I am ok' and then evade giving more information by batting the question back with, 'and how are you?'

Do we hear those hidden messages or do we pick up on the deeper meaning?

Of course in our conversations we don't only have to consider the words, an important part of valuable conversation is being able to use silence or allow silence to occur. But we often have problems with silence. Kay Lindahl again asks:

"Have you ever noticed the discomfort with silence in our culture? Think about the last time someone called for a moment of silence in a public gathering." . . . or, perhaps when I ask you to be silent during the meditative prayer. "The first ten to fifteen seconds are usually comfortable. After that, people tend to get restless and cough, rustle paper, cross and uncross their legs, clear their throats."

Well it is the same in a conversation, just think about how you react to a silence or a lull in a conversation.

It's as though there is an unwritten rule that whenever there's a hint of silence, someone must fill the vacuum with a rush of words. We start to talk faster and faster. Listening quickly takes a back seat to talking.

The power of silence though, gives us breathing room. There is wis-

dom in the silence. It can alter our perceptions and ability to see what is happening. It can give clarity in the midst of apparent chaos."

Kay Lindahl suggests that there are three qualities that are essential to the practice of deep listening and these are silence, reflection and presence.

- Silence, she says, creates the space for listening to God. It provides time to explore our relationship to the Source of our being, whatever we take that source to be. Not only does it allow this connection with our inner selves but the practice of being in this silence can nurture our capacity to listen to others.

- Reflection gives us access to listening for our inner voice. The practice of taking a few breaths before responding to a situation, question or comment gives time for your true wisdom to reveal itself. It's a slowing down, waiting, practising patience.

- Presence is the awareness of listening to another, of connecting at the heart level. The practice of taking a mundane, ordinary activity and giving it your full attention, for example washing your hands or brushing your teeth, trains your concentration and your ability to be in the present moment with another. This is often known as the practice of mindfulness that is espoused in the Buddhist tradition and especially by the Tibetan monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Often listening can be a valuable spiritual practice, whether it is listening to others or just being silent with ourselves and listening to our internal voice. It is only when we practice being silent that we can hear that inner voice – that is often referred to as the 'still, small voice' that sometimes can be felt in times of meditative prayer.

The Catholic priest Henri Nouwen says this about the art of contemplation and silence.

“The word is born in silence, and silence is the deepest response to the word.”

This practice of silent listening is important for our spiritual wellbeing – an area that we often forget to nourish in our busy, daily lives. Kay Lindahl says:

“Connecting with the sacred in daily life leads to a sense of inner peace, even in the midst of chaos. We experience a wholeness that transcends our differences. We find ourselves in community, with feelings of gratitude and growing compassion for others.”

Continue this practice into our conversations with each other and we will find that

“When we talk to each other about our fears and dreams, we open up the space for hope. When we learn how to listen to ideas that conflict with our own without becoming defensive, our hearts begin to open and we start to see each other as part of one human family. We connect at a deep level. When we practice the sacred art of listening, we also learn the art of conversation. It is this type of conversation that can transform our world.”

Maybe this is how we will be able to bring about peace in our world by truly listening.

So may it be. Amen.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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