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The power of listening

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The simple act of listening can change people's lives and the world.

"So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being

conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it." J. Krishnamurti

I listen for a living. As a longtime journalist and documentary producer, I have interviewed hundreds and hundreds of people and paid very deep attention to their stories—their specific words, of course, but also to the feelings underlying the words, the energy beneath and behind the sentences.

The words are transmitters, like radio signals—and what they carry is sometimes so luminescent, so filled with humanity, that this material passes right into my heart-cells and jumps me wide open.

Lately I have been thinking about this business of listening. In mid-October I attended the 22nd Annual [Bioneers Conference](#)—a Bay Area gathering of 3,500 social, scientific and artistic innovators who shared practical and visionary solutions to the world's environmental and social challenges. There, at a panel called "No Women, No Democracy: From the Streets of Cairo to Your Family," I listened to the personal stories of three citizen-journalists from the global communications network [World Pulse](#), which

connects women via an interactive platform so that they can share their stories—a first critical step towards change.

I listened to [Martha Elena Llano Serna](#), a Colombian who is fighting to preserve her people’s rainforest environment and traditional ways through a nonprofit she founded called SENTIR (“To Feel”). I listened to [Sarvina Kang](#), a Cambodian who was the first in her community to earn a university degree and now campaigns for girls’ and women’s education so that they can lift themselves out of despair, poverty and sexual exploitation. I listened to [Achieng Beatrice Nas](#), a Ugandan who told of how her mother was going to be evicted from her land when her seven brothers died of AIDS, because in her community only men are allowed to own land. Nas sent an email alert to her World Pulse network and received countless responses of support. “When the community leaders came to take us from the land,” she said, “my mother stood up and said, ‘This is my land and I’m not going anywhere. Should anyone tamper with my land, women around the world are going to come here.’ The men disappeared. So I want to let you know that there’s power in Internet, there is power in communications, there’s power in realizing our voices.”

The feminist leader [Gloria Steinem](#)—whose actual profession, I was reminded as I watched her, is journalism, is listening—sat on the panel paying rapt attention to these women. “The most revolutionary thing we can do is listen to each other,” she announced to all of us in the audience when Nas finished her story. Then she turned to [Jensine Larsen](#), the panel moderator, who had founded World Pulse when she was 28. “Do you need listeners?” she asked Larsen. Yes! More than 600 women from the globe’s farthest reaches had applied to be trained as citizen-journalists, “and we need [volunteer] listeners to hear their stories. We had 200 listeners this year because World Pulse can’t listen to them all. It seems like a small thing, but leaving a comment can change a woman’s life.”

Listening can change people’s lives. Over at Occupy Wall Street, the playwright-activist [Eve Ensler](#) ([The Vagina Monologues](#)) has been gathering the stories of the occupiers and publishing them, in their own words, in [her column on Huffington Post](#). On her [first foray to Zuccotti Park](#), she wrote recently,

I had the fortune to spend the night with a group of about 30 occupiers—the talk could have gone on through the early morning. The depth of the conversation, the intensity

of the seeking, the complexity of ideas were startling. But what moved me even more was the respect, the way people listened to each other and honored and appreciated each other.

We say all the time how we believe in democracy, that we want the people to speak and be heard. Well, the people are speaking. The people are experimenting. The people are crying out with the deepest hunger to build a better world. Maybe instead of labeling it, we could join it. There is so much to be done.

Enslar writes about a particular form of listening that the occupiers have created out of necessity. I find this so beautiful it makes me want to leap up and testify:

Because the city has forbidden the use of microphones and sound systems, the group is using a human microphone. This system of communication is compelling and metaphoric. The group is forced to repeat the words of the speaker so the speaker is forced to talk slowly, with less words at once. The audience is asked to listen in a whole new way and to actually help transmit the message to others. Accuracy and transparency are the crucial elements. To make sure the human microphone is working properly the speaker calls out Mike Check and the crowd repeats Mike Check and by doing this it becomes clear if the voice of the speaker is being carried through the entire crowd.

To convey their responses to what is said, the group has devised a series of hand signals:

My favorite is the signal for agreement, or something you like a lot. People lift their hands and wiggle their fingers. This has come to be called Upsparkles.

Upsparkles! This is what I feel in my heart when I deeply listen, when I do this revolutionary thing of taking someone else's story into my being. Do you know what this feels like, to have Upsparkles shimmering in your heart? Of course you do. I encourage you to make this kind of listening part of your daily practice. Listening this way will change your heart. Listening this way will change our world.

By Diana Rico

About Diana Rico

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The ancients lived in deep knowledge of the sacredness of water. Today, those of us who dwell in the so-called developed world have lost that sense, though many indigenous sisters and brothers living in traditional ways still hold it. On my blog "Holy Waters" (holywaters.wordpress.com), I explore the sacredness of water—and, by extension, of all things numinous—through my own writing and through the work of invited guest artists in all media. My hope is to make readers shimmer with delight and help them plunge their own holy depths. | Diana Rico (dianarico.com) is an internationally published journalist, curator, critically acclaimed author, and award-winning documentary producer-writer specializing in the arts and spiritual/social issues.

← If Jane Austen lived today, she'd be a blogger

6 Responses to *The power of listening*



1. [Boomgono](#) says:

[November 11, 2011 at 12:55 pm](#)

Lovely post. Thank you for your thoughts. I once remember seeing a quote you might appreciate – and I sure wish I could attribute it, but can't. Goes something like this:

Average listeners listen until they have something to say or have reified a belief. Great listeners listen until they have learned something they did not know before.



2. [Matt C](#) says:

[November 12, 2011 at 5:22 am](#)

** UPSPARKLES ** for a wonderful post!! Thank you for the work you put into this and for sharing such useful, beautiful ideas.



3. [Gina A](#) says:

[November 16, 2011 at 7:37 am](#)

This is inspiring and definitely gives me upsparkles in my heart. Being present to others in the way of deep listening really calls me out of my personal obsessions and predicaments. Imagine if we all did more listening and less judging.

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–A great article that comes to me on a day where my practice in the book Steps to Knowledge reads: “Today I will learn to listen to life.” (!!)



4. *Peg* says:

[November 16, 2011 at 1:40 pm](#)

I notice as my brain is slow in remembering that I stop listening and try to hold on to the thought, but I reluctantly lose it and have missed so much. I will work on letting it go right away and wait for the upsparkles.
