

To build a better human, we must start with the ears

A few years ago, several veteran Austin guitar-playing musician friends – John Inmon, Derek O'Brien, Denny Freeman, Richard Jessee – took time to talk with my son about what their lives devoted to playing music were like, where their inspiration and passion for music came from, what difficulties they faced and still face.

What stays with me was how well these masters of soul-inspiring guitar sounds listened to what a 16-year-old fledgling musician had to say.

True attentive listening is a vanishing skill and underdeveloped talent. We all want to be heard. Yet it is the capacity to hear sympathetically that makes us truly human. The words we share in our native languages, the specific meanings we give words within our families and social groups, the feeling of outsidersness we have when we cannot understand what others are saying, all define who we are in our connections with or disconnections from other human beings.

Inmon posed a conundrum that applies not just to playing music, but to all other forms of human communication. He said: "When you are playing the guitar you are just sending out vibrations that travel through the air. They don't mean anything until they reach the ears of the people who are listening. Figure out how to get what the song means to you across to your audience."

What a wonderful concept. Applied to nonmusical communication, it asks that we do one simple thing: listen before or while we speak so that we can best express what we mean to others.

How is listening, especially John's kind of pre-listening or imaginative listening to what others will be hearing, important? Without it, we lose contact with others and with ourselves, we become less able to help others and ourselves.

A few weeks ago, I visited the Freud Museum in Vienna and stood in front of the famous couch upon which Freud's patients reclined and the famous chair where Freud sat, behind his patients. What he was practicing was called "the talking cure," but it depended on patients knowing that a sympathetic, if invisible, listener was taking in what they were saying.

Psychoanalysis is now a multi-faceted science, but the art of sympathetic listening was known to Homer. Achilles, when in his deepest suffering from the public insult to his core self as a dedicated field commander, talks at length to his mother, Thetis, she listens with maternal care. Later when his closest comrade Patroclus is killed, Achilles unburdens himself to Thetis again about his sorrow and his guilt.

He later speaks with Priam, king of Troy, who appeals to Achilles to return the body of his son Hector, whom Achilles had killed. Achilles in his anger and grief had tried to mutilate Hector's corpse. Listening to Priam's words, Achilles remembers his own father and becomes fully human once more.

Walt Whitman in his famous commentary on the abysmal medical care given the wounded well into our Civil War, "The Great Army of the Sick," cites the case of J.A.H., "a young man from Plym-

outh Country, Massachusetts," "prostrated by diarrhea and vomiting" and virtually catatonic because "no one spoke to him" or did so "with perfect indifference" or "heartless brutality." Whitman "sat down by him without any fuss – talked a little – soon saw that it did him good – led him to talk a little himself." By humanly listening, Whitman pulled J.A.H. from the brink of death from a despondency caused by nobody caring to listen.

Unfortunately, in our society the reward structures in many professions promote single-minded self-expression. A just-completed senior honors thesis at the University of Texas at Austin by Bethany Hamilton that Stephen Sonnenberg and I supervised looks at UT students who are military veterans. We need to listen to opinions like those Hamilton gathered from veterans. One was that veteran students would rather be at Austin Community College than at UT because the professors at ACC take time to listen when veteran students talk about their special needs.

This problem doesn't apply only to veterans. UT has long had dauntingly high student-to-faculty ratios. And faculty members know that devoting time to research and publications is the one sure way to be among the chosen half of the faculty who now receive annual small merit raises.

The art of listening needs a public hearing, and we all need to lend our ears.

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