





hear & now

what emerges in the space between words?
reflections on a language of listening by **bob stilger**

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Several years ago I was in discussion with Terry, a thirteen-year-old girl and two other people at the Shambhala Authentic Leadership Institute. I have no memory of what question we were addressing, but Terry brought the story of her own invisibility in her family. She spoke of her deep pain of her parents not knowing who she was and their complete inability to listen to her story, her experience, her yearning.

We only had twenty minutes together in conversation. I'm sure I was looking for something wise and pithy to say, but mostly I listened. Sometimes Terry spoke harshly, each word a blunt instrument crashing down. At other times she spoke softly, sharing her inner bewilderment with us. *They won't let me talk. They ignore me. My dad actually put me on a curfew because he didn't believe*

what I was saying. I just want to get out. Why can't they see who I am? Why do they have to put me inside the little boxes of their own experience? In front of my eyes, I saw a passionate and courageous warrior emerge from her bewilderment. Mostly, she talked. We listened.

I saw a shift in her and it didn't come from any advice or proffered wisdom. It came because we listened. For years I had been looking for new language. If only we could find the right words, I thought, we could talk about new ideas and frameworks to help us navigate these uncertain times. The experience with this young woman helped me begin to realize that we don't need new words as much as we need new listening. We need a language of listening.

It's not that I don't love words. I do. I savor the way they can slip off a tongue and slide into an ear. I delight in their

capacity to bring light into an ominous room. But too often they are used to codify, dominate and suppress life. Too often they are used as shields to surround our own doubt and as weapons to secure a position of seeming superiority. What are the words and the language that allow us to speak from the depth of our knowing with the passion of our souls? What is the language that can reach past our pettiness and into our separate and collective greatness?

As a social artist, community activist and sometimes academic, I think I ought to be able to put just about anything into a compelling phrase. I've lived a lot of my life in my mind: having conversations, reflecting on conversations, getting ready for conversations. I've spent countless hours thinking and wondering about experiences. I've

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always been ready to put ideas into my words. Yet, there are times when I have been most able to share my strongest convictions and deepest feelings by keeping my mouth shut.

At the Berkana Institute I have an opportunity to work with people from many cultures. We work with a network of leadership learning centres located in Pakistan, India, Greece, Senegal, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, the US and Canada. We think of this as a *trans-local* network because it is rooted in local experiences and local learning which are then connected across the globe. As a network, we are learning about the conditions that build resilient communities. We pay attention to new forms of leadership, deep conversation as the basis for all learning and decisions, and the physical work required to grow food, live healthily and create zero waste.

Many languages are present within this trans-local learning community—not just the obvious languages from different cultures, but the less visible languages that have arisen in a world characterized by the use of power *over* rather than the use of power *with*.

A core part of my work is to listen people in this community into their greatness. I listen as the stories of their personal experience pour forth. Sometimes I ask a question or two, but mostly I listen. Another key aspect of my work is to help people remember what they

already know. We all know what it means to be in right relationship with each other and this small planet. We know what it feels like when we receive and give respect. We know what it is like to have courage and what it is like to be afraid. We know that place where right action springs forth in an instant because of a deep alignment between our heart, spirit and mind. We know what it is like to be listened to.

Words, of course, continue to be important. I keep searching for those words which will, when spoken, make everything clear. As a sometimes writer, I think that if I put those words on paper, then more people will share my clarity. But I have begun to understand that when I compact experience into words and then compact spoken words even further into writing, the meaning that was clear to me doesn't say the same thing to others. Indeed, my truth can't replace their truth and my words are often a distant echo or a distraction from what they actually believe. Words of wisdom are, perhaps, better used sparsely.

When I have a problem or issue that won't go away, I don't usually look to someone who will give me advice. I look for someone who will give me listening. Ten years ago, I organized a healing group when my friend Robert Theobald was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. I thought I was

organizing the healing group for Robert, but I soon realized it was for all of us. Robert left us eight years ago and our healing group continues to meet. For many years, we met once a week for two hours; our time together now is less frequent and goes deeper. Basically, what we do is listen to each other. No fixing. No advising. Just listening.

In this healing group, I cultivated my practice of the language of listening. I begin by reaching inside myself to find my own deep well of curiosity which I then combine with deep respect for those I'm listening to. Physically and energetically, I create a safe and quiet space where I have no need to judge or categorize the things others say. I remind myself to treasure the silence and the space between the words and to ask people to go deeper and deeper into their story.

I have learned that this practice works in any situation, whether it's a healing group, a conversation with a thirteen-year-old girl, or a global learning community. But I also know that listening isn't enough. Language is needed to share technical learning—the best way to build composting toilets, make bicycle-powered washing machines, grow plants that nourish health. Concepts are needed for understanding different ways of reflecting and learning. Theories are useful to get a sense of right direction. All of these require words and languages.

Working in a community with many languages present, I am also aware that different meanings are carried in different languages. There is no word in English that holds the depth of *itadakimasu*, the phrase spoken at the beginning of meals in Japan. That one word expresses gratitude to those who grew, harvested, prepared and served the food as well as to the rain and sun and soil that went into the making. There is no word in English that conveys the depth of *sano* and *insano* in Spanish, meaning whole or healthy and then its opposite.

While all these words are important, the domination of concepts, expressions and language developed in the white/northern hemisphere must be broken if our lives and world are to be healed. We must let magic and mystery loose again, until more of us remember how to reflect our true experience through dance and song, poetry and painting, mime and sculpture. We must and we will discover new conceptual constructs that help us make sense of our world. Our collective capacity to really listen to each other will allow us to create a world where we are whole, healthy, sacred and free. ☸

Bob Stilger is the co-president of The Berkana Institute and works with initiatives all around the world that are aimed at mobilizing community-based leadership to solve tough problems in areas of food sustainability, eco-building, health, economic development, community, media/the arts, education and youth leadership.

