

Week 3 - Empathic Listening: Loving the Stranger

The theme or focus for this week is empathic listening - loving the stranger. It's important to understand the feelings and needs of the other (both those on the Left and the Right) to be able to reach across differences, understand people better, help people have a real experience of being gotten and understood, and to be able to choose strategies that are effective and can bring more people under the umbrella, and to try to help the Left understand that its current approach is not the best strategy. Empathy is an important process to be able to bridge the divide within the Left and btw the Left and the Right. I want to remind folks that the first stage is to work to transform the Left so the emphasis is on how we talk to folks on the Left about the shortcomings of the Left in an empathic way.

Brief summary of readings

Love Wins Article

Something shifted that brought about the incredibly shift in public opinion and then in the Supreme Court that led to its decision to legalize same-sex marriage throughout the country - a truly amazing feat. In the article I shared with everyone, I discuss some of these changes. I am going to highlight them because they are relevant to what we are discussing today and I want to make sure they are fresh in our minds.

Here are some things we learned from that movement. First, the importance of sharing our stories and lives with people who have very different lives and stories. As more and more gay/lesbians decided to stop being ashamed, embarrassed, or scared, and more and more people came out of the closet and began living openly as gay or lesbian, they slowly stopped being someone else who is not like "us"—an "Other"—and instead

became our friends, neighbors, parents of our children's friends, our family members, our colleagues, our bosses, etc.. This broke down the boundaries between "us" and "them" broke down.

So for us, what we can learn from this is that we need to bring the struggles of people in the US and around the world more fully into peoples' lives. We have to raise consciousness by sharing the real-life stories of people struggling to survive in the current economic structure of capitalism. We have to start talking about how the economic system of global capitalism with its concurrent ethos of greed and selfishness results in the exploitation human beings and animals, and the planet, and creates both human and planetary suffering. This means sharing our stories of how the ethos of capitalism has impacted us and those we know negatively. We have to do this until people respond to the suffering of others so deeply and so profoundly that they are willing to both be allies to those suffering and to those working to change the systems and structures that create and perpetuate this suffering, and to make the changes necessary in their lives that will result in enhancing and improving the lives of others. We need to break down the separation between "us" and "them." Instead of seeing people who are most profoundly affected by the current systems and structures as some "Other" separate from us, we need to find ways to transform consciousness so that we see them as our neighbors, our friends and even our family members. This is hard because people feel ashamed if they are not living out the American dream. This plays right into the shame and blame we have discussed and you have read about. One short example, that I experienced just the other day. We had people over for high holidays and someone asked another person there, "where do you live?" I

know this other person and know that he struggles to maintain a home and that his financial situation is rather unstable. When the person asked him that question he looked at me with a pained expression and kind of shrugged his shoulders and said, “near Marin.” I thought to myself, wow there are so many questions we ask and presumptions we unwittingly make about people that impacts their sense of self. I wonder what would have happened if he felt safe and comfortable enough to share his personal situation, to allow himself to be fully seen and through being seen a number of things might have happened. First, he might have felt more fully seen, understood and accepted. Second, it might have helped the other person (who is a lovely person) see the impact of the socio-economic system in which we live on other people firsthand. How might knowing and hearing each others stories transform us and might we all then become more likely to support systemic changes in our society to ease the suffering of others?

A second major factor in the shift that swept through our country is that the argument for same-sex marriage based solely on the basis of legal rights (e.g., the “right” to marry and “equal” rights) and economic entitlements (e.g., the right to have the benefits of being legally married for tax and other economic purposes) shifted to one based on the value of love. People who otherwise would have opposed same-sex marriage were able to see the deep yearnings of same-sex couples to be treated with dignity and respect. If there is one shared deprivation that cuts across all class, gender, race, religions, spiritual beliefs, atheism, secular-humanism, and sexual orientations it is this: the deprivation of love, the feeling of not being fully seen and recognized for who we are, the feeling of being surrounded by a

world of selfishness and me-firstism. When people advocate for rights it is often perceived (and even more often exploited by the Right) as yet another interest group demanding something for itself at the expense of someone else. But when we advocate for love, and against the practices, policies, and laws that interfere with love, almost everyone can identify with that feeling and thus with the so-called other, because they too have been feeling that there isn't enough love coming to them.

So again, this is why we keep saying that it is important to actually talk about wanting a world based on LOVE! People are so reluctant to talk about love in politics but it is love that will move us closer together, not farther apart.

The third thing that we can learn from the same-sex marriage movement is to not be realistic. The effort for same-sex marriage began in some circles with efforts to have civil unions recognized. There was a big debate within the gay/lesbian rights movement about the limits of that approach, with some arguing it was realistic and others arguing it was not really what they wanted so why settle for something less? This is a common retort today about so many policies and this is exactly the response we often hear from the ruling elite and many social change organizations as well - we need to be realistic. What this movement shows us is that we need to put forth a vision of where we want to get to and make that vision front and center. Will there be compromises along the way? Sure, but we should not start with a compromised vision because a compromised vision is actually not a vision at all, it is a compromise!

Now let's think about some of what I just said in the context of the other article - what trump supporters are saying - and I think you will see the importance of really listening to each others' stories, trying to understand each others' struggles, and being compassionate - even with those we think of as "other." Othering leaves the one "othered" feeling less than, dismissed, disrespected, etc. Let me just give you a few examples from the article on what trump supporters are saying and also from posts I read on FB. "You care more about transgendered bathrooms than you do about my home being repossessed." "You cry when the Koran is mocked but laugh when my Bible is mocked." "You all can defeat Trump next time, but not if you keep mocking us, refusing to listen to us, and cutting us out." "I'd love to see one-tenth of the outrage about the state of our lives out here that you have for Muslims from another country. You have no idea what our lives are like." "I'm so tired of hearing about white privilege. I'm white but way less privileged than a black person from your world. I have no hope my life will ever get any better."

The basic message is - You do not care about me, you do not see me, you do not respect me. Until we are able to show respect for all the different forms of suffering and build a movement that genuinely embraces all different kinds of people, we will not be able to build the massive movement we need to create the kind of long-term, systemic and meaningful changes we want and need.

Teaching on Empathy

Two components to empathy: (1) enhance your understanding of the other person and ideally through that deepen your own compassion for that

person and (2) support the other person to feel heard and understood - to have a sense of being “gotten”

Through empathy, connection and understanding is deepened and then there is a greater possibility of engaging in meaningful discussions that don't deteriorate into shouting matches. In difficult conversations where there are strong differences of opinions, it can take a long-time to build the connection, trust, and understanding needed to move beyond empathy to talk about how to solve things. The focus of empathy is solutions, but understanding and connection. Once there is a quality of understanding and connection, then it is possible to have meaningful discussions about solutions. Having said that, in the role play you are going to do later, one of you will be sharing the NBL with someone else and you (the one sharing the NBL) will then practice giving empathy to the person who is questioning or challenging you (like I did with Rabbi Lerner in the role-play I played for you last week).

Empathy is always a process of genuine curiosity (not cross-examination curiosity) and is framed in the form of a question or a reflection of “What I'm hearing is important to you is . . . , am I getting it?” Or, “are you feeling X” “Do you want Y?”

Engaging in empathic connection with someone else can feel vulnerable and uncomfortable for the other person because there is a way in which you are actually trying to get to know them better, to understand them more fully, to see them and while we desperately want to be seen, we also hide from being seen so I want to emphasize that unless you are prepared to be honest and vulnerable as well, you should not be inviting someone into empathic conversation. It can become a power play or a way of putting oneself above someone else if there is not mutuality in the

conversation. People often say to me when I do a role play with empathy, if it was me in the conversation I would just feel put down and talked down to. So then I invite them into a role play with me and they have a different experience once they have engaged in the conversation with me. How we engage in empathy is not robotic at all, it is about bringing our authentic self and hear to the conversation. So if I experience someone who is pushing back, resistant, gets angry with me for the way I'm engaging with them - in other words being angry not about the content that we were discussing but rather about the context - the way I am engaging with them - then that is where I meet them and usually I express something from my heart. It may be something like - I am genuinely trying to understand you and connect with you and I can see it's not working - do you have any ideas as to how we might hear each other better? Or perhaps something else. Remember, this is a process for deepened understanding and connection between people, not for one person and not the other. This is not therapy - this is building mutual understanding and connection. So the question I always ask myself is - how can I bring my fullest, most compassionate self present and really listen even if I do not like what I'm hearing.

It is important to hear the meaning underneath the words. What is the meaning of what the person is saying?

When I engage in empathy, because I'm a visual learner, I see the person painting a picture on a wall like a mural and I am trying to highlight what I am hearing are the important parts of that mural. I may be wrong and that is ok because I am asking, not telling. I am simply being curious - I heard you say X and if I understand you correctly it seems that X is important to you because you really value Y or because when you think about X you feel Z. Am I getting it?

Empathy is a way of getting an understanding of what it is that matters to the other - what are their needs and yearnings? In the first week of the class you practiced listening deeply to people and to distinguish for yourself what was facts/observations, feelings, needs, judgments, assessments, etc. That exercise should support you now in empathic engagement. Now you can bring those distinctions to your empathic conversation. Notice for yourself what they are saying - what are the facts, what are judgments/assessments, what do you think are their feelings and needs?

Naming or guessing feelings can feel very vulnerable for people so if you find that's the case, then you can just focus on what it is that you are hearing is important to them because ultimately where we will find shared understanding is on the level of values and needs, not on the level of feelings.

Empathy is not about trying to convince the other person that they are wrong or you are right, or about educating the other person - it is about understanding, connection.