

## Learning to Listen to Stories

Written by Kathleen McCarthy

Wednesday, 04 September 2013 10:40

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A short course in learning the language of transition is soon to be offered in the Quad Cities, and it's one to attend if you're encountering changes in your life. Present or past, all can be reviewed with careful guidance. Listening is a powerful source of learning, growing spiritually, and sustaining relationships, whether with spouses, family members, friends, or associates. Specifically, listening to another's life stories, composed of a vast array of experiences and emotions contributing mightily to our individual self-images and well-being. Our stories are often the means by which we convey our identities to each other, a process of self-revelation.

The Reverend Canon Marlin Whitmer, a retired hospital chaplain, believes profound healing comes while listening to stories. He discovered this over 40 years of experience, listening to patients at St. Luke's Hospital after establishing The Befrienders in 1966. His program began with three people from Trinity Cathedral who were members of the Auxiliary of St. Luke's Hospital. They were to provide patients with in-hospital visits from non-medical volunteers whose sole purpose was to listen to the patients. The following year and thereafter Befrienders were trained to continue these visits. This legacy continues today at both Genesis and Trinity hospitals and has been recognized as a contributor to improving quality of life in the Quad Cities.

Chaplain Whitmer found that every story consists of themes that can be identified and explored through the use of metaphors. Metaphors can often bridge the gap between a story's facts and the accompanying feelings those facts arouse. He realized that communicating stories is a big part of our successes and failures in life, including how we physically heal or don't heal. He incorporated the development of listening skills into the Befrienders program with enormous

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success. By applying a trained listening process into patients' health care, he observed shifts in attitudes and behaviors from patients and caregivers that contributed to more positive outcomes relative to healing.

Whitmer cites a patient whose health challenges included an amputated leg just below the knee. She was not responding to therapy, nor was she receptive to her caregivers. She was profoundly unhappy. Whitmer visited with this patient, drawing her story out by asking various questions, then letting her talk. He eventually asked her to describe how she felt. She didn't hesitate in answering. "I feel rotten," she said.

He knew instantly that he had found the necessary metaphor to help her heal. He shared her response with the medical and nursing staff and learned that "rotten" described how they were all responding to her as well. Her view of herself as rotting extended to their view of her, thereby contaminating her entire health-care experience with this underlying sense of rottenness.

By carefully listening, then precisely identifying this critical metaphor in her story, Whitmer was able to inform everyone dealing with her care. The result was a collective shift in perceptions of this patient, which in turn changed their behaviors toward her. Within two weeks, this woman's story had completely transformed, from "feeling rotten" to "my stump is healing."

Listening is a skill, make no mistake, one that is arguably least developed in our education system. We are a talking culture where marketing, selling, and giving directives dominates. Yet listening is the essential skill necessary to advance our culture in a way that projects caring and compassion. Try and think of one area of your life that, without the ability to listen or be listened to, would not greatly suffer.

True listening, where listening skills are more fully developed, not only contributes immeasurably to the well-being of those telling their stories, but has exponential benefits to the listener, as well. The outcome is a mutual benefit.

It is precisely because listening is such a powerful discipline that it is finding a much-needed place in health care. While traditionally practiced within health-care facilities, Whitmer and Ann Hochhausen (retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps) believe there is an even greater need for the therapeutic value that listening provides within the community at large. It is

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increasingly a fact that much of today's health care is being undertaken by families and friends in the home setting. This will only increase with chronic illnesses and an aging population.

Together, Whitmer and Hochhausen will offer a course on the beginning steps to effective listening using the alphabet as a way to discover metaphors within stories. Naming the words associated with transition helps identify the paths available for a new beginning. The class "What the Alphabet Has to Teach Us" allows us to experience the healing of our wounds and to be more sensitive to the wounds of others. This is a "wounded/healer" approach.

Hochhausen learned a lot about the transformative power of story listening through her master's thesis at the University of Wisconsin. "The research required listening to women's stories about breastfeeding without an agenda, without leading the storyteller down a path that I wanted to take them," she said. "What I learned about listening transformed my practice and made me a better OB/GYN nurse, officer, manager, friend, person."

She points out that the listening skills offered in this course are for anyone experiencing significant changes in their lives, such as the loss of a loved one, retirement, empty nests, etc.: "Learning the language of transition can provide for enormous growth. I believe it is when we are going through a transition that the greatest possibilities emerge for our lives."

Listening has residual benefits that expand into other areas of our lives. It is not hard to imagine the good that comes from listening to patients who are able to express their fear and/or anger over their illness or physical misfortune. But discovering certain metaphors within their stories often reveals deeper, more entrenched issues that are able to surface, releasing long-held toxic thoughts and feelings, leaving both the patient and the person better off. Healing is more complete, deeper in nature, and can be life-altering.

Listening without interjecting our own experiences is the most difficult obstacle to overcome. It is critical that while listening to another's story, listeners don't identify too much with its content to the exclusion of the teller. In order to be empathetic, people try and relate to others by comparing common experiences. This can be a good thing in conversations, but distracting as a listener. As Whitmer explained: "As listeners, we must leave our own agendas out of it, which is extremely difficult to do. That is why listening is a discipline."

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The course "What the Alphabet Has to Teach Us: Learning the Language of Transition" will begin on Sunday, September 15, and continue each Sunday through November 10. (Participants are encouraged to attend a minimum of six sessions.) It will be held from 2 to 4 p.m. in the Deanery on the Trinity Cathedral grounds, located at 121 West 12th Street in Davenport. There is no cost to attend, but donations are both welcome and appreciated. To register, call (563)323-9989.

The course will be offered again starting in January.