

**“Listening with the Whole Self”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval**  
**Unitarian Church of Montpelier**  
**October 4, 2020**

**Reading**

Selection from “Engagement” by Terry Tempest Williams (originally published in 2004)<sup>1</sup>

“It is easy to believe we the people have no say...It is easy to believe that the American will is only focused on how to get rich, how to be entertained, and how to distract itself from the hard choices we have before us as a nation.

I refuse to believe this. The only space I see truly capable of being closed is not the land or our civil liberties but our own hearts.

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up — ever — trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?”

**Sermon**

With our theme of “deep listening” this month, I have been reflecting on how listening is an engagement with both our inner self or inner world and the external world. We can direct our listening inwards and also outwards, and these two modes of listening or tuning in exist in relationship to one another. How I listen to my inner self can affect how I’m listening (or not listening) to others and the world around me and vice

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<sup>1</sup> <https://orionmagazine.org/article/engagement/>

versa. How I listen to others and the world around me can impact how I listen to myself.

Here's an example from own life this past week.

Some of you joined in the church-sponsored debate watch vigil on Tuesday night led by Ministerial Intern, Verdis Robinson, in preparation for watching the first presidential debate. We listened to music and centering words and shared moments of inspiration to ground ourselves in preparation for taking in the event to come.

I found the debate difficult, and even painful, to watch, as I know many of you did as well. The bullying and abusive tactic were distressing and the dog-whistle to a white supremacist group was unfathomable. Some of you may have chosen not to watch it at all knowing that it probably wasn't going to be a productive exchange of ideas between candidates. I honor the wisdom of that choice. I couldn't really stand to give the debate my full attention, so I was writing emails and doing other things on my computer at the same time - trying to create somewhat of a buffer between myself and what was unfolding on the television screen. Busyness was my coping mechanism for the night.

The next morning I felt like I was still processing that whole event, mentally and emotionally. I was trying to listen to what my own inner wisdom might be telling me about anything of value I could take from that experience.

That morning after the debate was also quite gloomy. And, I'm not just describing my inner, emotional landscape which, honestly, was pretty gloomy. That morning the skies were gray, and rain was pouring.

I stood outside on the corner with my son waiting for the bus as cars drove by through the slight fog and pouring rain.

As I looked down the road to watch for the bus, a fawn suddenly darted up onto the road. I watched as a car moving very fast caught the fawn's back end and kept on

driving. The injured fawn scampered down the road toward where my son and I were standing, and we watched as it lay down on the ground barely out of the road.

Just a few seconds after it was hit a doe shot up to the road's edge, paused and looked around, clearly looking for the fawn, and then kept going into the woods on the either side of the road.

I could feel fierce protectiveness take over my whole body watching the fawn writhe in pain. I started to approach it wanting to utter a few comforting words when suddenly the fawn shot back up and started weaving across the road. The approaching vehicle slowed down and the fawn walked into the car and then kept going.

At this point, I had one eye on my son and one eye on the fawn. I began to direct traffic as we watched the fawn who then lay back down in the middle of the road. On this two lane road, cars could not drive around the fawn unless they moved into the other lawn, so I began to direct traffic.

A few cars were able to drive away when again, suddenly, the fawn sprang to life. I put my arms way up over my head to signal to an approaching vehicle to slow down, and the fawn ran up the way its mother had gone into the woods of our neighbor's property.

I'm sorry to say that I don't know what happened to the fawn. My neighbor's walk around their property later that morning didn't turn up any sign of it.

Between the debate debacle and the sad and dramatic incident that gloomy morning, I was feeling pretty unnerved and shaky. I imagine many of you have had times over the last week (and more) when you have felt similarly. These aren't just metaphor but actual feelings in the body - tightness, jumpiness, unsettled.

What I am learning as I also live through this time of unease is how to navigate my own engagement with the external and all that's happening in the world that might

elicit a whole onslaught of powerful emotions with the internal, and my body, heart, and mind.

As sad as the incident with the fawn was to watch, I also noticed that strong feeling of protectiveness that arose within me. Perhaps that feeling of being on high alert was drawn out in watching the debate witnessing the bullying that was on display and hearing the dangerous words shared.. With my son nearby, I'm sure that also brought up that feeling of needing to protect and vigilance which accompanies most parents and caregivers.

Whatever the reason, that feeling of protectiveness lingered and continued to speak to me. While it may be a defense mechanism, I believe it is also fuel for staying engaged over the next month ahead of the election and even beyond.

Terry Tempest Williams says, "The human heart is the first home of democracy," and asks, "Can we listen with our whole beings?"

Although what is showing up in our minds, hearts, and bodies in this moment may not be pleasant, I believe that if we listen deeply, we can hear the wisdom that is present within us.

In that space between engaging with the outer world and listening to your inner self - what do you notice?

To deeply listen with all of who we are is to listen for those nudges of the spirit that call you in a specific direction or to listen for those instincts held deep within your muscle memory of why you may be feeling unsafe or needing to rest or what next action you may need to take. This kind of listening requires awareness and attention.

Yoga practitioner and poet, Danna Faulds, writes, "I yearn to listen not just to my body and its sensations, to my self-talk, thoughts, emotions, intuition, and creative urges, but to the source of all these things. I long to go deeper, to listen with my whole being. What do I mean by that? Just asking the question requires me to sink

into inner experience and receive my entirety: body, mind, heart, soul, spirit, and divinity, fully alive and awake.”<sup>2</sup>

Body, mind, heart, soul, spirit, and divinity, fully alive and awake.

A couple weeks ago I talked about the space for reflection that is needed to make room for renewal of our spirits. Self-awareness is key. This awareness is a whole being experience. Deeply listening isn't just an engagement of the mind. It is an engagement of the heart, the body, the spirit, and maybe for you, also the divine.

I invite you to reflect on this prompt with me: I know I'm listening deeply to myself when....

Think about yourself and notice what might come up, “I know I'm listening deeply to myself when...” (pause)

I know I'm listening deeply to myself when...I pause before I speak.

I know I'm listening deeply to myself when...I stop doing and rest in stillness.

I know I'm listening deeply to myself when...I follow the urge to turn up the music and dance around the room.

I know I'm listening deeply to myself when...I curl up with a beloved book of poetry just because.

When Terry Tempest Williams asks, “Can we listen with our whole beings?”, she is asking about the quality of our listening not just to our inner selves but to one another. She invites us to listen in a way that engages our attention and not just our opinions.

And, I believe that this kind of listening can only happen if we first practice it with ourselves and develop an awareness and quality of attention that we can then share with others.

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<sup>2</sup> Danna Faulds, Inner Listening, <https://kripalu.org/resources/inner-listening>

This deep listening to the inner self is what then fuels us to engage in the world “out there,” and in our democracy which is so vital right now.

When we can listen deeply, with our whole beings, we can cultivate wisdom and peace for the path ahead.

Further along in her article Terry Tempest Williams writes, “The heart is the house of empathy whose door opens when we receive the pain of others. This is where bravery lives, where we find our mettle to give and receive, to love and be loved, to stand in the center of uncertainty with strength, not fear, understanding this is all there is. The heart is the path to wisdom because it dares to be vulnerable in the presence of power....

We have a history of bravery in this nation and we must call it forward now. Our future is guaranteed only by the degree of our personal involvement and commitment to an inclusive justice.

In the open space of democracy, we engage the qualities of inquiry, intuition, and love as we become a dynamic citizenry, unafraid to exercise our shared knowledge and power. We can dissent. We can vote. We can step forward in times of terror with a confounding calm that will shatter fear and complacency.”

So, as we move forward together into this open space of our democracy, may we do so with deep listening.

May we listen for the inner wisdom of our own bodies, minds, hearts, souls, spirits, and of the divine within each of us.

And in so doing, may our hearts remain open - alive and awake with courage.

So may it be.