

JOAN
CHITTISTER

Grace-filled
moments

WITH
Sr. Joan

365 REFLECTIONS ON LIFE,
LOSS, HEALING & JOY



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To Hear a Broken Heart

Sometimes the holiest messages come from the most mundane of places and just when we don't expect them. For instance, "Listening" is one of the foundations of Benedictine life. In fact, the very first word of this ancient sixth-century Rule is "Listen." "Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions...." Ho, hum. More of the same.

Until Beyoncé says it. Then suddenly we understand. Suddenly, the place of listening in life becomes crystal clear. Listening is the glue—or the downfall—of every relationship, she sings to us. If you want a New Year full of good relationships, listening is the key. Better yet, she outlines the process in straight and painful terms. She leaves no doubt where the problem lies.

She sings in "Listen" the universal cry of the lonely human spirit. She tells us the problem that attends everyone who tries to talk to us but whom we ignore. Often nicely. As in, "I'm so sorry you're going through this. I really wish I could help...."

But then comes the mention of “the very important meeting to which I really need to run,” which tells the lonely person that she and her pain are not very important. Not even important enough for another twenty minutes of understanding and life—and the hope that comes when someone she values takes the time to listen to the pain. And so her heart dies. And no one notices that either.

The singer is crying out to have her own voice heard, to have her own needs recognized, to become her own person rather than the shadow of another.

When we stop listening to the other people in our lives, not only do the relationships deteriorate but we become separated from the well of Wisdom around us. No matter how together we look, we have become hopelessly separated. The problem is that in our own desire to be listened to, to be really heard and understood by another, we miss one of the basic messages of life: It’s not just about me. It’s about the other person, too. Anything else is not communication; it’s manipulation.

Jesus listened to people. In the bonds he forged with the poor, the sick, the outcast, and the foreigner lay compassion, truth, support, and growth. First, he listened to what people were saying. Then, he cured them of what they wanted to have cured rather than what others might have decided they most needed—like faith or patience or trust.

To talk without listening to the other is simply chatting. It fills time but changes nothing. In self-centeredness, friendships end, marriages dissolve, relationships become sterile. Most of all, wisdom, holy friendship, the sharing of insights that come from experience, evaporate.

Friendship, marriage, and lifelong relationships come from listening to one another.

Clearly, when the Rule of Benedict calls for “listening,” it’s not calling for some kind of hollow obedience; it’s calling for real relationships.

JANUARY 1 Here’s a quick test to tell us how we interact with people: What are you doing when the other person is talking? In his leadership courses, Steven R. Covey gives us a clue. “Most

people,” he says, “do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” And that leads where?

JANUARY 2 The desire to have our ideas and dreams heard is the foundation of discernment. We make better decisions when we can compare our own assumptions with the experiences of others.

JANUARY 3 People who listen to us, who help us hear ourselves and our motives without condemning us for having them, give us a chance to grow. How? By giving us the opportunity to think things through in all their dimensions from all directions.

JANUARY 4 Asking a person to defend or justify what they haven't yet done—as in “You're going to change jobs again? That's ridiculous!”—is not communication. It is argument. And poor argument at that.

JANUARY 5 Communication ends when I cease to hear the cry, the need, the unspoken pain of the other. “No one is as deaf,” the Jewish proverb teaches, “as the one who will not listen.”

JANUARY 6 If there is any ministry on earth worth being part of it is the ministry of those who can hear a broken heart. “Fixing” a problem is a final act of mercy. Understanding it is the first.

JANUARY 7 All the great saints bent their lives to hear the stories of the sad and the lonely, the forgotten and the accused. It is that kind of “loaves and fishes” that we are all able to give the starving. If only we will.

JANUARY 8 The genius of holy communication lies in listening to a problem before we decide to fix it without really understanding it. Then, as Scripture says, “the last evil is worse than the first.” Or as Louise von François writes, “We never listen when we are eager to speak.”

JANUARY 9 To make friends, all you need to do is to listen to them. To have a friend is to have someone who is really listening to you. “Attention,” Anne-Sophie Swetchine writes, “is a tacit and continual compliment.”

JANUARY 10 Society’s great, unremitting question is always, “To whom do we listen?” When was the last time we saw conferences of inner-city representatives who were invited to tell their elected representatives what it would take to make their neighborhoods peaceful, beautiful, and safe?

JANUARY 11 It is easy to cover up unhappiness with security in “things,” but the pains of the lonely and the unfulfilled wealthy are no less debilitating than the pains of the insecure and the poor.

JANUARY 12 The technology of “global ears” has done nothing, it seems, to calm our anxieties. On the contrary. Obviously, technology connects us electronically. It does not necessarily give us anyone to really talk to.

“It seems rather incongruous,” Erma Bombeck writes, “that in a society of super sophisticated communication, we often suffer from a shortage of listeners.”

JANUARY 13 Unhappiness comes with feeling abandoned, alone, unaccompanied through life. Happiness comes if one other person really cares whether we come home at night or not. “Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world,” Simone Weil wrote, “but people capable of giving them their attention.”

JANUARY 14 Electronic contact is no guarantee of love and listening. It’s just a means of finding love and care if, of course, it’s really there to be had. It’s important not to confuse the two. “Listening,” Krista Tippett reminds us, “is about being present, not just about being quiet.”

JANUARY 15 Everyone needs someone who cares enough to hear them through, to support them as they take their next moves through life.