

Aikido as Listening

by Richard Moon

Excerpt from my upcoming book "[*The Power of Extraordinary Listening*](#)"

Introduction:

Remember the song "Everybody Needs Somebody To Love" where he says in the intro "Sometimes you get what you want and sometimes you lose what you have. If everyone would listen to my song tonight, it would save the whole world."

Solomon Burke [1964]

Introduction:

In the summer of 1999 I had an experience that changed the direction of my life. I was leading peace building work with a group of thirty-five young people from the various factions in Bosnia. Several groups I work with had brought them to the U.S. for leadership training. Together we went to a remote Island on Lake of the Woods in Northern Minnesota for several weeks. In addition to the class lessons, we divided into groups and everyone went out on a five-day portage trip.

If you have traveled internationally you know that there is often communication without words per se. Communication takes place in connection. I will venture to say for all of us involved, it was one of the strongest connections we ever made. I had a group of eight young men and women on the portage trip plus several guides. Though I do not speak their language, I found myself laughing with them at jokes I did not understand. When we returned my associates described a similar experience. Communication takes place on many levels.

After watching these young people, whose relatives had wreaked unimaginable horrors on each other, play and laugh together my heart was somehow different. I listened to them speak and listen to each other in ways I could never have imagined. I can not report to you my feeling because what I saw and felt was beyond the power of words. It was a feeling, an experience of love I had never had before.

At the closing ceremony in Washington D.C., I was asked to encapsulate what we learned. It was an honor to be asked, yet, it was overwhelming trying to describe one of the most powerful experiences of my life in a couple of minutes. Years of meditation could not have produced the emptiness of mind I felt trying to know what to say. That inner silence was deafening. The transition I mentioned above seemed to build up throughout my life to that moment in time. Finally, suddenly, out of that emptiness the idea hit me in a few simple words:

The action that creates peace is listening.

Listening, in the broadest meaning I am creating for the word, is the act that connects us with the universe, throughout the totality of time-space. Though few of us listen with that quality of attention I suddenly knew it was possible. More than possible it was our mission here. Somehow, it feels as though I live a different life from that moment.

Thinking back on everything that happened, the part of the story I want to point to now, is the very beginning. All this started when I was first asked to go on a trip to Bosnia. Of course, I was honored to be invited but I did not really want to go to Bosnia. I had heard such horror stories about the way the people there treated each other that I could not imagine wanting to be around people like that. As much as I wanted to help and be of service, experiencing that aspect of the human psyche seemed too much to handle.

In retrospect I can see why it was so hard to accept. I preferred staying in my separate world judging them as somehow other. That way I did not have to identify with the aspects of myself that echoed with the stories that had made the news in my country. At a distance I could safely think they must be a horrible people. I comforted myself by thinking I was different.

What I was afraid of was seeing myself. What terrified me the most when I got to know them as individuals and as a culture was how close we all are to that edge of violence and horror. The lengths we will go to, to escape our fear, knows no bounds.

I have traveled quite a bit in my life and am the kind of person who enjoys people almost everywhere I go. But what was so surprising to me was the depth of the way I was touched by these people across all three cultures. I quickly found myself having the warmest feelings and the strongest affections for them. I enjoyed everyone that I met. The camaraderie seemed so easy and so natural. The women were attractive with a warmth that I found difficult to define. Their spirits touched me in a way I had not expected.

I remember one of the young men who went on the canoe trip with me both for his endearing quality and his enthusiasm for what I taught him. One night around the campfire he said, "I think the Bosnians could be the happiest people on earth." That night to as we watched the camp fire burn, arms around each other, leaning against each other, heads on each other's shoulders, I knew he was right.

What I saw was that anything is possible. The future of the world is in our hands and we could choose in a moment of light to do something extraordinary with it. I also knew, hearing the stories they told in English, that if we fail to choose the spirit of love, what awaited us was sadness beyond belief. I saw it in the eyes of a young girl whose father and brother had been killed on the same day, for no real reason. I was reborn that night and through my experience with them. In that way, I owe them and all the people, somehow especially the young people on the planet, my love and the commitment of my life. I can never live up to it but I am lucky to have something to strive for. I thank you all my friends. I will never forget you.

Communicating Creates Community

The spirit of our communication, the way we connect with ourselves, and one another, develops the character of our communities and the quality of our lives. Improved human relations will come about through improving the way we pay attention to one another.

It is best if you can talk to someone in their language. And everyone speaks their own language. The only way to learn someone's language is the same way you learned yours, listen. Listening is far beyond a verbal exchange or an exchange of information. Listening includes connecting the formation of perception into meaning. It is how another person's process of awareness includes ours, and how ours includes theirs. It is learning with the intention of better understanding what is important to someone and why.

Communication directly impacts our ability to live together; to learn, teach, to make friends and to do business. Our ability to talk together translates to the bottom line of every company and creates the wealth of every society. Communication is critical to the effectiveness of any team and the happiness of every family. Yet too often we accept poor communication as inevitable. That's the problem!

Diplomatic communication between countries can generate relationships of war or peace. From the first club to the hydrogen bomb, from the war within to the on-going tensions throughout the globe, people feel unheard. When people feel unheard they amplify their message until they do. Terrorism is a primary example. Listening is a most difficult and valuable skill. It changes the quality of our lives.

When countries can listen to each other, when they can speak to each other and are heard, they enrich each other through trade and cultural exchange. When they cannot, they tend to develop fear-based relationships, arms races and war. Nations are made up of people. The psychology is similar. The quality of diplomacy in the communication between individuals sets up a relationship of friendship and support or distrust and antipathy.

I remember watching a couple on the edge of divorce. The pain stimulated anger. Once the anger seemed more important, it took their attention. It blinded them to the love. Their reactive responses to the fear real or imagined controlled their behavior. They said things and did things to each other that I think would have shocked even them, if they could have seen them selves from a distance. And most upsetting was I knew how much they loved each other. I felt frightened watching their interactions. I remember my reaction to my fear. I remember telling myself that I would never treat anyone that way, especially someone I fell asleep next to. I

wanted to think I was somehow different. Like my resistance of going to Bosnia, I did not want to face the fear we all share. I could not bear to witness the effects of our failures in handling that fear. We add pain and hurt to what could be listening and understanding. We turn helping each other focus and succeed in getting what we want to destroying anything good the other might enjoy. We sacrifice our spirit and our wealth in the process.

I understand our feelings are intense. I understand when I fail to pay attention to my reactive energy it drives my actions. I, any of us in that condition, react without thinking. However, the whole experience emphasized for me how important it is to pay attention to the way we communicate. If at those moments we could see ourselves and the repercussions of our behavior, I have to believe we would act differently.

There are endless stories about business failures based on the inability of the leaders to listen. I cannot count the number of executives I have sat with who were having difficulty communicating with each other. These are some of the brightest and most capable people on the planet. They earn salaries in multiples of what most people can even dream about. These people held in their hands the responsibility for thousands of employee's lives. In cases they were responsible for hundreds of thousands, even millions of customers. No matter how capable, no matter how well paid, no matter how educated, and I will add no matter how much we love each other, once reactive behavior hijacks the attention, once resistance to reactivity becomes defensiveness, none of these things matter.

We are careless about how we create meaning. If we saw the effect of the way we talk and listen to ourselves and each other, if we understood the power of our communication in the creation of our world, we'd bring a higher quality of attention to the way we generate and share meaning. The quality of our communication is precious. No amount of attention paid to it could be too much. The way we listen and form meaning is the most powerful point of leverage in our lives.

Communication directly impacts our ability to live together, work together, to learn, teach, to make friends and to do business. Our ability to share understanding affects the bottom line of every company and creates the wealth of every society.

"Since both the benefits and the dangers inherent in listening are equally great I am of the opinion that listening ought to be a constant topic of discussion in one's own mind and with other people. This is especially so because it is noticeable that most people go about the matter in the wrong way: they practice speaking before they have got used to listening. They think that speaking takes study and care, but benefits will accrue from even a careless approach to listening. Some people think that the Speaker has a function well the listener does nothing.

Proper listening is the foundation of proper living." Plutarch

After this experience I founded The Listening Institute dedicated to increasing human wealth through the power of harmony. In honor of passing on O Sensei's teachings to those who will never take a martial arts class.

"Rely on harmony to activate your manifold powers and create a beautiful world." O Sensei

Thanks for 'listening'

All the best in your study of Aikido however you understand it. May your understanding grow.

R.Moon, Aikido of Marin

P.S. If you have any stories about listening you think I might find interesting please pass them along. Thank you in advance!