

The Art of Communication

As I watch our political leaders struggle to communicate openly with each other, I continually wonder how to find balance in this unrest and how to help initiate change. I believe there was a time when we could sit down and truly communicate, both politically and personally. Now it feels like everyone has stopped listening. How can we change this? We start with ourselves... and so my personal search began.

"The world is an imperfect place and will remain that way. I cannot change this, but will see it as an opportunity to awaken. I cannot control events, but I can change my attitude towards them. I will develop the wisdom not to assume that my initial responses are always true and correct." (Buddhist Monk, Venerable Deok Wun Russell Pitts)

I believe it's time to ask ourselves some questions when in conversation with others:

- Do I hear what they're saying even if I don't agree or am I figuring out my rebuttal?
- Might their viewpoint have merit or do I need to be right?
- Do I have an open mind to what they are saying or am I reacting?
- Am I listening or waiting to speak?



As I struggled with these questions for myself, I went to a book I wrote 15 years ago, "Listening for Treasures in the Wind." I found many tips on how to bring us closer together by listening with an open mind but felt that today's world needed something more. Then I found a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, "The Right Way to Have Difficult Conversations," by Celeste Headlee, that brought my struggles into focus. Her article, adapted from her brand new book, "We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter," made me realize that this is the change in myself I was searching for. Now I want to learn to listen to understand other viewpoints, whether I agree or disagree, whether I find it offensive or not, and whether or not I'm willing to be open to changing my own viewpoint.

Celeste writes, "These days, it seems that there are more and more deal breakers when it comes to deciding whom we're willing to talk to. But in our tense era of

deep divisions, talking to each other, and having difficult conversations, is more important than ever before.” Even though we feel that some subjects are too sensitive and emotionally charged to talk about, those are truly the subjects that need the conversations. She offers several tips to help facilitate this kind of communication, paraphrased here:

1. Be curious and have a genuine willingness to learn something from the speaker – even if it is someone with whom you vehemently disagree.
2. Resist the impulse to constantly decide whether you agree with what someone else is saying.
3. Show respect for the other person at all times.
 - a. Practice your empathy skills by listening to a video of someone you don’t like.
4. Stick it out, even if you don’t like the topic.
5. End the conversation well.

If we approach our communications with others without the need to prove our point, change their mind, and/or be right, then we allow a balance of equality between us.

If we make changes such as this on a personal level, becoming better fellow citizens and more unified, the effects can reach outward, like the sun’s rays, and bring us closer together as a community and as a nation.

If our unification goes global, we all win.

