

Heart Talk

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Ruth Flower spoke at an FCNL annual meeting plenary session, on the evening following a keynote address by Parker Palmer, author of "Healing the Heart of Democracy."

It's good to ask ourselves: Why are we here?

It might be to be with each other – to connect with one description of "we" or "my people." Or as Parker Palmer said last night – my tribe.

I heard at a meeting on Wednesday with some Native American youth how critical it is to touch base with your tribe as you go out and explore new things. Keeps up your courage and resilience.

Being with each other is a good reason to be here.

But more deeply – why are we engaged in this work? For me, this "why" goes back to deep stories. At age 19 through my early 20s I was involved with VISTA (now called Americorps) – when poverty in America was just being "discovered."

The deep stories might be about a 12-year old I met, named Desiree, who was raising her sister and brother herself because both her mother and grandmother – who were in the home – were taken up with alcoholism. Desiree wanted to be a Girl Scout and do all the things that Girl Scouts do.

Or Anita, a young girl in my assigned neighborhood who was caught up in the juvenile court system for the crime of burglary. The juvenile judge asked me if I could find out the story behind this very serious charge. When Anita finally consented to talk with me, I asked her what did she steal? Bread. And a blanket. In her family there were four children and an addicted mother. And the children had nothing. I asked around among the social agencies that might have something to do with this family. I found no fewer than 7 social agencies that had the family on their case load – for truancy, for living in a condemned house, for welfare and food stamps and so on. All the caseworkers were over-worked – all had too few resources to work with. All had given up.

Or there's the library kids in southern Colorado – where we started a summer adventure of getting everybody library cards and going to the library every two weeks. Each time, each child was supposed to check out one book for themselves, and one to read to a younger child. We had reading times at my house and they were tremendously popular. In the fall, the teachers wanted to know what happened to their kids, who were now enthusiastic about school and wanted to tutor the younger children.

I left those experience with a lot of gratitude and a lot of anger. With a heart deeply broken over what I had seen, and looking, hungrily, for what I could do to make a difference. When I was in that broken open space – I found Quakers. And Quakers helped me to see the other half of the story.

The second half of the story is that everyone has a story. Everyone. The overworked social workers, the teachers who hadn't been able to get through to the "library kids," the postal worker who waited on the corner for Desiree to duck out of school on the day when the welfare checks came, so she could take the check to the grocers so she could feed her brother

and sister. The guards in the solitary confinement unit at Folsom Prison in California. Everyone.

We may not be privileged to learn everyone's stories – like Anita – not enough trust, or like Laura – who probably didn't share with Kate on their very first encounter just how deep was her knowledge of the Middle East. And not everyone has time or inclination to learn ours.

The important thing is knowing – at a heart level – that everyone has a story – and that we can connect with each other at that level of shared humanity, and wait in patience to learn the unfolding of the details.

That's the essence of "heart talk" -- not the mutual baring of souls that we usually mean when we say we had a "heart to heart talk" with someone. It's a deeper relating than that.

To talk about "heart talk" – I want to pull a few more ideas from Parker Palmer's wonderful book on Healing the Heart of Democracy.

First of all – thinking about the real meaning of "heart." The Latin for heart is "*cor*" –the root for "courage" among other things. Palmer speaks of heart as "the center place where all our ways of knowing converge – intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily." All our ways of knowing converge in the heart.

Parker Palmer talked last night a bit about how we might find a path back to re-claim democracy, through re-building civil conversations and creating safe spaces to hold creative tension.

In the book, there a couple of additional points about healing that speak strongly to me:

He begins in the heart – “the heart is democracy’s first home.” ... or maybe “democracy’s first forum.” Because it’s here where we argue with ourselves. We want to be generous, we want to be in favor of equity, but we (well, I) also want what’s mine. We want to be open to listening to others, but (I) also sometimes don’t want to hear what they say – or I’m afraid that I won’t like what they say, so I avoid the conversation altogether. We want to be responsible and care for the earth, and so we recycle and carry our own bags to the grocery store. But maybe I still drive the few blocks to the grocery store in a car that is larger than I need.

And so we argue with ourselves – in our own little safe space –in our hearts. And this is a good thing.

The great thing is that our hearts do not need to be perfectly resolved and pure before we can engage with others with integrity. It seems in fact that it’s better if we’re not completely settled and consistent – the better to engage in the dialogue that may be going on in another’s heart.

Because of this democratic dialogue in our own hearts, our own core, we can appreciate the dialogue in the rest of society. Where we can acknowledge the contradictions and tensions within ourselves, we can more easily rest with/ hold the tensions among our neighbors, the people in the next town, the people “down south” or “up north” or in a red state or a blue state, the people in another country, or the person across the table from us on a lobby visit or at Thanksgiving dinner.

But I have to say that the first few encounters with my family after my VISTA experience were not easy ones. My heart was broken and I had not yet figured out what to do with that broken heart.

A heart that is broken is one that can shatter – or harden – or open further. We have the opportunity to choose a path.

It's important to embrace the heart break, knowing that it comes from an openness – knowing we have invited ourselves to engage –
with the children we teach,
the elders we care for in their last years,
the people we serve dinner to at the soup kitchen,
the child refugees at the border and immigrants searching for a
home in this country and
with the first Americans, who allowed us (or had to allow us) to live
in theirs.

If we had not been open to these and other experiences -- to these "knowings" -- our hearts might very well be intact – not broken. Perhaps a bit emptier, but not broken.

As we embrace that heart-broken space, we may know intellectually about many things that are wrong in the world. But often there is something that draws us particularly – something that compels us to find a way to make a difference. Whatever we're drawn to, it is likely that with an open heart, we will be drawn toward engagement with others.

That engagement will very likely find expression in "heart talk" – speaking with that voice that we know we have, with our whole being. And listening with the humility that tells us that our picture – our story – might be wrong or incomplete, and that the "other" might have something to add, or an experience that offers a different understanding from ours.

Heart talk, remember, comes from that place within us where all ways of knowing converge. Heart talk is just like the dialogue that takes place in

our own hearts – if we are willing to acknowledge it. Since we already know about those doubts and arguments and contradictions within ourselves, it's really not much of a stretch to open up that dialogue with a next door neighbor, the person in line at the grocery store, or even our local communities through a letter to the editor. We actually know that we're already connected.

Why are we here? We're here to engage – with “our people,” with *all* people and the earth. We hear stories of hurt and healing, of frustration and progress. We hear and live patience and steadfastness. We find and live joy.

We look for the stories we haven't heard, and open ourselves to engage them. We look to live in that central place where all our ways of knowing – and doubting, and questioning – converge.