



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
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## Listening As An Act of Love Is God Listening?

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 16:1-12; Psalm 22:1-11

“Listening is an act of love”—it’s a profound truth, I think, but also (I know now) the title of a book. I first learned about the book just a few weeks ago from a friend, younger than I am, a pastor who lives in another city. I could tell he was surprised I hadn’t heard of it. “Well, have you heard of StoryCorps?” he asked, the “where-have-you-been?” incredulity tinging his voice. “Sorry,” I said, sheepishly.

As many of you know, audio books are my friends and traveling companions on Interstate 70; so I downloaded the book—both print and audio versions. And I learned that StoryCorps is the brainchild of one David Isay, and that it’s a regular feature on public radio, every Friday morning on the news show, Morning Edition. Since 2003. Clearly, I haven’t been listening.

It all started way back in the 1970’s, one Thanksgiving, when Dave Isay was around ten years old. After dinner, he took out his little box cassette recorder, unraveled the cord from around the little foam-covered microphone, held it up, and began to ask his grandparents and great-aunts questions. It surprised him how much they had to say, and even more *what* they had to say. And it surprised them all how much they enjoyed it, and how much it meant to them. Many years later, Isay would look and look for that cassette tape in his parents’ attic, but never find it—much to his regret.

As a young adult, Isay fell into radio almost by accident—he had meant to go to medical school. But once in radio—perhaps harkening back to that Thanksgiving with his grandparents and great aunts—he was drawn to in-depth, intimate interviews with ordinary people. In 1993, Isay produced a radio documentary about two thirteen-year-old boys—Lloyd Newman and LeAlan Jones—growing up in the projects on the south side of Chicago. He gave them tape recorders, showed them how to use them, and asked them to record a week in their lives.

When he got the tapes back . . . well, Isay writes this:

*Sitting in my room in Chicago, listening to a recording of LeAlan climbing into bed with his grandmother and asking her about her life, was an epiphany. It was one of the most intimate and powerful moments I’d ever heard; the tape all but glowed with the love radiating from this conversation. The microphone had given LeAlan the license to ask questions he had never asked before—about the father he never knew, about his mother’s mental illness, about his grandmother’s childhood. The interview opened up lines of conversation between LeAlan and his grandmother that continued long after the taping ended. Years later, after LeAlan’s grandmother died, these tapes became some of his most treasured possessions. “They’re enough to sustain me for a lifetime,” he said.*

Once again, Isay was struck by the power of the spoken word and the human voice—the depth, the feeling, and the wisdom in the conversations of ordinary people. StoryCorps was on its way to being born.

The genius of StoryCorps—what makes it work—is the idea of the little soundproof recording booth, which, to begin with, Isay set up in the middle of . . . Grand Central Terminal. Yes, that's right, Grand Central Terminal, the transportation hub in mid-town Manhattan, with 750,000 people passing through *every day*. And they invited anyone, preferably two people—but anyone—to come in and conduct a 40-minute interview with the help of a trained facilitator—for free. The participants would receive a CD of the conversation, and with their permission, a copy would be sent to the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

The idea was genius. But at first it just seemed weird—and risky. Isay writes:

*I had all sorts of concerns about whether we could actually pull it off. Would we get Jerry Springer moments—families zinging each other during sessions and breaking into screaming fights—or worse? Would people make reservations to use the booth as a personal recording studio and cut song demos? Would participants agree to sign the release at the end of the session so that the material could go to the Library of Congress? How would they feel about having the facilitator in the booth? Would the idea just flat-out fail?*

It didn't flat-out fail. With some 75,000 (and counting) interviews facilitated and recorded in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, StoryCorps didn't fail. Those interviews have been the source for now five different book collections and fifteen-years worth of segments that have aired on Fridays on Morning Edition. But it's not the numbers that make StoryCorps a success. Isay continues: "Happily, from the day we opened in October 2003 it was clear that this little booth in the middle of Grand Central Terminal was something of a miracle." And then he adds, "the first thing we noticed were the tears."

*The first thing we noticed were the tears.* People didn't zing each other, or break into screaming fights, or put others down to make themselves look good. Not at all. People went deep—and quickly. Their conversations were almost always about life and death, birth and rebirth, joy and sorrow . . . and love. The tears often flowed, and almost always, in the course of those 40-minute conversations, people grew closer—just by talking, just by listening.

And please, please, if you haven't heard StoryCorps, *don't* think that every story is all sweetness and light, nothing but tear-jerking sentimentality. Eventually, StoryCorps went mobile with two different Airstream trailers serving as recording booths, and it went to places like the Oregon State Penitentiary, and New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In July 2005, StoryCorps opened its second permanent recording booth in New York City, at the site of the World Trade Center, a booth available to the general public, but with special slots reserved for families to remember loved ones lost on September 11, 2001, as well as for rescue workers and survivors.

As for *my* experience with the book . . .well, you have to understand that there's *always* a difference between reading a book and listening to it . . . and a great deal of that difference depends on the narrator, that is, the person reading the book aloud. (Every narration, no matter what the book, is both interpretation and performance.) But *this* book, this collection of stories—the first collection from StoryCorps, the one titled, *Listening Is an Act of Love*, is not read by a single narrator. Instead, you hear the actual voices of the people in the booth as they talked; so when Seth Fleischauer, age 25, interviews his grandfather William Jacobs, age 83, you're listening to the voices of Seth and Mr. Jacobs. And I have to say, when I did, I had the same experience Dave Isay had listening to the LeAlan Jones talking with his grandmother: it was an epiphany, one of the most intimate and powerful moments I'd ever heard; the tape [or, in my case, the car console] was all but glowing with the love radiating from this conversation. It was as if I was in that recording booth with them, as if my car had become that

booth, and all four of us—Seth, Mr. Jacobs, the facilitator, and I—and perhaps still another—were all there together.

Nowhere was this clearer than when I listened to Richard Pecorella speak of his fiancée, Karen, who was on the 101st floor of the World Trade Center on September 11th:

*Karen was the love of my life. I knew it the day that we met. It was magical. . . . I'm a typical macho Italian guy, a tough guy from Brooklyn. I grew up on the streets, and went to work. I was one of those guys who rolled down the window, screamed at the drivers when they weren't driving the way I thought they should be. But Karen changed me—she taught me patience. And she toned me down. She showed me how to be nicer to people, give it a second thought before you start yelling. And I've carried that with me. She didn't sit down and teach it to me; it was just by her actions that I followed.*

And then, towards the end of the interview, Richard Pecorella begins to speak to Karen directly:

*Karen, I love you. I always will. I feel your presence all the time. I just hope you keep guiding me in the right direction. I lost my soul. I still have my heart, but I lost my soul. Karen, I'll always be in love with you; there will never be another one. And I will see you again. I will do enough good to make it up there to be with you.*

I tell you, it was one thing to read those words, with my own voice providing whatever tone and tenor silent reading necessitates. It was something very different to listen to Richard Pecorella saying them, in his tear-filled and hope-filled Brooklyn accent.

Listening is an act of love. And we human beings, perhaps above all else, want to—need to—love and be loved. There are few things worse—few feelings worse—than feeling that we don't have a voice, that we're not being heard, especially by those who are supposed to—whom we believe—love us. As Dave Isay puts it: "people love to be listened to because it tells them their lives matter."

And if this is true for our human-to-human relationships, how much more true for our human-to-God relationships!? In fact (if you ask me), the chief cause of atheism is not some abstract, philosophical argument that God doesn't exist. No, it's the felt conviction, that even if God does exist, it doesn't matter because I don't matter to God; God doesn't listen—to me or to us.

I have heard the cry of my people—and it is a human cry: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" And that, of course, is Jesus' cry as he hangs on the cross—and he's quoting Psalm 22. But what hung in the air, on that Friday afternoon as Jesus hung on the cross, was not God's answer, but God's silence. And in that silence, atheism beckons. Please, hear me: atheism is not embraced. The very act of crying out to God expresses a conviction that God exists and is listening. The cry itself is both protest and prayer; if there were no God, why waste your breath? No, atheism is not embraced in the cry, but it does beckon. It beckons in the feeling that my voice isn't heard, doesn't matter; that God isn't listening, that I don't matter to God or anyone else; that I'm dying here, alone.

So how do we know that God *is* listening? How do we know that God does hear us, hears our cries, including, no, especially, our cries of abandonment? How do we know that?

Well, I'm a preacher, so I have an answer to that question. The answer is that we know that God hears us because God heard Jesus: Jesus was *not* forsaken: on the third day, God raised him from

the dead to life, to sit forever on the right hand of God, to rule in glory. And because God heard Jesus, Jesus has become, as the Bible puts in the Letter to the Hebrews, our great high priest, merciful and faithful, fully God and fully human, and therefore like us in every way except for our sin, the one who knows and sympathizes with us in our weakness, the one who listens to us and advocates for us.

I can say all that because I'm a preacher, and that's my job.

But I'm not sure how much any of that helps on the days when Richard Pecorella feels Karen's absence—and God's. What does help then? Listening.

Shortly after StoryCorps started, the facilitators—who are thoroughly trained and agree to serve for no more or less than one year—the facilitators began to speak of “the magic of the booth.”

What is “the magic of the booth”?

Did you hear the hope—at the end of the interview—the hope in Richard Pecorella's voice when he speaks directly to Karen? He tells her that he feels her presence all the time; that he wants her to continue to guide him, and that he will see her again—he'll do enough good down here to see her again—to be with her—up there. (And be the way, only a fool or a Presbyterian preacher—probably someone who is both—would object that Pecorella is here guilty of “works righteousness,” and that only Jesus' goodness can get him or anyone else “up there.” When goodness is motivated by love—as it clearly is for Richard Pecorella and for all of us—you can be sure it is pleasing to God. There *are* times to theologize—this is *not* one of them.)

That hope in Richard Pecorella's voice was the magic of the booth. Everything about the booth—two people who know and care about each other, facing each other, alike committed to an important, sustained, and personal conversation, the presence of the recording equipment and the facilitator, the fact that the recording would be sent to the Library of Congress—everything about the booth, including the idea of the booth itself, says this: “Listen: you matter, what you say matters, what we say here matters. I will listen to you; you must listen to me; we must listen to one another.” In other words, everything about the booth is pretty much the exact opposite of twitter, and the way we use other social media. Which is why we need the magic of the booth—why we need to listen to one another—Isay himself calls the booth, “sacred space”—now more than ever.

Isay also relates that, soon after the booth at the site of the World Trade Center was opened, the facilitators there began referring to their work as “bearing witness.” There *are* times to theologize—and this *is* one of them. Whether the facilitators knew it or not, the phrase, “bearing witness,” is fraught with theological meaning: it means to testify to God's presence at work in the world and in our lives. The facilitators, like the Holy Spirit, were testifying to God's presence at work in the world and in our lives: they were listening.

Listening is an act of love. The best way for us to know that God loves the world and us, the best way to know that God listens to us, is for us to listen to one another.

**That** is the witness of God's Holy Spirit. “It is,” as Dave Isay put it, “something of a miracle.”

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.