

When to say Nothing  
By  
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During college I spent my summers working in camps, for the simple reason that I didn't want to go home. Working at a summer camp meant that I could stay busy and keep my independence. Two of those summers were spent working at a Southern Baptist girls camp, called Mundo Vista, where I began to learn the essential lessons needed in life.

I never went to camp as a child and so I had no idea of what to expect, and I wasn't prepared for many of the issues I would face. Homesick campers were the least of my worries; I had children who were facing the difficult issues of their families going through a divorce, children who were being abused, children who had been orphaned, and children who had witnessed unimaginable horrors. Nothing in my camp counselor training prepared me for what I would hear from my campers. Eventually I learned the best thing I could do was to listen. Answers weren't as important as listening. The reality for most of my campers was that there wasn't an easy answer; the best I could do was to show them love.

I began to learn the lesson of listening my first summer, when "scholarships" were given to Departments of Social Services around the state, which brought a new and diverse group of campers to my cabin. I realized I was in for a wild ride of a week when I asked if any of the campers wanted to "ask the blessing" at dinner the first night. The camper who volunteered to pray began to pray in tongues about half way through her blessing, which wasn't something those young Baptist girls had ever heard before. Only later did I realize this camper was an "Angel" sent to teach me a lesson.

Later that week one of my campers from a "traditional" church became sick with a migraine. The fearful reaction of her friends when I explained that she was resting in the infirmary caused me to question her illness. Her friends explained that her birthday was the next day, quickly stopping me as I was about to suggest doing something to celebrate. Her friend said "You see her dad shot and killed her mom on her birthday." Horrified I asked, "Did she see what happened?" Her friends nodded yes, and I felt as if I had somehow lost my balance. I couldn't imagine that horror, and then I wondered what I could ever say to someone who had experienced something so tragic. I was still pondering the question when she came back to the cabin. I asked if she needed anything and said I would try to find a quieter place for her to rest if she wanted. She said she didn't want to be alone and to make sure not to leave her if she fell asleep. I asked if she was ok, she only smiled and said "it's a long story, but I saw my dad kill my mom and now my head hurts when the anniversary comes around." From behind the girl I heard the Angel say, "Your daddy shot your momma too?!" Stunned I stood there in silence and listened as these girls began to share their stories. They discussed their feelings at the loss of their mothers, and their torment over what to feel about their fathers. I realized the Angel said very little, except things like "I want to hate my daddy, but part of me still loves him." She would then sit back and let the girl talk about her dad and her feelings. The conversation ended when the Angel said "sometimes I feel guilty because I think my

momma was trying to protect me.” The girl began to sob uncontrollably. I don’t think she had ever really admitted that feeling to anyone. The Angel put her arm around the girl and said, “Like my memaw says we got nothing to feel guilty about. Our mommas loved us and no matter what else happens you can always remember that. Concentrate on her love, not just her death.” I sat there with the girl as she cried herself to sleep. I felt overwhelmed by the emotional reality of these two girls and the amount of suffering they had faced at such a young age.

I realized that summer that answers weren’t found in my ability to quote scripture or recall the clichéd sayings from my youth. I needed to listen not just to the words a person was saying, but also to the emotion and spirit behind the words. Perhaps the call of Christ isn’t just to preach the “word of God”, but to listen. Jesus responded to people at the level of their need. For example, at the death of Lazarus when Jesus finally arrived at the home of Mary and Martha, He responded to each sister in a very different way. To Martha who first came to Him and said “If you had been here my brother wouldn’t have died.” Jesus responds with a discussion about resurrection from the dead. But later when Mary comes to Him and says the same statement Jesus responds by weeping with Mary. The importance was placed on the one asking the question and not merely on the question itself. How often do we respond to others without considering the real meaning behind the question? How often have you felt the frustration and disappointment of knowing that someone hasn’t really heard you? How many times have you realized too late that you didn’t really hear what someone was trying to tell you? I find that it is so easy to fall back into the comfort of my own opinion where I can congratulate myself on my knowledge and feel good about the compassion I have when I can relate what a person is going through to my own experience. Perhaps the true path of Christianity is to imitate Jesus’ message of hope, love, and compassion regardless of how a situation relates to my experiences.

I find that as I attempt to really listen to those around me the greatest difficulty lies in the struggle to silence my own internal dialog. I fight to keep my own stories from limiting my ability to understand the people around me, to stop projecting my assumptions onto others. Learning to step outside of my feelings, fears, and failures, and understand the plight of another without judgment or assumption has become one of the thorniest paths I’ve ever taken. Every time I feel I make progress I find my thoughts pricked with my own experiences. Yet I am learning that this effort not only frees me to better understand those around me, it rescues me from the feelings of isolation and self condemnation. For the worst form of tunnel vision comes from only looking inward, from only seeing the world according to my filters, of living in fear of saying the wrong things, of second guessing my actions, of continually judging myself. Why is it that we are often the most judgmental toward ourselves? I find that when I am overly concerned with hiding my imperfection, as if that were possible, I lose the capacity to sincerely interact with those around me, I lose my ability to show compassion.

So my resolution for this year, and hopefully beyond, is to listen, to wait. To try not to respond immediately to every question with what I feel is an answer or react to every statement with one of my own. I hope to learn to quiet the dialog in my head, to step

outside of my feelings, and try to understand the feelings of others; perhaps then I can present Christ's message of hope, love, and compassion to the world around me without preaching a sermon.