

Take off your shoes

by Karen Hering, February 8, 2009, Unity Church-Unitarian

Take off your shoes. Bend knees. Fold hands. Bow down.

These simple instructions in prayer, though not part of my personal practice, have taught me by their common approach. They are not postures of making speeches, of claiming ground, commanding attention, or standing tall. No. Around the world and in so many religions, the practice of prayer calls upon us to fold our egos away and to make ourselves quiet and small. To pause from busy schedules and personal agendas and to point ourselves in the direction of the holy. *Take off your shoes. Bend knees. Fold hands. Bow down.*

We are instructed to listen.

“All sound requires patience,” wrote Terry Tempest Williams after sitting with her dying grandfather, leaning over him to hear his whispered words in the final days of his life. “Not just the ability to hear,” she said, “but the capacity to listen, the awareness of mind to discern a story.”

It can be harder than you’d think to do this. Much easier it is to listen only for the opportunities that will allow us to speak, to hear only the stories that will invite us to act. Especially in our work for justice, when there is so much that needs to be said, so much that desperately needs to be done.

Some years ago, I was traveling in Nicaragua with a group of North Americans and we heard a lot of talk about how much was broken in that deeply impoverished nation. And our inclination was to ask, “What can we do? How can we help to fix the

problems?” Whether it was a road washed out or a hospital placing patients two to a bed or the lakes thick with pollution, over and over again, we asked “What can we do?”

And then one evening, while staying with a woman named Marisol in the northern mountains, I felt a new answer stirring in my heart. We’d just spent the day hauling water in heavy string-handled buckets and patting out tortillas with our hands and frying them over a fire. And after eating dinner together by the light of a single candle, we lingered at the table in the dirt-floored room, singing songs to each other, and I listened as Marisol shared her story and her hopes and her fears with me. When we retired that night, for the first time on that trip, I knew what to do. Or at least I had discovered where to begin. Not with roads or hospitals or wells or waterways. No. The first step, I came to understand with Marisol that night, was in taking time to listen with my whole heart, with a patient ear and the awareness of mind that would allow me to discern another’s story.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, Lao Tsu said in the Tao. But a better translation of this familiar passage is to say the journey begins beneath our feet. Not in the first step but in the stillness that precedes it, in the ground beneath our feet, in the ground of our being.

So I take off my shoes, standing on the holy ground of this earth. I bend my knees, making myself small, and fold my hands, pausing their habit of doing, doing, doing. I bow my head and listen for a story larger than my own, waiting for a holy word in which to root the work for justice that lies ahead. May my listening be my prayer. May my prayer be my deep listening.

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