

Listening to Your Heart

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“Feelings are much like waves. We can’t stop them, but we can choose which one to surf.” - Jonatan Martensson

This has been a difficult year for many of us. The news has been filled with stories about the coronavirus, social justice protests, and threats to democracy from Donald Trump. It is a constant background noise of anger and fear. Do you hear it?

We are told to keep a social distance from each other. We are literally “out of touch.” That can easily turn into keeping a distance from our own selves. When we are out of touch with ourselves, then we can get lost.

One answer to the cacophony of anger and fear is to listen to our hearts. That sounds like a simple answer, but it is not.

We live in a world where we are bombarded by electronic media. Politicians and advertisers are competing for our attention, and the more graphic and violent the images the more they capture our attention. The messages in the media are loud and intense. In contrast, the voice in our hearts is quiet and deep. We need to listen carefully to hear what our hearts have to say to us. What do you hear during these challenging days when you listen to your heart?

Our rational minds give us objective and factual information so that we can make good decisions. Our emotions give us subjective information. Our emotions tell us about what something means to us. Your emotions are usually wiser than your mind. Our hearts tell us what seems deeply true to us.

Our hearts speak in the language of emotions. There are four primary emotions: glad, sad, mad, and afraid. Fortunately, three of them – glad, sad, and mad – rhyme. All of our complex emotional experiences are combinations of glad, sad, mad, and afraid.

This is a color wheel that my daughter is using to teach my grandsons about art. On a color wheel, the three primary colors can be blended together to create any color of the rainbow. For example, the primary colors of red and blue can be mixed together to create the secondary color violet. The four primary emotions blend together to create the complex interplay of all our emotions. That is the language of the heart.

Our emotions have corresponding physical sensations. That is why we call them “feelings”, because we can literally feel our emotions in our bodies. For example,

sadness often feels like a heavy weight, like an elephant sitting on your chest. Fear is usually associated with muscle tension, often in the stomach and abdomen. When we worry, which is an expression of fear, we may feel tight shoulders or a band of tension around the forehead. Anger is the easiest physical sensation to identify. When we are mad, we feel physically hotter. Some people literally “see red” when they are angry. That is the physiology of the fight-flight-or-freeze response. If you want to listen to your heart, observe what your body is telling you about your emotions. Where in your body do you feel your emotions?

All of our emotions can vary in intensity and duration. Let’s use sadness as an example of how an emotion can vary in intensity and duration. A small degree of sadness is referred to as being moody or having the blues. A greater degree of sadness is called loss. As we get older, we have losses in our lives every year, including the loss of our health. An irreplaceable loss, like the death of a husband or wife, is called grief, and that can last a lifetime. When you combine loss and hopelessness, then people experience depression. Those are all experiences of the primary emotion of sadness. Is that what you experience when you feel sad?

Sometimes people funnel all their emotions into one emotional response. For example, men are typically socialized to ignore sadness and fear, so they often channel those emotions into anger. It feels more manly to be mad than to be sad or afraid. Anger is an emotion that produces action, and men prefer action over the powerlessness of sadness and fear. Anger can mask deeper emotions. For women, they are typically socialized not to directly express being mad. Sometimes what appears to be tears of sadness are actually tears of anger. Do you know people who channel other emotions into anger? The language of the heart requires careful listening.

The real challenge in listening to emotions is that emotions usually don’t occur one at a time. They come all at once. Sometimes our emotions feel like they are being propelled from a fire hydrant.

Let’s imagine a common emotional situation in a family. Maybe you can relate. Imagine you are the parent or grandparent of a rebellious sixteen-year-old boy. He told you that he was staying at his best friend’s house until his eleven pm curfew. It is now 1am and you are very worried. He hasn’t replied to your phone calls or text messages. Every time you hear a police siren, you’re sure that he has gotten into a car accident. Finally, he comes in the door. You can smell alcohol on his breath. You realize that he lied to you and went to a party. All your fear is immediately replaced by anger. You consider handcuffing him to the freezer until his eighteenth birthday. Instead, you calm down and tell him that you will talk with him about the consequences for his actions in the morning, but he should expect to be grounded for a while. Finally, you give him a hug and a kiss. Your love for him is greater than your fear and anger. All those emotions – fear, anger,

and love – flooded over you within a few minutes. Maybe you can recall a time when you had a mixture of emotions all going on at once. It can feel overwhelming.

The last of the primary emotions is gladness. Everyone would like to experience more joy, happiness, and love in their lives. Gladness comes from enjoying each individual moment exactly as it is. Gladness comes from living our own personal and spiritual values. It comes from learning to be humble and grateful. If you listen to your heart right now, what gives you a feeling of gladness? Can you hold on to that feeling?

Even when it is difficult, I have been trying to listen to my heart. When I listen carefully, my heart tells me that my wife, my daughter, and my grandsons are the most important people in my life. They are the greatest sources of gladness for me. During the pandemic, I am afraid for the health and safety of my family. I feel grateful that I have a good job when so many people are unemployed. I'm pretty scared of what Donald Trump is doing to my country. I'm truly sad and angry that there is so much injustice in this world. Those are the emotional truths deep in my heart. What are the emotional truths that your heart is speaking to you?

One of the many reasons why I belong to Beacon Unitarian-Universalist Congregation is that we talk about emotions every week. "Love is the spirit of this church" is more than just words. It is the starting point of our faith. Each week we talk about what makes us glad, mad, sad, and afraid. Reverend Robin is a master at voicing the emotions that we all experience. When we come together, we share those emotions with each other.

In these troubled times, listen to all the emotions within your heart. Your emotions will help remind you about what is really important. They will help you experience the love within our congregation, within your families, and within yourselves.

Stop for just a moment and listen to your heart. Your heart will remind you of what is really important to you.

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