



NOT LISTENING BUT PAUSING

by Jonar Nader

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AM AMAZED AT SOME OF THE 'STUFF' IN MY HEAD. I HAVE NO IDEA HOW IT GETS THERE. THEN, WHEN I LEAST EXPECT IT, THE PENNY drops and that 'stuff' comes rushing to the fore like an over-enthusiastic winner at a bingo hall.

For example, I cannot work out when the expression 'not waving but drowning' first latched onto me. It seems I had always known this phrase, even though I had no idea to what it referred. I just liked the fact that four words could depict such a vivid picture.

The phrase remained unexplained and dormant for over twenty years. Then recently, while speaking with my friend, I described how drained I had felt while trying to assist a man who had suffered a head-on collision with his ego. His life was in turmoil. His troubles were self-induced and his suffering was self-inflicted. Yet, no force on this planet could redirect his pointed finger. He blamed everyone for everything, both real and imagined. I could not get him

to concentrate, because his mind raced every-which-way, darting about like a turbo-charged bee. He was searching for evidence to prove his righteousness. No matter what I said; no matter how I said it; no matter what I tried; he was not

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interested in finding a solution. He had lost the desire for inner peace. He just wanted to vent and to blame and to complain and to criticise and to justify and to destroy...

The most amazing thing about his quixotic ramblings was that, for anyone observing from a distance, he seemed to be a good listener. He was polite enough to stop

talking when I spoke. Alas, he did not hear a single word. Actually, he did hear the words — one at a time, but no two words were linked. He simply dropped each one as soon as it reached him. He listened in words; not in sentences. And as such, nothing made sense to him.

In outlining this story to my friend, I said, ‘There are not enough words in the English language to describe how unbelievably troubled he is. His condition is overwhelmingly complicated. When I spoke, he stopped. When I finished, he launched straight into his mantra. All the while, he did not understand a thing. It was a case of *not listening but pausing*.’

I began to think about the origins of ‘not waving but drowning’. I discovered that it was published in 1957 as a short poem by Stevie Smith. She was a poet and novelist who was trying to describe how a man, while drowning at

sea, was ignored by his friends who assumed that he was waving playfully. So they waved back. No-one understood his desperate struggle.

Thus it is with the people around us. They smile, while hurting inside. They speak from the west, yet we hear from the east. We proffer advice, but they construe it as criticism. We pull them away from a bad decision, and they scoot off into the path of an on-coming train.

Indeed, many people do not listen. They might be polite enough to pause, but not sufficiently interested to engage. As a result, they never learn about their world or about the people with whom they interact.

Whether it’s at home or at school or at work or in the street, we see people drifting in and out of places. They are always doing something and going somewhere. Yet, what we cannot see is the inner struggle. They hide behind fancy clothes and fashionable gadgets, and they wear masks. If we could glimpse into the thunder clouds that darken their mind, we might begin to understand why seemingly-pensive gentlefolk, who appear to be at peace with the world, are in fact plotting their next sinister move.

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We spend so much time trying to make ourselves understood, when it might be easier to first understand others. Such wisdom was handed down to me by a teacher who daily asked our class to recite the Prayer of Saint Francis that encourages us to sow love where we see hatred, and to pardon those who hurt us, and to bring joy to those in sadness. Saint Francis knew that the world would be a better place if we tried to console, before we sought to be consoled; and to seek to understand, before we demanded to be understood; and to set out to love, rather than wait to be loved.

No wonder it was a daily prayer. Such noble qualities are so difficult to attain, that we plead for divine help.

The miracle of life, and the incomprehensible genius of creation, and the architectural complexity of humans and apples and trees and birds and microscopic particles, ought to stun us in our tracks. Instead, we ignore the marvels of our existence and we fight and argue and blame and hurt and cry. We even accelerate the damage, by manufacturing weapons and chemicals and pollutants and mind-numbing substances.

While I still agree with Saint Francis, I suggest that in this troubled and troubling world, we need to rise to the occasion to do what must be done, and to fight for what must be won, and to pounce on those whose selfishness robs others of an opportunity to laugh for real, and to smile for real, and to hug for real. Life would be sweeter if more people stood-up to the bullies.

Please join me in pushing forward on a daily basis. If you can do something, or say something, about the things that matter to you, do try. Just an email, a phone call, a letter, a voice. It might seem insignificant, but it does matter. More of us need to engage.

Follow your heart, even if you have to lose friends and infuriate people.