



*Listen, listen... winter's gone.*

*Finches whistle, "Here's the sun!"*

*Pop, pop, bulbs sprout.*

*Leaves grow, flowers shout.*

*'Listen, Listen,' Phillis Gershator & Alison Jay*

Spring is a reminder of how life can be new again. The earth wakes up. The first day of spring, the vernal equinox, is the day the sun crosses the celestial equator, and day and night are the same length. There is balance and equality, at least for one day.

What strikes me most as springtime emerges is birdsong. Gratefully, birds sing in our lowcountry most days of the year, but they seem quieter when temperatures dip closer to freezing. Those days, I think about the small creatures puffing up their feathers, and waiting for the cold to pass.

Birdsong invites us to listen. It makes no announcement. There is no grand sign, no billboard announcing the next melody. There are no expectations. Birdsong just is, and if one doesn't stop, get quiet, and pay attention, it goes unheard. It gets drowned out by noise and thought.

And so it goes with you and me. Listening to another person is the act of entering their world to understand what they are feeling, and how they are doing. It is respectful. It is virtuous.

Sensitive listening is understanding and appreciating someone. It doesn't necessarily imply the requirement to solve another person's problems. As we hear ourselves talk about our concerns to another human being, we begin the process of problem solving or healing.

In his book, *The Good Listener*, James E. Sullivan writes, "The truth is that our need to be heard and understood is a powerful, relentless hunger. It never diminishes. It never goes away." When another person really listens to us, they help fulfill our need for emotional intimacy.

My husband is a clinical therapist. His job is to listen, to provide a healthy way for a person to vent their feelings. I know he is fully engaged in his work, and oftentimes, when he arrives home, he is quiet. He doesn't want to talk, probably because talking would elicit a response from me and require him to listen - more listening after a long day. I have an expectation from him when I speak. I expect that he is listening, available to provide me feedback, and is emotionally connected to what I am communicating. Sometimes a person is just too tired and worn out to listen.

I had a career in sales. Early on, I was taught that the best salespeople are expert listeners. Not only do they need to be able to listen well, a good salesperson reads between the lines, asks open-ended questions, and seeks to understand a customer's needs in order to be able to provide a solution that benefits both parties. I had to work at being a good listener. I still do.

Real listening is non-judgmental. For me, this characteristic is in the heart of the best

listeners. When I am listening to someone, I am likely to make some sort of assessment or judgement. I spring into problem-solving mode. I forget that if I am not asked for help, maybe all that I am supposed to do is be quiet, attentive, and caring. That's all. Nothing more. Pay attention. If I can maintain eye contact, put my thoughts on hold, and respond after I allow the other person to finish their thoughts, I am an active listener. I am in service to the other. Listening is a way to lift the burdens from the shoulders of another person.

What are the birds saying when they call out to one another? What warning are they giving us as we approach a new nest? What is it about the rising sun that causes birds to sing, and isn't that a good way to begin our day, by singing? If we are not vocalizing, can our hearts truly sing? The proof of a joyful heart is that others recognize it and come to trust a person whose goodness is outwardly available. Unspoken recognition of a joyful heart leads to surprise. Someone will start a conversation with you in a grocery store aisle. A stranger sitting beside you on an airplane feels a quiet connection prompting them to share. You receive a phone call from a friend who has been out of touch for months because they trust you. You will listen and not judge. You will care when no one else does. A secret is safe with you.

It isn't likely that we can stop a Carolina wren singing on the railing of a backyard deck. Likewise, as a caring listener, we choose not to interrupt the flow of conversation by a person desperate to be heard, and we all want to be heard. Trapped feelings need to come out somehow, some way. Listening, remembering what's been said, and making time to revisit a person or situation afterwards builds acceptance and provides relief whether it is short-lived or resolved.

Springtime is coming. Birdsong is floating on warmer breezes. And if we really listen, maybe we will hear leaves growing, or a friend breaking through anger and darkness into a newness of spirit. Imagine the possibilities if we just listen.