

FCCS September 13, 2020

“Lend Me Your Ear”

“The first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives God’s Word, but also lends us God’s ear... We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.”

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

We all know how good it feels to be truly heard by another person, the balm that is deep listening. Likewise, we can see the damage done and pain wrought when people forget how to listen and really hear one another. One of the many difficulties of this moment in time is that we are spending a lot of time alone with the voices in our own heads. It is one thing to live alone, but even those of us who are partnered are missing the companionship of others we used to spend our time with.

Over the Labor Day weekend, we invited a couple that we have been “podding” with to come to Sonoma for an afternoon. It was 103 degrees outside, so we stayed inside; played scrabble and watched several episodes of “Bob’s Burgers”. We ate ribs and sweet corn, drank wine, and laughed together. We all got to feeling sort of normal for an afternoon, we agreed that it felt awfully good to be in the company of friends.

My friend Kate shared an article she had read that spoke to something most of us never really even noticed we had until it wasn’t there anymore—the company of strangers. The piece was written by Rachel Martin co-host of NPR’s Morning Edition, it appeared in the Atlantic on September 2, 2020. It is so vivid and well written that I am going to read it to you today in its entirety. Listen closely for the voices of hope, of connection and of love which feature heavily in her words.

A Stranger Helped My Family at Our Darkest Moment

I don’t know how to say it except to say it. It sounds like something from a movie, or like the paranoid nightmare of an overprotective parent—but it is what happened.

I saw my 8-year-old son go over a waterfall.

At this point, before I tell you more, I need to tell you that he's fine. Because when I tell this story, I can see people's faces contort as they conjure up horrible outcomes. After all, falling off a waterfall seems like a thing you wouldn't walk away from unscathed—like a thing you might not even survive. But it wasn't a huge fall.

It was the middle of August. We were on vacation. We had canceled our plans to fly to Wyoming, because of the pandemic, and instead drove from our home in Washington, D.C., to New Hampshire. We wouldn't see friends or family—it would be just me, my husband, and our two kids. A nice, safe, socially distant week away.

Social distancing is what brought us to the top of that particular waterfall in the first place. We had hiked about a half mile to this really popular spot called Diana's Baths, near the town of North Conway, New Hampshire, where the water falls off a series of flat boulders layered up the mountainside like an M. C. Escher drawing. The baths were full of families. So we made our way to one of the upper levels of rock, to keep our distance and be safe.

Both where we sat and down below, the water cascaded and fell into small pools, where kids in swimsuits were splashing around. I watched as some younger parents nervously corralled their toddlers away from the rocks' edges, feeling grateful that my husband and I were out of that stage—that our kids, at 6 and 8, could navigate their physical space with more confidence. Don't get me wrong, I was still terrified as I saw my two boys jump between the slippery rocks. "No running," I said again and again. "Stay away from all those edges."

But I soon relaxed and we were all having fun, splashing in the pools, my kids laughing big belly laughs as my husband dunked his head under the cold running water. The stress of the previous few months seemed to melt away. And there had been plenty. It's 2020 after all—no one has been untouched by pain, grief, or anxiety. But seconds after I reached that place of contentment, every fear I'd ever had rose to the surface.

I turned around and saw my son Wyatt sitting down between two boulders in a fast-moving stream of water. I yelled at him to get out. He yelled back something that I couldn't hear, and then he disappeared over the edge.

All I remember from the moments after is screaming, over and over, like a prayer, "Jesus Christ, somebody help my son!" But I didn't even know what help he needed, because for several seconds I couldn't force myself to look down.

My husband was already sprinting down the rocks. I finally looked. Wyatt was sitting up—he was alive. My biggest fear was erased. As I held my younger son, Jed, close, I heard another woman scream—she and her husband and two kids had been near us on the high ledge. She was hysterical, yelling at her husband that they needed to go. “That child just went over the waterfall!” she shouted. “We are leaving!” They walked away immediately and didn’t even look back to see if our child was okay.

It was about 12 feet from the top of the waterfall to the pool below, which was studded with huge rocks. Wyatt had fallen on his back, straight onto the rocks. That’s what Lisa told us.

We didn’t know her name was Lisa at that point. All we knew was that while everyone else looked on from a distance, too afraid or unbothered to help, this petite brunette woman with a mask didn’t hesitate. In fact, by the time I had climbed down the rocks and my husband had pulled Wyatt out of the water, she had already called 911. She told me that she was a nurse. She gave Wyatt a red, white, and blue striped towel to put under his head. She implored us to keep him still and on his back in case he had injured his spinal cord. I finally had the wherewithal to ask her name. “Lisa,” she said. “My name is Lisa and I’m not leaving you.”

I knew she was a mother. I saw her kids standing a few feet back. I couldn’t see her face. Just her eyes. But she looked at me so deeply, like she was trying to take every bit of energy, love, and strength in her body and push it out through the only part of her face I could see. I held onto that energy like a rope that could pull us to safety—to some other place and time where my son wasn’t lying on rocks, crying in pain over injuries we tried not to imagine.

The rescue team came. They took Wyatt out of the forest on a stretcher. An ambulance took us to the small local hospital. The doctors reassured us that he had escaped the most serious injuries, but they still wanted to transfer him to a big trauma hospital in Portland, Maine, that would be better equipped to assess him. So Wyatt and I got in the ambulance again, this time for an hour-and-a-half-long drive to another state. My husband went back to the vacation house with Jed. There were tests and scans and telling the story over and over. A sleepless night in the hospital. But by morning, we got the all clear. Wyatt had three broken ribs and a punctured lung—injuries that sound horrific but heal on their own.

It would be a few hours before I could text Lisa with the good news, because her number was in my husband’s phone. But in the hospital, as

soon as I knew that Wyatt was going to be okay, my thoughts fell to her. If she had not stepped up, would someone else have done so? Perhaps. But it was her. She was the one who went toward the unthinkable instead of turning away. And something else had happened in the moment Lisa helped us that I hadn't realized right away. I felt so drawn to her, so strengthened by her, because she stepped into what has been a painful void in my life during the pandemic.

I miss strangers. I long for connections with people I do not know. We are so separate now. We have so few opportunities for brief interactions: a random shared joke with someone in an elevator. A quip that turns into a conversation with a store clerk. Even the banter with a chatty restaurant server. I've always known that I get a lot of satisfaction from talking with people I don't know about things that matter to them—that's why I interview people for a living. But the pandemic has made me realize how much I need even the most casual interactions with strangers. I need those people to feel less strange. I need to feel like we aren't all floating around in our own bubbles, concerned only with the health, pocketbooks, and survival of ourselves and the ones we love. Because if we stop being able to connect with those we don't know, if we stop being able to see ourselves in them, our empathy starts to atrophy. And then where are we as people? As a society? What are we left with?

My mom's birthday was a couple of weeks ago. She died of cancer in 2009. I mention this because my mom lived for those interactions with strangers too. It became a running joke in my family how she would meet a stranger and end up hearing their whole life story. We all knew the tale of how she met an older woman at a Marie Callender's restaurant one day and ended up sitting with her for hours, talking about their children, the nature of ambition, and what happens when we die. I don't think they ever saw each other again. The ephemeral nature of the interaction created intimacy and gave it power. My mom wouldn't have called it power, though. She would have called it love.

On that mountainside in New Hampshire, the circumstances were anything but casual. The situation was urgent. I was desperate. But as a result, the moment had even more intimacy and power. And yes, Mom, love. And all of that has sustained me since. Lisa and I have exchanged several text messages. She sent gifts for our kids—individually wrapped Lego sets with a handmade card. We told each other how nervous we are about the upcoming school year. It's not the drama of two mothers on the side of a waterfall, one holding the other through her worst fear. But every interaction

that now follows, no matter how mundane, will be built on that. And in this world that has violently shaken all of us upside down, that has dizzied and bruised us in our own isolation, we are two strangers who are less strange.

Beloved, sometimes it is in listening to another person's story that we discover something important about ourselves. Sometimes we are reminded that we are not as alone as we might feel, sometimes we see glimpses of what can be amid the rubble of what is not, and sometimes that is enough to help us make it through another day.

Amen