

18th September 2020

Hearing

**"People talking without speaking;
People hearing without listening ...
'Fools,' said I, 'You do not know,
Silence like a cancer grows.'"**
Paul Simon, Sound of Silence

"People talking without speaking." I can understand that. I've heard many people talk – and talk, and talk – without speaking, or, at least, having nothing worthwhile to say. But even more, I know what "hearing without listening" means, for I've been guilty of doing that often enough myself.

In any form of counselling or pastoral care there's the technique of what might be called the "sympathetic grunt", as you nod reassuringly and mutter encouragingly to help draw out a problem or clarification from someone. That can be a *good* thing, for it's often better to listen, to say nothing and encourage a story to be told. We have one mouth and two ears, and we should use them in that proportion at least. But where it falls down, is when we *hear* and don't *listen*. Our ears get the words, but we do nothing to absorb, interpret, "take on board" what's actually being said. We hear, but we don't have the empathy to listen. And I've done that too.

I could use the excuse of wearing hearing aids. I *could* say I can't hear properly. Or I could do what some do – switch off my hearing-aids so I literally hear nothing when someone is droning on and on. But it's not just physical. It's emotional. It's switching off from engaging with someone's issues. It's being self-absorbed and ceasing to care. I have a friend – and still a friend – who, when I meet her in company, will greet me warmly, shake my hand, kiss my cheek, say all the right things and nod appropriately when I speak, while all the while looking over my shoulder to see if someone more interesting has come into the room behind me.

Let's stop talking without speaking. But, more importantly, let's challenge ourselves when we're hearing without listening. It would be a great shame if we were called "fools" when it shouldn't be necessary.

A prayer for today

*Lord, you hear when me when I talk, because that's what you do.
Thank you for listening. Amen.*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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