

The lesson of listening

by SHERALYN ROMAN

While today's musings were originally spurred by the passing of Pope Francis; in our increasingly volatile election cycle, I believe it's a timely reminder that there are lessons to be learned from faith leaders and lay people alike, if only we are willing to listen. Too many of us are 'locked in' to a position whether it concerns politics, or religion, or even about matters like access to education, attitudes towards those experiencing homelessness, or whether public or private health care is best. There are so many things about which we can potentially (or even actively choose to) disagree. Instead, I can't help but wonder if only we took the time to really listen to one another, what a different world we might be living in. There's a lesson in listening.

When I taught communications classes, one of the topics discussed was the concept of active listening. As the name implies, taking an active role in listening is a skill. It involves focussing your complete attention on the speaker, making a conscious effort to both hear, and understand, their words. Crucially, you're listening to learn from, not just to respond to. In other words, giving the speaker your undivided attention and not mentally preparing your own response in defense of your position. An active listener might ask open-ended questions seeking clarification, might look for, and listen, to both the verbal and non-verbal cues of the speaker, and might pause and reflect before jumping into the conversation with their own thoughts and opinions. They might repeat the words of the speaker back to them to help ensure understanding. It goes without saying an active listener is not also looking at their phone, something we are all guilty of and which I believe to be the single, largest distraction to most conversations in our modern world.

Why did the passing of Pope Francis prompt this train of thought? Because of the words he spoke over the course of his papacy and how well (or not) the world listened. This Pope was more accepting than some of his predecessors. For a church that typically moves at a glacial pace, he welcomed the 2SLGBTQ+ community by asking, 'who am I to judge,' and later, by approving the blessing by Catholic priests of same-sex marriages. It was at the very least a step in the right direction. If only more people actively listened to his words, practised empathy and understanding, and then put those words into action, perhaps at minimum, a pride flag would fly at local Catholic schools.

As well, in what was to be his final Easter address, the Pope ruminated about conflicts raging throughout the world saying, 'there can be no peace without freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of expression and respect for the views of others.' He recognized that with freedom of language and expression also comes the responsibility to listen, to learn and to respect the views of others. Listen. Learn. Respect. Arguably, these three principles should form, at least in part, the very foundation of our daily interactions with one another.

The theme of listening also surfaced for me at a Council meeting I attended recently. Many delegates from the community arrived to have their voices heard on several matters before Council. I've watched this process happen before, from the gallery and online, but it was the first time I took an active role in delegating. I commend the Mayor and Councillors for truly listening to resident concerns. I believe a good percentage of the delegates that night felt their concerns were actively listened to and that questions seeking clarification were asked. Even delegations that may not have directly pertained to matters before the Council that night were listened to with respect, even when the meeting went on well past midnight! How we are listened to, respectfully or dismissively, is just as important as the words being spoken.

I'm reminded of a colleague I once volunteered with on a local non-profit board. They were unequivocal in stating the following, which I'll paraphrase: 'We don't have to share the same opinions to be able to work together, politically or otherwise. We just need to be able to listen to one another and respect our different opinions enough to be able to find common ground.' It doesn't matter what political party or religion we follow, just that we DO follow the idea of respectful engagement with a view to working together to solve our common problems.

Finally, I acknowledge that for some, even the fact I am quoting Pope Francis might draw the ire of certain readers, who will rightly point out the Catholic Church has much to atone for. We can choose to focus on the past, and divisive words, or we can choose to try

and come together, united in the shared hope for a better world. I choose to focus on hope. As an example, in that same Easter address to the faithful (and the world) Pope Francis expressed his 'closeness to the sufferings' of both the Israeli and Palestinian people, exhorting the world to 'Call a ceasefire, release the hostages and come to the aid of a starving people that aspires to a future of peace.'

This could be interpreted as a call to the world to listen, to learn, to recognize our common humanity and that when pressed, acknowledge that all humans want to exist in a state of peace. If only we'd actively listen to the words people speak to find our commonalities, to learn from one another while respecting our differences, and then act accordingly by focussing on actions that unite, not divide us. What a different world we might be living in.