Columns
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Bailey Dreyer)



by Jane Marie Bradish

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 23, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Christmas song "Do You Hear What I Hear" wasn't originally written for Christmas. Rather, it was composed as a call for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the early 1960s. Growing up, without knowing the context of the song, I was fascinated by its imagery: wind, lamb, star, shepherd, song, king and sleeping child.

These days I'm more fascinated by the questions the song raises than the images it mentions. In my experience, try as we may, no one can see, hear, know or listen as suggested in the song lyrics. Seeing and hearing — while sensory — are much more than just senses. Many speak of an "inner knowing," a "gut feeling" or "reading between the lines."

At my place of ministry, I see nearly 1,000 people every day. More often than not, I see faces — that's all. I don't see what they may be carrying with them: anxiety, hurt, a special something they are celebrating, etc. I hear their greetings, but I don't hear what their whole being may be calling out for nonverbally. I will not even claim to know anything about anyone. And listening? With so much noise in our world right now — yikes! Just think of an experience you've had with customer service.

For me, all of this begs the question: How can I see, hear, know and listen? I don't care how much training and practice you have; this is tough stuff.

Advertisement

Seeing and hearing might be the easiest to figure out. Eye contact can reveal a lot. Someone saying "Hi" can have "sad eyes," or their tone can let you know something is up. It is easy to miss, though, as more often than not we say "Hi" as we're on the way to someone or somewhere else, and we may not even pause for a response. It wouldn't hurt to slow down or to be more attentive. Even if no further words were exchanged, a look can make a connection.

Knowing is harder. How often have you found yourself sensing or recognizing something was "off" but not able to name it? In the United States, and other places I'm sure, we live at high speed most of the time. Knowing takes time, reflection and most of all, honesty.

Listening isn't much easier. If someone is not sure what's happening with them, it's impossible to articulate it. In order to really listen, we need to put ourselves aside,

and that's hard.

The world in which I live is fast-paced and loud. Connections with some meaning are rare. Seeing, hearing, knowing and listening often don't factor into the day-to-day reality. I'd love to have tips and tricks to share, but I don't. So, I took the song and my questions to prayer. Talk about a way to frustrate myself!

Prayer is all about seeing, hearing, knowing and listening. I know that — or at least I thought I did. Why was I surprised then when my prayer was restless? In my experience, prayer is a place of vulnerability. We are also vulnerable when we see, hear, know and listen on more than a surface level.



(Unsplash/Walter Chavez)

> Prayer is all about seeing, hearing, knowing and listening.
>
> Tweet this

See: There is much beauty, but there is much pain as well. I enjoy all the plants and flowers in the yard, and I always wait too long to cut them back and pull them out for winter. Maybe I'm hoping the natural death cycle won't come this year. I know deep down that some of the plants and flowers won't survive. That's a hard reality to face.

Hear: Most of the news media report the hard things: war, famine, natural disasters, violence. It can become overwhelmingly negative and hopeless very quickly. You have to work to find and hear good news, and then it's usually fleeting. A long-ago local newscaster used to sign off each evening with "Better tomorrows." A current national newscaster signs off by saying, "Take care of yourselves and each other." What wonderful reminders to keep trying no matter how discouraging things may be at the moment.

Know and listen: These require us to step aside — to get out of the way, if you will. In a world so focused on individualism and "besting" the other, a willingness to step aside is often seen as weakness. I think of the never-ending wars in the Middle East. In an obviously oversimplified statement, they are two peoples who for centuries cannot agree on anything, neither knowing nor listening to each other.

The call of the song more than 60 years ago remains the same. We need to see, hear, listen and know — not just ourselves, but especially the other.

The question that keeps coming back is: Am I willing to be vulnerable? It is a risk.

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.