

# Along the track

## Listen

Recently I heard a person tell the story of her great, great grandparent who came to Australia as a thirteen year old. His brother had been previously transported at age thirteen for stealing a handkerchief. A group of little boys were playing and grabbing the handkerchief out of the pocket, it was a dare, with terrible consequences. His younger brother (aged eleven) missed him so much that two years later he also stole a handkerchief so he could join his brother. That's how he came to be in Australia.

The story was greeted with silence. Those of us who heard it were terribly moved. The cruelty of such a system was incredible, let alone the suffering for all involved, the boys, their families. Just like the Stolen Generation. There was really nothing to say, nothing that could be said. The person thanked us for taking the time to listen to the story!

It is not always easy to listen – to really listen. Sometimes we are just distracted. Often we are thinking of how we will respond. Sometimes we want to say: “That happened to me too” “I know how you feel” or we try to ‘outdo’ the other with our story or we want to give our opinion or advice. Listening non-judgmentally is pretty hard. We have to work at it. That's not new – the Book of Proverbs was written around 400 BC. It warns that: “It is the fool who takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” ([Proverbs 18:2](#)), and thus “gives an answer before he hears” ([Proverbs 18:13](#)).

Sometimes what we are being told is harrowing, hard to listen to, or perhaps we have been told this story before. We may even stop listening when the other's ideas challenge us. Sometimes we make judgments about the person telling us the story, about their credibility. But real listening enriches both the hearer and the storyteller. Listening may not be easy but it can be a source of healing, a means of support, an acknowledgement of the other's feelings and struggles, a catalyst in rebuilding lives. Just listening can show the other that we respect them. When we acknowledge his or her story by listening we also show respect for the trust and confidence placed in us by this person.

Hearing another's story is a privilege, an honour, a gift. Listening to another's story connects us, and lets the other know that he or she is not alone.

Sometimes it takes real courage to tell that story but my presence, my time and my listening acknowledges that courage. The apostle James offered some timeless advice: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). Sounds simple enough but too often we are slow to hear, quick to speak, and even ‘quicker’ to anger.

On the other hand, not to be listened to, not to be heard is bad enough. Not to be believed takes that to a whole new level. In recent times we have been assailed with stories of people, many of whom were children, coming forward to tell their story and often they were not heard, they were not believed, they were dismissed. Nothing happened or, worse still, there was a cover up. That has led to a lifetime of suffering, in fact lives have been destroyed because they were not heard, not believed, their stories dismissed as made up or hearsay or rumour. Some were believed but no-one did anything. Stories of domestic abuse have also been heard but ignored, again with terrible consequences. Sometimes we just don't want to hear, we don't want to believe what we are hearing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian who was executed for his anti-Nazi activities. His book *The Cost of Discipleship* has become a modern classic. He used the above quote from the Book of Proverbs to make a very salient point. Bonhoeffer warns: *The person who can no longer listen to his brother or sister will soon be no longer listening to God either; he or she will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life. . . . Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother or sister but only for himself and for his own follies.*

If our faith urges us to create a kinder, gentler, fairer, more compassionate world, surely that begins by listening to the other, hearing their story, acknowledging their grief and pain and anguish.

Regards  
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