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RCC 300H: Tradition and Innovation
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Listening and Living Well

Listening to other people and taking other perspectives into account can be very difficult, especially if what the other person believes in or what they think is contrary to your own beliefs. However, I do think that learning how to listen to others is crucial in trying to live well together. In order for that to happen, we need to go beyond just hearing what others are saying and really take care to listen and understand and try to empathize.

There are a few steps that I believe need to be taken before we can really try to listen to another perspective, and while the first step may sound simple, I believe it's one of the most important. The first thing that anyone should do when presented the opportunity to listen to someone is to realize that they have a story to tell that is worth listening to. I personally had to experience taking that first step in the first Community-Based Listening Project of the semester. The man that I listened to was homeless and I went into it thinking there is nothing he could tell me that I wasn't already expecting and I would be bored the entire time. Although I didn't know it at the time, I was very lucky to have the opportunity to listen to his story. As he spoke, he talked about how he served the country and about his family and what he was doing to try to rent an apartment. His story wasn't the "woe is me" story that I was expecting. I am actually very grateful that he took time out of his day to talk with me and my group. Taking the time to listen to what he was saying really altered what I thought about him, and I'm glad that he was able to change the stereotypes about homeless people that I had that I didn't even know I had. Now

every time I see a homeless person, I feel that I can understand that they have a story to tell, and I can say that my experience with listening to Steven's story has helped me to live well with other homeless people as well.

Going along that same thread, I also think that an important part of being able to listen is being able to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. One example of this is found in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison at the end of Part I. Stamp Paid showed Paul D a newspaper clipping with a drawing of Sethe and a description of her crime, but since Paul D can't read, "The print meant nothing to him so he didn't even glance at it" (183). Stamp Paid told Paul D some of the story about Sethe, but he left out some parts of it in his description. After hearing Sethe's story, Paul D went to confront Sethe about it, and he heard her firsthand account of what she did to her children. Paul D tells her that her love is "too thick" (193) and confronts her, saying "your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard. How did it work?" (194), and he insinuates that she acted like a beast. Paul D wasn't willing to see the fact that Sethe tried to kill her children only to protect them from Schoolteacher and Sweet Home. All Paul D was willing to see was the fact that she tried to kill them, and he wasn't willing to understand how she could be so scared that she would try to kill her own children. Had Paul D given her the benefit of the doubt and tried to understand Sethe's point of view when she was committing the crime, I don't think that he would have left them at first.

What Paul D didn't know when he heard Sethe's story was just how much it would change their relationship. At the end of the novel after *Beloved* left, Paul D returned to 124. He found Sethe in Baby Suggs's bed and it isn't until then that Paul D recognized that she desperately needed help. Sethe was lamenting the fact that her "best thing" (321) left her, and Paul D thinks to himself that "there are too many things to feel about this woman" (321). The

image of Sethe that Paul D has in his mind after listening to her story changes at that moment when he listens to the pain in her voice. Instead of going back to the story of how Sethe killed her child, Paul D listens to her and realizes where she is now, and he knows she is not in a good spot. He tells her, “you your best thing, Sethe. You are.” (322) Now, instead of seeing her as a beast like he did before, he’s there to pull her back up when she needs it the most, and that was all due to the fact that he took the time to really listen to her.

In listening to other people, we are also able to understand and gain a new perspective on issues. In Brenda Cooper’s article “*The White-Black Fault Line*”, she examines different viewer’s reactions to Spike Lee’s 1989 film called *Do the Right Thing*. Essentially, what she was looking at was how well the different types of viewers were listening to the characters of the film and how they processed and interpreted what the characters were saying. Cooper looked at the responses of 65 university students that she classified as either African American or non-African American. In general, she found that the African American students empathized the most with the African Americans in the film, and the non-African Americans empathized with the non-African Americans in the film. For example, the non-African Americans view Sal as “a paragon of fairness and the victim of racist actions” (211) while for the African Americans. Sal was “a symbol of oppression of their race” (211). In the issue of the riot and police brutality, the Whites and Hispanics surveyed expressed their sympathy for Sal and ignored the police brutality, focusing instead on the loss of the pizzeria, whereas the African Americans had the opposite reaction. Many of the problems in *Do the Right Thing* that Brenda Cooper examined are still relevant today. With the many voices and opinions out in the world about those different issues, I do think that many of the issues can be solved if we try to understand why different spectators, like those examined in Brenda Cooper’s article, see things differently than how we see them.

We can gain a new perspective and see issues like police brutality through a different lens only if we listen to the other perspectives.

More problems can occur when people don't take the time to listen to the people that are begging to be heard. One family that really has problems with listening to one another is the Younger Family in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. The play starts out with one of the many instances of the family members not listening to each other and not being willing to talk about issues. While making breakfast, Ruth expresses her frustration to her husband Walter about the fact that their son Travis doesn't get enough sleep because Walter and his friends stay up talking all night long. He responds by asking her "The things I want to talk about with my friends just couldn't be important in your mind, could they?" (27) Ruth doesn't try to hear him out after he says that, and only asks "Why you always got to smoke before you eat in the morning?" (27) in return. Instead of taking the time to try to listen to the other person's opinion, both Ruth and Walter are so stuck in their ways of fighting with one another that they couldn't solve their problems.

Another person in *A Raisin in the Sun* that has problems with being listened to is Beneatha. Beneatha is unique character in the play in that she is a woman that truly wants to be independent and have a sense of who she is. She has a habit of switching between hobbies to find one that really sticks. She was taking guitar lessons, she tried joining a horseback-riding club and theatre group, and she bought a bunch of camera equipment because "people have to express themselves one way or another" (48). Mama asked her what exactly it is she was trying to express and when Beneatha says she is trying to express herself, both Mama and Ruth "burst out in raucous laughter" (48). Beneatha was trying to use all of those activities to express herself and get people to listen to her, but she was being scoffed at by her mother and her sister-in-law.

Just because Beneatha wanted to be and portray herself as an independent and intelligent person and nobody would listen to her and take the time to understand her, it only added to the tension that the Younger family faced throughout the play.

Being able to listen to others is essential to living well together. Even though it can be difficult to listen to other people, listening enables us to recognize others as human beings, it allows us to learn new things and helps gain a new perspective. Not listening to others can be destructive. Without being able to listen to other people, it is impossible for us to live well together.

Works Cited

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