

## **Deep Listening and Saint Francis of Assisi**

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Saint Francis was a curious man.

His story was the narrative of so many of the holy seekers and saints down through the ages: born of great wealth and privilege, shielded from the brutality of the world, he has an epiphany and abandons his privileged life to travel the humble path of a monk, living off the charity of others, trusting that god would put someone in his path to care for him.

In his years spent in contemplation and prayer, Francis sought always to live with love, even toward those who were cruel to him, and to serve others and god above all. He sought to emulate the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth: to preach the good news of salvation and to live in universal love with the world in the most humble way he could.

As happens when people are passionate about their mission, he soon attracted followers, and he taught them. When he organized his organization of ascetic monks, he developed some very simple rules: humility, poverty, abstinence, service, prayer.

Animals ask of us a different kind of listening

Animals both ask of us and offer us a different kind of listening than we experience with our human companions.

To spend time with an animal is to learn how to listen to tail wags, ear position, head bobbing, and to an endless list of noises and individual behaviors animals display.

And despite our different languages, there seem to be a kind of understanding and feeling that transcends species.

Anyone who lives with a companion animal and who has left the house for some amount of time – be it a month's vacation or a weekend, or even a long day at work, is familiar with the behavior of their pet when they return home. Our animals greet us with excitement, or perhaps what seems like resentment, upon our return.

Animals respond to events in their own communities as well and have been known to display behaviors that humans associate with a variety of emotions. Some of you may remember in 2018 the sad story of a mother orca named Talequah whose baby died. The grieving parent carried her baby's body with her for 17 days as she traveled a thousand miles, before finally letting it go. The world was transfixed and moved by this

display, and it caused us to once more reconsider what we know and don't know about animals' capacity for cognizance and complex emotion.

Two weeks ago, Talequah gave birth again, in Puget Sound, to a healthy male calf. While this news may make us smile, it caused a significant response among the orca community of the Pacific. Three separate pods of orcas gathered and celebrated in what biologists call a "welcoming party."

In a report by public radio station KUOW, the event is described in these words:

On the day the orca baby was born, the whales partied into the night.

"That day, on September 5, was really remarkable," said Howard Garrett, co-founder of the Orca Network.

Whales from three pods converged in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, north of the Olympic Peninsula. The J-Pod orcas swam down from the Georgia Strait, where they'd been for five days.

"K and L pods, which hadn't been seen or heard from since July, came in from the West," Garrett said. The whales "seemed to have had a pre-arranged meeting time and place," he said.

It's been seen before: a whale party known as a "super pod" or a "greeting ceremony."

The whales whistled and clicked, vocalizing above and below the water. Amid the ruckus, the baby orca, known as J57, was born. The orca was "born looking very healthy and robust," Garrett said.<sup>1</sup>

The scientists at the Center for Whale Research have complex and powerful technology that allows them to listen to the whale's communication with one another. While they cannot translate the vocalizations into something like human language, they are able to observe behavior that is familiar to a variety of human emotions.

Let's consider for a moment what it might take to listen to what animals are saying to us. Do they communicate more than simple requests for food and access to toilet facilities? Or do they require our attention? Do they respond in ways that show pleasure or fear? Excitement or disdain?

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<sup>1</sup> King, Angela, and Shepard, Kim, September 24, 2020. [kuow.org/stories/a-bouncing-baby-orca-boy-good-news-from-the-salish-sea?fbclid=IwAR0zeScm6NxQJG1UPkGppjVABKFL71NrhJ6lZab7VetxAg7jfKgv36Z32ec](https://www.kuow.org/stories/a-bouncing-baby-orca-boy-good-news-from-the-salish-sea?fbclid=IwAR0zeScm6NxQJG1UPkGppjVABKFL71NrhJ6lZab7VetxAg7jfKgv36Z32ec)

What kind of attention does it take to listen to the thoughts of a dog? Or a cat? A horse? Snake?

In our reading "How to Listen," poet Joyce Sutphen instructs us to "tilt your head slightly to one side and lift your eyebrows expectantly." I call this the "dog responding to a mouse in the cupboard" look. You know the one.

We must listen with a new kind of curiosity. A new kind of attention.

Sutphen encourages us to abandon our expectations, to forget what we've heard and experienced before, to be in the moment, and listen with every fiber of our being.

She encourages us to listen without thinking about our response, without judgment or expectation, to let go of our ideas about what we are being told or taught. She encourages us to be truly empty vessels into which can be poured the most honest experience.

Let's examine her words once more:

**Joyce Sutphen: "How to Listen"**

Tilt your head slightly to one side and lift your eyebrows expectantly. Ask questions.

Delve into the subject at hand or let things come randomly. Don't expect answers.

Forget everything you've ever done. Make no comparisons. Simply listen.

Listen with your eyes, as if the story you are hearing is happening right now.

Listen without blinking, as if a move might frighten the truth away forever.

Don't attempt to copy anything down. Don't bring a camera or a recorder.

This is your chance to listen carefully.  
Your whole life might depend on what you hear.<sup>2</sup>

When we listen with an open heart, we allow ourselves to be open to hearing and learning new things. We can listen to the world around us and observe what we hear. Why don't you try that now? Settle in and listen to what is happening where you are. In your house, or car. Or outside, wherever you might be. Listen.

Where I am, I can hear the hum of my computer. I hear the occasional thump and scramble of my cats playing downstairs. I can hear traffic on my street, and somewhere there is a lawnmower in use. There are birds sharing their opinions about something in the branches of the tree outside my window.

When I listen deeper, I can hear my own heartbeat in my ears. I can hear air entering my lungs. When I move, I can hear the gentle creak of my chair.

These are the things I can hear with my physical ears, in this time and place right now.

But what happens when I listen with my heart?

That's a different kind of thing entirely.

Listening with my heart requires me to explore the depths of Joyce Sutphen's poem, to abandon what I know and be open to the unexpected.

It is that kind of willingness to put aside the self that Saint Francis practiced and taught – to be willing to abandon all of one's own desires and needs in service to a higher purpose: that of love.

Francis was not the only prophet to advocate such selflessness. The Buddha preached the same philosophy: abandon the selfish desires of human comforts and be present in the moment. Be present to what is happening around you. Be present to what you are feeling, and observing, don't have expectations or judgments. Observe and let go.

Deep listening is the sort of thing that lets us connect beyond words or language. Deep listening is what permits us to share our hearts with animals.

Deep listening requires a level of selflessness that Saint Francis ever sought to achieve.

I need to say here that the kind of voluntary submission that Francis spoke of is not always healthy. If fasting is not voluntary, it is not godly. If serving others without

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<sup>2</sup> Sutphen, Joyce "How to Listen" October 14, 2014 <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2014/10/joyce-sutphen-how-to-listen.html>

compensation is not voluntary, it is exploitation at best and slavery at worst. If seeking peace between an abuser and their victim does not include accountability, it is further abuse.

Please never let Saint Francis' words or deeds be used in a way that hurt people.

We need not abandon our own understanding of human dignity – our own and others' – to live out the kind of deep compassion that Francis spoke of.

I will end this morning with the text of a prayer credited to Saint Francis. As with so many things passed forward through the ages, there is no record that shows this was written by Francis' own hand. But the words have carried down and are widely accepted by scholars to be the philosophy and ethos of the Italian Saint who preached to the animals.

#### Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.  
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.  
Where there is discord, let me bring union.  
Where there is error, let me bring truth.  
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.  
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.  
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.  
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.  
O Master, let me not seek as much  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love,  
for it is in giving that one receives,  
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,  
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,  
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

May we always strive to serve others.

May we always strive to listen deeply, with our very souls, to what the world has to teach us.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer\\_of\\_Saint\\_Francis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer_of_Saint_Francis)