



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

# Listening into the Difficult Places

Ted Zorn © 22 February 2026

I've spent my entire adult life believing in the power of communication.

I have a PhD in the subject. I've spent my career studying it, teaching it, writing about it, and trying — not always successfully — to practise it effectively.

Next week, when classes begin at the uni, my main teaching responsibility will be a course entitled Managing Conflict.

So I am personally and professionally invested in the idea that clear and honest sharing and deep listening matter.

And I believe that from the depth of my being.

We have seen communication between diplomats stop wars from starting. We've seen mediators get individuals and gangs to put down their fists and weapons and shake hands. Talk people down from suicide. Repair broken relationships. Restore good will and dignity in families and in workplaces. I've seen people stop yelling, stop blaming, stop retreating into silence, and begin to connect again.

For us UUs, communication plays a huge role in living our 7 principles. If we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of others, we must take the time to listen to them, even when we disagree. If we believe in compassion in human relations, we are compelled to lend a sympathetic ear to our fellow human beings when they are hurting. To achieve acceptance of one another, we must listen, share and be listened to.

So there's no doubt in my mind that communication can be transformative.

But despite all that, communication has limits. And acknowledging its limitations is important.

Even with people who are skilled and deeply committed to communicating with each other, sometimes communication fails to resolve problems. That's especially true when the problem is **not** lack of understanding.

Sometimes the problem is that we understand each other perfectly... and our values or beliefs – or both -- are fundamentally at odds.

That's what I want to explore this morning.

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Let me tell you a story. This one is fictional, but only just. I suspect it's a conversation that you can imagine.

Kara and David are siblings in their fifties.

They grew up in the same home, learned the same family jokes, and have spent a lifetime irritating each other in ways only siblings can. But when it matters, they show up. They love each other.

Now they are showing up for their mother, who is dying.

It's not sudden. It's slow and grinding — serious illness, steady decline, pain that is sometimes controlled and sometimes unbearable.

And their mother has been clear for months. She has said, "I'm ready. I don't want machines and fluids just to keep me barely alive. I want comfort. I want dignity."

And then she says something more specific. She says she wants medical assistance to die.

Kara hears this and feels grief — and also relief. Not because she wants her mother gone, but because she can see her mother's exhaustion.

She believes love sometimes means letting go. For her, helping her mother have a chosen, supported death feels like the final act of care.

David hears the same request and feels panic. He loves his mother deeply.

But he believes — in his bones — that you do not end a life. Not his mother's. Not anyone's. He believes life is sacred. He believes suffering must be met, not escaped.

And underneath it all is something he can barely say out loud: He is not ready for his mother to die.

So the siblings do what good people do. They talk. For hours. For days.

They sit in the hospital cafeteria with cups of bad coffee. They take walks outside the ward. They meet with doctors. They ask questions. They read. They share what they've read with each other.

They cry.

Kara says, "David, Mum is suffering. She's asked for this. This is what she wants."

David says, "And I need you to understand: if we do this, we are killing her. I can't be part of that. I can't live with it."

They listen. They repeat. They try again.

And slowly, painfully, they come to a truth neither of them wants:

They understand each other. And they still do not agree.

Because this isn't a conflict about facts.

It's a conflict about what dignity means. What love requires. What a child owes a parent. What counts as harm.

Finally, one afternoon, after another conversation that goes in circles, David says quietly:

"I love you. And I love Mum. But if you go ahead with this, I won't be there. I won't sign anything. I won't witness anything. I won't hold her hand at the end."

Kara feels as if she's been punched.

She says, "So you'll abandon her?"

David says, “No. I’ll be here every day until then. I’ll sit with her. I’ll care for her. But I won’t participate in ending her life. That’s my line.”

Kara looks at her brother — this man she has known her whole life — and sees something she can’t argue with.

Not stubbornness. Not ignorance. But a boundary.

And in that moment, she realises something heartbreaking: Even with deep listening, even with love, even with their best intentions, *this difference will not resolve itself*.

And a decision must still be made.

Whatever happens next, they will both carry grief — not only for their mother, but for the loss of the comforting belief that listening and understanding will bring agreement.

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One of the lessons I’ve learned in studying communication is that we must take seriously the invisible things that shape our lives: what people assume, what they fear, what they value, what they think is “normal”, what they believe is “right”, what they think is “allowed”.

And often these things are implicit, unstated – in some cases not even conscious.

Conflict isn’t just about what we say.

Conflict is bound up in what we *mean*, what we *protect*, what we *refuse* -- sometimes what we fail to acknowledge.

And that’s why I think it’s important to state this clearly: Communication is powerful — but it cannot, by itself, reconcile incompatible beliefs or values.

It can help us understand. It can humanise. It can soften. It can reduce cruelty.

But it cannot guarantee resolution.

And when we pretend it can, we set ourselves up for disappointment — and sometimes for harm.

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In the organisation Essentially Men, which many of you know I'm active in, we talk about getting to the "clunk". That's the real insight, the real guts of the matter.

In my own experience, I had a similar "clunk" moment as in that fictional story.

I once had a group of friends who were very close. We socialised regularly, had the occasional out of town holiday as a group. And often when we talked, we really talked. We shared almost everything happening in our lives with each other, often in a deep and personal way.

However, one member occasionally began making demeaning comments about the group or about individuals in the group.

The comments were often subtle or implied, what might be labelled passive-aggressive. Things like "When you get better at this, you'll see what I mean" (implying you're not so good at this now). Or "I'm surprised you're still stuck on this issue."

When we raised concerns with him, his response was **NOT**: "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realise the impact. I'll stop." Nor was it, "I made a mistake."

Passive-aggressive communication often works by making the target sound oversensitive if they object.

And his response was:

"Hmm. I didn't mean it as offensive. I think you misunderstood me. Or maybe you were just being a bit too sensitive. But if we just carry on listening and sharing with each other, then any difference of opinion will resolve itself."

At some point, others in the group were upset enough that they wanted to sit down and talk about his comments, but he resisted that, just insisting that if we just carry on as we are, listening deeply and sharing deeply, everything would be fine. And he continued making offensive remarks.

Now maybe I'm naïve, but I don't think he was being malicious. I think he was blind to the effect of his comments. But I also think he sincerely believed that

he was sharing honestly and listening carefully, and that if we did the same, the concerns would fade away.

And we eventually grew apart because that pattern continued.

So here's my clunk. When someone says "Communication will resolve everything," as he was saying here, it can place the burden back on the group.

If the conflict persists, it's because we haven't shared vulnerably enough.

If someone is hurt, it's because they haven't listened deeply enough.

And suddenly, the responsibility quietly shifts away from the person who caused harm.

That's not spiritual maturity.

That's a rhetorical escape hatch.

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One of the most important things we can do in conflict is to listen carefully and check your understanding. That is, paraphrase until the other person says, "Yes, that's what I meant."

And then, sometimes, we have to say after that:

"Okay, I understand and I still disagree."

Or:

"We understand each other and I still can't accept your choice."

Or:

"I understand what you're saying, and I still need you to stop."

Those phrases can coexist.

In fact, in healthy relationships and communities, they *must* coexist.

Because if we make agreement the price of relationship, we will only ever have shallow relationships.

And if we make tolerating hurt the price of being empathetic, we will have relationships that are spiritually hollow and ultimately destructive.

Deep listening is powerful.

But it is not magic.

Honest sharing is courageous.

But it is not a guarantee.

Sometimes we listen, and we understand, and we still end up with a real difference that does not dissolve.

And the more we pretend otherwise, the more harm we can do — especially in communities like ours, where we value compassion, inclusion, and open-heartedness.

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Now, despite what I've said about the limits of communication, I want to be clear on this: Even when we don't or can't resolve the conflict, deep listening still matters.

Because understanding is not pointless. In fact, it can help us do the next thing more wisely.

If I listen deeply to someone and I come to understand them, I may discover that they are frightened, ashamed, feeling unheard, feeling powerless or carrying a deep wound.

And that understanding that can soften my heart.

It can help me respond without anger, bitterness or contempt. It can help me speak more clearly.

Understanding does not mean I must accommodate or keep exposing myself to harm or pretending that a behaviour is acceptable.

It simply means: I see you.

And then I still get to decide what I will allow.

So when I talk about listening into the difficult places, it is important to have the ability to say:

“I understand you.  
And the answer is still no.”

That’s a difficult place. Because we are taught — many of us — that if we are compassionate, we should always be open. That if we are inclusive, we should always make room.

But there is a deeper truth that we Unitarians, at our best, understand:

Inclusion is not the same as tolerating everything.

Beloved community is not the same as “anything goes.”

A healthy community has norms.

It has shared commitments.

It has standards of care.

And those standards are not the enemy of love.

They are one of the ways love becomes real.

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So what do we do when we find ourselves at a genuine impasse?

When we listen and listen and listen... and still, something doesn’t budge?

I think we have a few choices.

First, we can stay curious, even in disagreement.

Curiosity doesn’t mean we accept the other person’s position.

It means we refuse to reduce them to a caricature.

Second, we can speak truthfully.

Not cruelly. Not dramatically.

But clearly.

There is a kind of gentleness that is actually avoidance. And there is a kind of clarity that is actually kindness.

Third, we can name impact, not just intention.

This is huge. Someone may not intend to demean. But if their words demean, the impact is real.

Fourth, we can ask for accountability. Not punishment. Not shaming. Not exile.

Accountability is simply this:

“If you want to be in this community, here is what we require of one another.”

Sometimes, the person will respond well to this accountability. They might say: “I didn’t realise. I’m sorry. I’ll change.”

And sometimes they won’t.

And then we come to the final, most difficult choice: We can set a boundary.

That might mean making explicit agreements.

Not because we are mean.

But because we are trying to protect something precious.

A community where people can show up without bracing themselves for hurt or for bottling up outrage.

A community where dignity is not negotiable.

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Unitarians have a particular calling in this world.

We are not a church of shared doctrine. We are a church of shared values.

And that means our work is not to agree on everything.

Our work is to practise being together across difference.

But there is an important nuance. Not all differences are equal.

Some differences are about taste. Some are about theology. Some are about politics.

And some – and these are the important ones – are about whether people are treated as fully human.

And when it comes to that last category, the work is not to “find common ground” at any cost.

The work is to keep our hearts open *and* keep our values intact.

To listen deeply *and* refuse to normalise harm.

To stay in relationship where possible — and to step away where necessary.

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So today, I want to offer this as a spiritual practice for us:

Let us listen into the difficult places.

Not because listening will solve everything.

But because listening keeps us human.

And then, having listened, let us also have the courage to act:

To speak truth. To name impact. To ask for accountability. To set boundaries.

And when we find ourselves facing a difference that does not resolve, may we remember this:

Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is everyone being able to retain dignity, even in the face of deep differences.

Amen.

## A Meditation

Let us take a moment to settle in.

If it is comfortable for you, allow your eyes to soften or close.

Take a slow breath in...  
and a gentle breath out

Again...  
breathing in...  
and breathing out.

As we settle, we remember how much we long to be understood —  
and how much we long to understand others.

Bring to mind, if you wish, a place in your life where there is tension —  
a relationship, a conversation, a difference that has not easily resolved.

Without judging...  
without rushing to fix...  
simply notice what is there.

Notice what you feel in your body.  
Notice what you hope for.  
Notice what feels tender or guarded.

And gently, we make room for two truths at once:

The truth that listening can open doors.

And the truth that sometimes, even with care and goodwill, we remain  
different.

May we have the patience to listen deeply.

May we have the wisdom to speak clearly.

May we have the courage to hold our values with kindness.

Take one more slow breath in...  
and out.

And when you are ready, gently return your attention to the room.

## Discussion

- What has been your experience of communicating with someone with whom you had a profound disagreement?
- What did you learn from that experience?