

## **Excerpts from the book 'Writing down your Soul'**

by Janet Conner

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### **Tell your story**

Brian and Lisa Berman have a unique, intimate knowledge of the healing power of telling your story. They are Compassionate Listening facilitators and workshop leaders for the Compassionate Listening Project, a non-profit organization based in Indianola, Washington that teaches heart-based speaking and reflective listening skills to people in conflict around the globe. Compassionate Listening workshops have been held in Israel, Palestine, Canada, Germany, Bosnia, Croatia, and the United States. Brian and Lisa lead Compassionate Listening workshops in Germany that bring Holocaust survivors and their families together with SS officers and their families to listen to one another's stories. I was confident that Brian and Lisa's experiences with people telling their stories to other people would have applications for writers telling their stories to the Voice. I asked them to talk about the power of telling your story.

"Your story," Lisa began, "is your healer. In every story is conflict and within the conflict is the chance for change, for growth, for development. The story is what happened, it is what is. The value is in what the story is telling you. It's your guidance from Spirit who wants to bring you to a new place."

I asked Brian and Lisa how they teach people to tell their stories.

"Safety," Lisa said, "is first. There has to be a safe container." In Compassionate Listening, the safe container is provided by the listeners, all of whom are trained to listen beyond the details of the story for the core identity and needs of the person speaking.

### **Speak from the heart**

In this place of safety, you are free to speak as you have never spoken before—from your heart. Speaking from the heart, the Bermans explained, is different from speaking from the head. Typically, when we talk with other people we have an agenda, even if we don't allow ourselves to be conscious of it. As we speak, we scan the other person for reactions. We look for clues that their experiences are resonating with our experiences, their wounds with our wounds, their feelings with our feelings.

Speaking from the heart is different. It is not about linking wound to wound. Speaking from the heart is not about manipulating a response or gauging the other person's level of rapport. It is about uncorking and releasing the story in your deepest heart into the open where, at long last, it can be fully heard and finally healed. Brian described how that happens. "As the people around the speaker listen reflectively to the story, the speaker is able to hear their own story, perhaps for the first time. Until then, they really hadn't listened to themselves. They kept saying the same thing over and over again and having the same angry feelings about it, but they never really heard what they were saying."

### **Listen with your spiritual ear**

As you hear yourself, you begin to discern the needs hidden behind the details of your story. And behind those needs, you begin to hear the sound of your essence, your core, your very soul. This takes listening that reaches far beyond the physical act of hearing to the spiritual act of perceiving the essence held within the words.

Gene Knudsen Hoffman, whose work is the inspiration for the Compassionate Listening Project, said it most elegantly in an address to the Conference of the Pax 2100 in Costa Rica in 1994:

“I am not talking about listening with the human ear. I am talking about ‘discernment,’ which means to perceive something hidden and obscure. We must listen with our spiritual ear, the one inside, and this is very different from deciding in advance what is right and what is wrong and then seeking to promote our own agenda. We must literally suspend our belief and then listen to learn whether what we hear expands or diminishes our sense of Truth.”

“Listen with our spiritual ear.” What an exquisite image. When we do, the story, at long last, can change.

Brian and Lisa seen people with unfathomable, deeply embedded pain transform before their eyes. Brian described how that can happen.

“If you are projecting all this anger at what happened at the other person and then you go behind your words and hear what you are really protecting and defending, you can say, ‘Oh, do I need to keep on protecting and defending this?’ The challenge is when people are so embedded in the character in the story that they don’t connect that they are the container for the whole thing. Within you is everything. Your job is to connect with that innate wisdom so you can have a deep connection with the heart of what really happened, and move on.”

That’s exactly what we soul writers seek: to connect with our innate wisdom, discern the truth behind our story, and move on. Move on from the place where we are to a new place where there is greater peace, greater love, greater possibility. Thousands of people at Compassionate Listening workshops have moved on—Israelis and Palestinians, Serbs and Croats, Syrians and Lebanese, Germans and Jews. “It is a beautiful thing to see a former SS officer and holocaust survivor get up and walk toward one another to shake hands.” Lisa said, “You can see them connect and let go of the picture of each other as ‘the enemy.’”

The image of a concentration camp survivor and a concentration camp officer shaking hands is stunning. And it is even more amazing to realize that this miracle happens not as a result of sophisticated diplomacy or high level negotiations or delicate mediation, but because two people tell their stories from their hearts, and listen with their spiritual ears, and recognize the truth within each other’s words.

### **Be present in the now**

When I spoke to Brian and Lisa about spiritual listening, they said it requires being one hundred percent present in the now. Even though people are talking about something that happened in the past, even the very distant past, they must be totally present and

fully listening in the moment. I wasn't certain what that meant or quite how to do that until Lisa said, you must be present in the moment because, "That which wants to be heard is now here." As soon as she said that I not only understood how it applies to the Compassionate Listening Project, I understood how it applies to writing down your soul.

In the Compassionate Listening Project, the story may have happened a long time ago, but the pain the person feels about it is still happening right now, and the reflective bowl of listeners that holds the story is here right now, and the awareness of the story behind the story happens in the moment, so the healing happens the only place it can happen—in the right here and right now. Two people from Auschwitz, one a prisoner, one a guard, may talk about something that happened in 1944, but they heal when they share their story now.

You can only learn in the present. You can only receive guidance in the present. You can only change your mind in the present. You can only heal in the present.

### **Recognize your guidance**

Brian and Lisa have watched people at Compassionate Listening Project workshops undergo huge shifts. I asked them how they can tell a shift is happening. Brian said that when someone connects with a deep inner truth, especially one that is opposite their conscious, expressed beliefs, tears well up. Lisa said there is another subtle way to know a connection with truth is happening. "It's as if you have a balloon and you put a needle in and the air goes out and it's a relief: aaaaahhhh." This is always a clue that what has transpired is important, meaningful, and real. At the same time, I often find myself nodding. Nodding is, I think, an external recognition of an internal knowing.

### **Critical voices**

I turned to Brian and Lisa and asked: "How do you make peace with your inner bully?" Brian began with an analogy. "If we listen to someone who frightens us, a belligerent neighbor, for example, we can see that person outside of ourselves. As a compassionate listener, we can listen to him, find out what is really of value to him, and what is his positive intention. And when we connect with him on that level, his negative behaviors diminish. So it is with our inner critical voices. Lisa and I have developed some compassionate listening work to listen to our inner critical voice as if it were an outsider and build a partnership to achieve an objective."

This sounded perfect. I asked my favorite question, "*How* do you do that?"

"Ah," Brian said, "it's the *how* part that is challenging. The basic exercise is to externalize the voice. First, each person writes down in a journal what their critical voices say and highlights one that triggers them the most. Then they train a partner to speak like the critical voice so they can hear it out loud as they hear it inside. The person who has this inner critical voice goes into a centering place. This is where the compassionate listening work comes. The person prepares to listen for the positive intention of the critic who lives inside. Then we role play the critical voice, working with the person to set up a mutually empowering partnership to live the critic's positive intention."