



My Word Of The Year, by Nancy Gibbs

My word of the year is listen.

It's one of those words whose meaning is in its music. Listen is a quiet word, that half swallowed L and diffident I and softly hissing S. It defies the clamorous words it absorbs, the words that have defined this year, the shouts and roars, the bray and bluster. Listening is hard when the sounds around us grow mean and ugly.

And listening takes particular courage in divisive times.

"Courage is not just about standing up for what you believe," Doug Elmendorf tells his students at Harvard. "Sometimes courage is about sitting down and listening to what you may not initially believe."

Which is not to say that if we all just listened more, our wounds would heal and our conflicts end. Nor does it mean abandoning our values; it's a strategic reminder of the value of humility. "It's always wise to seek the truth in our opponents' error, and the error in our own truth," theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said. Listening, closely and bravely, to an opposing view deepens our insight and sharpens our arguments--especially in our public life.

It's long past time that we quiet our animal spirits. Our fierce public battles, political fights that have infected our friendships and family, have degraded our discourse, defaced institutions, disturbed our peace. I grew up in Quaker schools, which included regular silent meetings. This did not come naturally to nine-year-olds. But I found then, and need to be reminded now, that we can't hear the soft, sane voice inside us if we're talking all the time, and certainly not if we're shouting.

Instead, let's listen. Invite surprise. Invest in subtlety. And surrender to silence once in a while.