

michael
mitton
a heart to listen

**Learning to become
a listening person**

Preface to Second Edition

This book was written during my last months of working with the Acorn Christian Foundation. It came out of the rich experience of working closely with colleagues in the Christian Listener staff team and the many people I worked with in this country and overseas who carried in their hearts a clear conviction about listening. Although I had long believed in the effectiveness of good listening, it was those years with Acorn that showed me its power. I took all I learned with me into my next job, which was to work with the Anglican Diocese of Derby to help manage a major change project called Renewing Ministry, as well as leading a small church. I lost count of the number of times I said to people that I could think of no better way of equipping me for this job than to have had six years of intensive listening training. Many of the textbooks on change management speak of the need to listen well, and this is not surprising, because when people are experiencing profound change they are full of emotion and questions. When people feel things very deeply and are asking often painful questions, what they need more than anything is a listening ear that respects the question and shows some understanding of the emotion. Only then, I have discovered, can we as humans make some progress into a new hope for the future.

So I would like to record my thanks to the Trustees and Staff of Acorn who allowed me space to write this book. I am particularly grateful to Russ Parker, who has been both my very dear friend and, during the six years I worked for Acorn, a wonderful colleague. I asked him to write the foreword because of both these important roles that he has had in my life. As a colleague, he has watched my deepening passion for the ministry of listening. Not only has he watched it, he has encouraged it and contributed to it. As Director of Acorn, a healing ministry, he affirms that increasingly close marriage between the ministries of healing and listening. As a friend, he knows well my own personal story and the journeys that I have

travelled, a number of which have shaped this book. At important moments in my life he has come alongside me and listened to me. As I write, I think of a time not that long ago, when Russ and I visited the island of Inis Moir off the west coast of Galway in Ireland for a retreat. One November morning we strode out into the strong north-westerly wind and for two hours I told my story to Russ, who listened with skill and devotion, enabling me to hear what was going on at a deeper level of my soul, particularly through a series of dreams I had experienced, and to clarify a direction for my life.

I also want to thank the Christian Listeners staff team with whom I worked in those six years. One of the hardest parts of leaving Acorn, for me, was leaving this remarkable team. I discovered that each member was not only utterly dedicated to their work, but they also demonstrated clearly in their lives a very high quality of listening. I have been inspired by each one of them more than I can say, and my life feels so much deeper and richer as a consequence.

Finally, I have dedicated this book to Anne Long. It was Anne who got me started on this road and, during my years with Acorn, I had the privilege of being entrusted with the work she began in Acorn. I believe Anne's ministry to the church of all denominations has been truly prophetic. With steadfastness of vision and with clarity, conviction and practical application, she has proclaimed the vital importance of this ministry of listening. There are thousands who owe so much to Anne, either directly or through those she has trained. This book will not do justice to the quality of her listening training and care, but I hope it will in some measure be a signal to her, to let her know how grateful so many of us are.

This second edition of the book is substantially the same as the first edition, for there is very little that I would want to change. I have updated some of it and shared some more recent experiences. When it was decided to produce this second edition, I happened to receive an email from someone who had just read the book. In that email she wrote, 'I want to say thank you for your wonderful but disturbing book. It made me weep and laugh out loud; it gave me such hope and joy. A lot of changes are happening at our local

church and not without much heartache and soul-searching. Your book has given me confidence to see things through with the grace of our Lord and the love and compassion that he has given me for people.’ On the days when I struggle with confidence and wish I was a better writer, I go back to emails like this and realise that something of my message has actually got through in this book. The message is essentially very simple: learning to listen draws us into the heart of God, to feel something of the compassion and care that he feels for the humans he has created. When we encounter this, it affects everything.

The first edition of the book was written during my last months with Acorn. I write this edition in the last months of my work with the Derby Diocese. An extended period of listening to myself and to God in a three-month sabbatical is leading me into a new work as a freelance writer, consultant and trainer. Such a move has taken me completely by surprise but it has come about not least because, as I have sat with good friends and told them where I’m up to in life, and they have listened with care, they have helped me find a voice within myself, saying clearly that this is what I need to do. Not only that, but they have helped me to listen to the Lord—this extraordinary, wonderful and risky God of ours—who, if we will but listen to him, has many adventures in store for us. I hope that as you read this book, you will discover some of the ones he has prepared for you.

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Foreword

I will keep this brief because I want you to join Michael on his listening journey, which is richly rewarding to read. Threaded through his book is a deeply ingrained passion and conviction about the utter necessity for us to become listeners above and before all other things. All the prayers we offer to God are on the correct assumption that he is listening closely to what we are saying. Jesus himself told us that everything he did was out of his listening and observation of what he saw his Father doing. We live in a world clamouring for our attention and this is best conveyed by our listening rather than by our proclamations. It was Michael who powerfully reminded me that, out of all the therapies we give to others, listening is the only one that does no harm or damage to the other.

This book invites you to take a journey of discovery about what lies at the heart of listening, and in so doing you will, with me, realise how difficult and how rewarding becoming an accurate listener really is. Michael is my best friend as well as being a colleague on the Acorn staff for six years. I think all of us would want to put on record that he has shown himself to be a man who listens to his team in such a way as to bring the best out of them and for them. He listened to me during times of great turmoil in my life and I am the better for it.

I am greatly excited about this book. Read it and be blessed!

Russ Parker

To Awaken the Heart

*Seldom is the human spirit
Given the honour of the listening ear;
But the gift of God
Is to awaken the heart.*

In 1996, on a warm June evening in a pub in central London, I was enjoying a drink with two good friends. One was Russ Parker, whom I have known and loved as a great friend for many years, and the other was Charles Longbottom, whom I had been getting to know through a joint project in which we were involved. At the time, I was Director of Anglican Renewal Ministries, Russ was the Director of the Acorn Christian Foundation, and Charles was the Chairman of Acorn. In the course of the conversation I asked Charles his opinion about what I should do after my time with ARM had come to an end. Without hesitation, and much to my surprise, he said, 'Join the staff of Acorn and take on the work of Christian Listeners after Anne Long retires.'

I travelled home on the train, my mind buzzing with many conflicting thoughts. I was happy in my work with ARM and loved the new openings that it was giving me, especially contacts I was beginning to make with equivalent organisations in different parts of the world. I had not long returned from wonderful visits to East Africa and India, and my heart had been deeply stirred by such immediate contacts with the developing world. Furthermore, renewal was at an exciting stage and important developments for renewal were taking place in the Anglican communion. In fact, I thought of many good

reasons not to leave my current work. But the invitation to consider the work with Acorn did not go away, and the next stage was to meet with Anne Long, who was then the National Coordinator of Christian Listeners.

I first met Anne 20 years ago, when I began a two-year course at St John's College, Nottingham. I still feel full of gratitude to God for the two very formative years I spent there, which proved to be an excellent foundation for my ministry as an Anglican priest. During the mid 1970s, St Johns was fully engaged in charismatic renewal, and had that ability both to experience the renewal and to reflect on it critically and theologically. Also, one of the effects of the renewal in the 1970s was to free evangelicals to explore beyond the rather rigid spiritual boundaries that had hitherto existed. Anne Long was particularly helpful in this regard. With clearly held evangelical convictions, she nonetheless taught us how to explore the worlds of catholic spirituality as well as the world of 'secular' counselling and therapy. These were two new directions for me (though guideposts for them have always been there in my heart), and Anne taught me how to travel down both of these roads. They have been roads of wonderful discovery for me throughout my ministry.

As I reflect on the training I received at St Johns, I am convinced that what has helped me more than anything has been the listening and counselling training that Anne offered. Not only this but she also led a personal growth group that lasted for a year. This group of students, led by Anne, met regularly, and in the increasingly safe context of the group we were invited to explore areas of personal growth. I am in no doubt at all that the healing that took place within that group, and the insights I gained from the counselling training, are the main reason why I have not sustained serious emotional injury from the many pressures that assail clergy.

I learned much from Anne Long, and from Dr Frank Lake, who was a regular visitor to St John's. Both stressed the importance of listening as a foundation not only to counselling but to all human growth. After I left St Johns and became a parish priest, I continued my connection with the world of counselling and listening by being

a tutor on the St John's Extension Studies Pastoral Counselling courses. I eventually gave this up in 1989 when I became Director of Anglican Renewal Ministries. In this job I was less directly involved pastorally with people, though I regularly needed to offer a listening ear. Often this was to clergy attending our conferences who were facing struggles in their parish. At other times, good listening was necessary in more diplomatic situations, with people who were quite opposed to charismatic renewal, often because they had been hurt by it. I frequently had cause to feel grateful for my listening and counselling training.

The invitation to join the staff of Acorn was one that would take me back into the world of pastoral care. I was far from certain that I wanted to return to this world, however, so I entered a time of listening to God, to myself and to others to discern the way forward, and over a period of time it became clear that God was directing me in this way. Thus it was that I found myself at a commissioning service in Derby Cathedral on 1 October 1997, beginning my new journey with Acorn.

A journey of discovery

The six years of working with Acorn were a journey of discovery for me. To be honest, when I first started with Acorn and people asked me what I did, I never thought it sounded very impressive to say, 'I do listening training.' It felt so much less dynamic than saying, 'I am encouraging renewal in the church.' I had no dramatic stories of revival to offer, no articles to write with thrilling headlines. I found myself being a little apologetic, and I noticed that the other person's response would often be a kindly nod, which I interpreted along the lines of 'Well, I suppose somebody's got to do it.' And yes, I would think, somebody has got to do it. There are precious few listeners around.

I had inherited a wonderful regional team of staff from Anne Long, and excellent resources, and it has always felt a great privilege

to offer this listening training. At staff meetings I would see one of the staff light up as they told a story of a training seminar and the often dramatic impact of listening training. I felt very privileged to be part of this, but I think, in all honesty, it had not reached that place in my heart where I hold my deepest convictions. As I listened to those deepest places of my heart, I kept on discovering a longing for the poor and the marginalised, and for those outside the Church who have never heard that there is a healing God who loves them with eternal love. Once or twice I travelled off to do a talk on listening somewhere, and found myself inwardly agonising that all I was doing was offering more resources for middle-class Christians who already had more than they needed.

These uncomfortable feelings ebbed and flowed, and the time came for me to consider renewing my contract with Acorn or moving on. I was coming to the conclusion that it was right for me to consider moving on to another work, one that would be driven by the callings from deep within my inner self. Then I visited South Africa.

In the early 1990s, Archbishop Desmond Tutu contacted Anne Long to ask if she would come to South Africa and introduce listening training to the Centre for Christian Spirituality that he was developing in Cape Town. The upshot of this was that several teams of Christian Listeners have visited not only Cape Town but other parts of South Africa during the last few years, and there are now centres established in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu Natal. I was asked to visit the emerging teams to foster the link of Acorn's work in the UK and South Africa. Thus it was, on a dark January day in 2002, that I found myself packing my suitcase in preparation for my first long-haul journey for many years.

On the night before I left, my wife Julia woke up and thought, 'It's 3.14am.' She turned over and looked at her bedside clock and, sure enough, it was 3.14am, and she found herself thinking, 'Exactly right.' It was at this point that she sensed God was speaking to her, as he has often done in the quietness of the night. She felt God was saying that it was exactly right that I should be visiting South Africa

at this time. She wanted to get up but found that it was a great struggle. She managed it, however, and felt God then speaking to her about the struggle we have in hearing how important listening is to him. She wrote down what she sensed God saying to her and gave it to me before I departed. I read it again as the huge jet heaved me up into a damp January sky and over the south of England, then France, the Mediterranean and on the long, long flight over the vast lands of Africa. As I pondered all this, I felt somewhat convicted that I had overlooked the obvious. The reason I was doing this listening work was not because it happened to be a job that became available at the right time. It began to dawn on me that God had actually led me into a ministry that was much more to do with the depths within my own heart than I had realised. Not only this, but I was beginning to appreciate just how important this listening ministry is in the work of the kingdom of God.

The climate in Cape Town could not have been more different from the one I left in London. Suddenly it was summer! One of the Christian Listener tutors in Cape Town met me and drove me away from the airport. We almost immediately passed one of the communities called 'informal settlements'. These are large communities of black folk who live in houses that are little more than huts made out of corrugated iron. I clearly remembered these communities from when I last visited South Africa, before the elections, when I visited a number and had the privilege of preaching in the churches and being entertained in the homes. As we drove past them I suddenly felt gripped by strong emotions and longed to visit these places of poverty. Previous encounters with these communities had had a healing effect in my soul, in that they had shown me about qualities of life that are all-too-often lost in our materialist Western world.

Not long after driving past this community, I met up with a very good friend, Bishop Eric Pike, and his wife Joyce. Eric had recently retired as the bishop of Port Elizabeth and he and Joyce now live in Cape Town. It was Bishop Eric who, on a previous visit to South Africa in 1993, had taken me to a Mothers' Union meeting in the

township of New Brighton. It was my first visit to a township, and one that I shall always cherish. In the midst of the anxiety and violence of that pre-election era, here was an oasis of hope. Here there was singing that somehow gathered up the voice of a suffering people and expressed it harmoniously in praise and supplication to God. Here I witnessed Bishop Eric's love for the black community as he spoke to them fluently in their language of Xhosa. Eric was one to lead with his ears, as it were, and he dared to listen to the deep pains of the people of his diocese. It was therefore good for me to be with him that afternoon, as he shared his understanding of the situation in his beloved country.

Eric then drove me to my next meeting, taking the coastal route, and at one point passed a beach full of happy bathers. 'Do you see that beach?' he said. 'This has always been a beach that coloured folk love to use. But during apartheid, they were forbidden to use their beach. Can you imagine that?' he said, swallowing back a pain familiar to those white South Africans who have always loved the black and coloured communities. 'But now look—they can swim there again. It is so wonderful to see!' Once again I felt honoured to be with one of the many white people who suffered so deeply during the years of apartheid, and whose acts of prayer and protest contributed to the birthing of this rainbow nation, a rainbow formed by the love of God shining through many tears. It soon became clear to me that the tears are still evident in South Africa and that there are many pains in all sections of the community that need the warm rays of the love of God expressed through a listening ear.

That evening, I met with the group of trained Christian Listeners at the Centre for Spirituality in Cape Town. A man called Ed Coombe led the meeting. Like Bishop Eric, he was one of those who had keenly felt the pains of apartheid, and the wounds were still evident in his soul. But all this had made him a man of deep compassion. He opened the meeting with devotions based on the set reading for the day in the South African Anglican lectionary, which was the call of Matthew. He then offered a few comments on

this reading, in which he urged us to see how we could take our listening training to the ‘Matthews’ of this world—the outsiders and the marginalised. He quoted from John Wesley, who once said, ‘Go not only to those who need you, but to those who need you most.’

Only a few times in my life have I felt the word of the Lord come to me with such directness that it seemed like the experience described by the writer to the Hebrews—as ‘sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow’ (Hebrews 4:12). This time was one of them. I knew that even if nothing else significant were to happen, it was worth my travelling all the way to Cape Town to collect this word from the Lord. Without any doubt, I knew in my spirit that this was God saying to me, ‘Go now with this listening gift not only to those who need you, but to those who need you most.’ Put alongside the word Julia had heard from God two nights before, I was left in no doubt that I was being called back into Acorn, and the specific calling was not only to take this gift of listening to those who need us, but particularly to seek out ‘those who need us most’.

I was impressed by all the Christian Listeners I met in South Africa, and there was no question that in their hearts they also shared the conviction that their listening training was to be taken to those who need us most. But before my visit came to an end, I was to experience another moment of listening to God that was to make a great impression on me.

KwaZulu Natal

The last stop on my journey in South Africa was to the province of KwaZulu Natal. The leaders of the Christian Listening work here at the time were Jim and Heather Johnston, who ran the Beth Shalom Retreat Centre situated in the hills that overlook Pietermaritzburg. Jim and Heather originally hail from Northern Ireland, but have lived in South Africa for most of their lives and have a deep love for

the people they serve. They have grown particularly close to the Zulu peoples in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands, an area that has been severely ravaged by HIV/AIDS. Jim and Heather have taken the listening training to this community, and have been part of a team producing a listening course for those caring for people living with AIDS. The course is called 'Listening to pain and hope'.

Thus it was, on a Friday morning in January, that they drove me out of fogbound Pietermaritzburg, north to the majestic Drakensburg mountains and on to the vast plains that hold a multitude of rural communities, all of whom have been buffeted by this brutal disease. We arrived in the small town of Bergville, where we met Phumzile Ndlovu, the Co-ordinator of World Vision's Child Survival Project and the Home-Based Care Programme for HIV/AIDS sufferers.

The home-based project started in 1999 and trains volunteers from the local communities to visit those who are terminally ill and to offer support to the families before and after the death. When I visited, there were 80 visitors, mostly women, in the Bergville region. Phumzile introduced us to three of the volunteer home-based carers who shared their stories. Between them they had cared for 57 patients, all of whom have died.

One of these visitors told us about her work.

I go to a household where there is a terminal patient. Sometimes the health worker tells me the person has AIDS and tells me how to look after this person. When I go to the household, I don't stay there, but I request to see a family member and train them to look after the patient. All family members need to be talked to. If the person has a wound, I teach them how to wash and dress the wound. I teach the family that they must give that person love. I also encourage them to eat nutritious food. Sometimes the terminally ill patient is the breadwinner and so there is no food in the home. Then I encourage the family to do the small gardens, but the trouble is that they have not enough money to buy the seed. In some situations, when there is no money for seed, I take the difficult decision of taking money from my family and buy spinach seed for this family. Some of my

patients don't have faith. We have some Bibles to give out, so I offer it to them and say, 'Do you know this book?' I leave it with them, and return the following day, and say, 'This book contains stories that will give you eternal life.' The Bible stories show the way to faith and hope—the promise of eternal life even after death. If the person is a parent and we know they are going to die, we talk with them about who will care for the children.

We are spending much time with the orphans—we sympathise with them and we help them to face their situation. All the supervisors meet together and we have corporate supervision and share what's on our heart. It is very painful—the person whom you have cared for who dies is part of your body. When you go to the altar by yourself, you pour your heart out to God and it helps you to face the truth that we are all going to die one day. Families often continue friendship with the caregiver.

I found myself feeling intensely moved as I listened to these women tell their stories of providing such generous care to those stricken with AIDS. I was also thrilled to hear them speak of how much the listening training was helping them. Such was the enthusiasm for listening training and the 'Listening to pain and hope' course that 700 of these home-based carers had received listening training. For me, this was a moment of revelation, of transition—a movement from seeing listening training as simply helpful to seeing it as a vital Christ-like gift to offer to those who need it most.

I returned to the retreat centre with Jim and Heather, feeling rather stunned. I was on my own and suddenly felt the Lord very close to me. So I got out my laptop and started to write what was in my heart. I found myself writing prophetically—I was not sure whether it was from God or from a deep and hitherto unheard place in my own heart. I did not mind too much which it was, because it was important to listen to both voices. Both had something important to say. Among the thoughts that came to me that evening was the following:

*Why do I need people to listen?
Why do I need an army of listeners?
Because my house has been a rebellious house.
The proud speak and speak and feel they have the answers...*

*The earth is sick because few have listened to it.
The church is sick because people speak when they should listen.
My poor are sick because people speak about them
but will not listen to them.*

*Why do I need my people to listen?
Because when you listen you meet me in my glory.
You will encounter me in such a way as to transform nations.
You humble yourself to become the meek who inherit the earth.
You relinquish your power.
You let go of what you want to say,
and instead, you wait as you listen,
and then you speak to what you hear,
and that word will be wisdom.
My world suffers because of lack of wisdom;
wisdom is not gained by talking but by listening.
The fool speaks and plans and fills all silences.
The wise one is prepared to look foolish by remaining silent
until they hear a word from the Lord.
This incessant talking has cut my people off from the living word.*

*When the poor are listened to,
they start to believe that they are being noticed.
I am among the poor;
you hear my word amongst them,
and then you release my word to the world,
and when my word is released my world will find healing.*

God's heart for listening

Given that I was listening to what was probably a mixture of my own heart and the heart of God, nonetheless I felt that within it I heard very clearly God's longing that we might learn to listen better.

This was confirmed for me on my return to England. I contacted Anne Long, as I wanted to check out with her my experiences in South Africa and to check them against the vision God had originally given her for Christian Listeners. When I met with her, she told me that she had been listening to God through reading the Psalms in Eugene Peterson's *THE MESSAGE*, and the set Psalms for the day I met with her were Psalms 81 and 95. She had been particularly struck by these passages:

*But my people didn't listen, Israel paid no attention;
So I let go of the reins and told them, 'Run! Do it your own way!'
Oh dear people, will you listen to me now?
Israel, will you follow my map?*

PSALM 81

*Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks:
Don't turn a deaf ear as in the Bitter Uprising,
As on the day of the Wilderness Test,
when your ancestors turned and put me to the test.
For forty years they watched me at work among them,
as over and over they tried my patience.
And I was provoked—oh, was I provoked!
'Can't they keep their minds on God for five minutes?
Do they simply refuse to walk down my road?'
Exasperated, I exploded,
'They'll never get where they're headed,
never be able to sit down and rest.'*

PSALM 95

We both felt we heard very clearly in these modern translations of ancient words the utter exasperation of God, who longs that we might be a listening people. We also heard the sad consequences of our stubborn failure to listen. Very simply, we lose our way.

In my time of listening to God and to my own heart after my day in Bergville, I was fascinated to hear of the connection between listening and ‘transforming nations’. I felt rather sceptical about this: was it a grandiose part of me getting rather carried away? But then, a couple of months after returning, I received an e-mail from Joanna Zeiner, a Christian Listener tutor in KZN who had been advertising a Christian Listening seminar in Natal Seminary. She advertised the seminar using our Acorn mission statement: ‘Bringing the healing of Jesus Christ to a broken world’. A student from Burundi, Freddy Tuyezere, saw the poster and wrote to her: ‘When you say, “bringing the healing of Jesus Christ to a broken world”, I just see my nation destroyed by wars and divisions. People are so discouraged there. Can you please allow me to start listening, and then help peace to come to my lovely country.’

I have always been impressed with the way African people are able to see things holistically. Typically, the African Freddy had seen that there was a link between listening and the healing of a nation. When people start to listen to one another, the mechanism for reconciliation is put into place and this is hugely significant for a nation torn apart by conflict.

I wrote the first edition of this book in my final weeks with Acorn. It is thrilling for me to see that much of the vision that I have described in these first pages of the book is now finding an out-working in Acorn’s listening ministry. The staff are working harder than ever to share listening training with many people. Some excellent work is now going on in schools, where Acorn is equipping children to listen well to each other.¹ The resources of Acorn are also becoming increasingly available to the poor of the developing world, especially those afflicted with HIV/AIDS, and great listening work is going on in the wounded countries of Burundi and Rwanda. I have

no doubt that God will use this gift to touch those lives that are so precious to him.

For me, those six years with Acorn were a time of a change of heart. I feel that God awoke my heart to the realisation that listening is not simply a pastoral tool for people who rather like counselling-related activities. It is fundamental to our humanity, and crucial for the way we treat each other. I know I have deeply changed, and for the rest of my life I shall value listening as one of the most healing gifts that we can possess.

This is not going to be an erudite book full of footnotes to impress you! Neither is it a handbook on how to listen. If you would like something more practical, then I refer you to Anne Long's excellent book called *Listening* (DLT, 1990) and the Acorn Christian Listener courses, which are listed in an appendix at the end. This book is more of an exploration of why listening is an important gift, and how it is a gift that is so necessary for today's culture.

When I wrote my book on the healing ministry, *Wild Beasts and Angels*,² I decided to risk including a narrative tale that ran through the chapters and served as a parable. I had so many positive comments about this story that I have decided to do the same with this book. The aim of the narrative is simply to convey the main theme of the chapter in the context of a short story, to help in the process of reflecting on the theme. It is an entirely fictional story based in Africa. It could have been set anywhere in the developing world but, because of my experience in South Africa, it felt most natural to root my story there. The aim of writing this story is to say much the same thing as the main text, but in a different way. My prayer is that as you read the pages of this book, both the main text and the story, you will receive that gift of God that awakens both the mind and the heart.

The Speaker (1)

The conference was well organised—very well organised. There were delegates from several countries. There was a government minister who sat at the front, although he kept having to go out to speak on his mobile phone. Everyone had very smart-looking name badges. And of course there was the Speaker—a very intelligent man who was very well dressed, very knowledgeable and used his PowerPoint presentation very well indeed. Nice use of colours, if rather too many words.

Nkani had never seen PowerPoint before. He liked it. He liked the pie charts best—something about them made him want to giggle. Looked at in a certain way, they seemed like funny faces, and some humour was worth a lot in this rather boring conference. Not that the subject was boring—just the way the Speaker addressed it. Actually, Nkani had never been to a conference like this before. It was the first time he had ever travelled out of his village, so everything was new and strange. He had been invited and sponsored, and when he had been told that he had been selected to travel to England for this conference, he felt as if someone had given him one of the stars from the sky. ‘Your English is so good,’ he was told. And they were right; it was—which meant that he could understand most of what the people on the platform were saying.

‘I think I speak for us all,’ said a man in a pinstriped suit next to the Speaker, ‘when I say that we shall always be indebted to our speaker today. His knowledge about AIDS is truly impressive, and the thesis he has presented to us this afternoon will give us food for thought for a very long time to come. I’m pleased to say that he can stay with us for a few more minutes before he leaves to catch the evening flight to Edinburgh, where he is speaking at another high-level conference tomorrow. So this gives us a chance for some questions. Could I ask you to speak your questions into the microphone that’s been placed here at the front, please.’

There was a shuffling of seats and several people formed an orderly queue at a stand-mike in front of the stage. Nkani had never liked microphones, so he stood up where he was and said in his gentle, yet strong, African voice, 'Sir, I have a question.'

'To the microphone, if you wouldn't mind, please.'

Nkani ignored the pinstripe and carried on, 'My question is this: sir, you seem to know a lot about the subject of AIDS. Your knowledge is certainly very impressive. But have you *listened* to those who are suffering? I mean, have you *really* listened to them, or have you just read about them?'

There was suddenly a sense of tension in the hall. The pinstripe shuffled nervously and smiled patronisingly at the questioner who should have been at the microphone. He leaned towards the microphone, but the Speaker moved in first. It was all right. He was used to this. He could handle it.

'Yes, I'd like to thank my friend for asking this important question. Part of my research involved assembling a detailed questionnaire that was sent to 1000 sufferers in 17 different countries, probably including yours. As I said earlier, 78 per cent responded, which is remarkable. I can assure you, I have studied those responses very carefully and in that respect have certainly listened to them.'

The pinstripe smiled an artificial smile, put his hand on the mike stand and attempted to ask for the next question, but Nkani spoke again.

'With respect, sir, I would like to invite you to meet the sufferers in my country. You cannot meet people through a questionnaire. People from my country will not open their heart in a questionnaire. They have a voice that has become so weak that you have to draw close to hear them. Sometimes it is no more than a whisper. Please, will you travel with me to my home village? You would be my guest, and there you could listen. I think it would help.'

The pinstripe was now sweating. This was not the kind of 'question' he had wanted at all. In fact, he had never had anyone behave like this. The conference had gone so smoothly up to this point. He leaned toward the Speaker and said something that no one

could hear. Then he turned back to Nkani and said, 'You must appreciate that our speaker is a very busy man, and I very much doubt...' He failed to finish, as the Speaker leaned forward over the lectern and said, 'I will leave an e-mail address with you. Please contact me.' He smiled a quick smile and then looked hastily toward the queue of other questioners, raising his eyebrows in anticipation of a rather more helpful question.

'Thank you, sir,' said Nkani quite fearlessly, 'but I think I should talk with you afterwards, as I have a better idea. There won't be any problems. I will meet you at the back of the hall before you leave', and the breadth of his smile spoke not of victory but of an inner joy that, as far as he was concerned, a friendship had been formed.

Thus it was that, six weeks later, the Speaker found himself, against all his better judgment, settling into his Business Class seat on a South African Airways jet. He was shuffling several sheets of paper but not reading any of them. He could not for the life of him work out why he had agreed to go on this trip. He was even paying for it out of his own pocket! 'But it will sound impressive,' he convinced himself. 'I will at least be able to say, "When I was in Africa I witnessed first hand..." Mmm, yes, that will certainly give me more authority. It's only a week anyway. I'll treat it as a bit of a holiday. Should be fine.' But, despite his reassurances to himself, he felt rather vulnerable, as vulnerable as he had felt on the day when Nkani had asked that question in front of the whole conference and he had detected tears in Nkani's eyes when he said that the voice of his people had grown weak.

The Speaker quickly swallowed the feeling and ordered a gin and tonic from the flight attendant. When the cabin lights were dimmed, he fell into a restless sleep, one interrupted by strange dreams as he flew over the hills and valleys of Africa.

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