

# A Darned Good Listening

Walking the Taitua Arboretum, off the Raglan road, just outside of Hamilton, is one of my favourite places at any time of the year, and particularly when avoiding the summer sun. Our usual pattern is slow, reflective wandering, stopping often to feel bark, examine leaves and bathe in dappled sunlight. As a bonus, the Arboretum's resident chickens, ducks and geese always manage to offer up a gorgeous stray feather or two for the shelf at home.

If walking here doesn't set your world to rights, it's hard to imagine what will.

This time was different. "I just need you to let me rant", she said. "I have to get this off my chest before I suffocate."

As we walked, I heard the latest family drama described in technicolour. Every 'he said', 'she said' and 'you'll never guess what happened then.' You know, it's the kind of conversation that happens when two friends know all the players in each other's family. The safe offloading you do with a friend who won't judge and won't tell. We're sounding boards for each other and our friendship has weathered the events of many years.

This day, she was furious about a family conversation, adamant that it was deliberately designed to make her feel small. All the old hurts and old patterns came out in force. 'It's typical, he always does this...' Knowing her so well, I'm familiar with the dynamics of that highly competitive brother-sister relationship and recognise that the traffic is not always one-way. But she is my friend, so my support for her is unconditional.

Many of our best and deepest conversations go from incident to understanding, taking the sting out of life through different interpretations, without denying the feelings or the history. This time though, she spun like a top over this latest family incident, raging through tears and frustration. Nothing would shift her as the wounds are so old and the scars so deep. And all she wanted from me was to be present and purposeful. To listen, not speak. She needed love, not a lecture.

It's easy to slip into old habits though, so every time I was tempted to open my mouth and offer a different view, I had to remember that she just needed to offload and that she knew what she was doing.

So we walked, or rather strode and the usual circuit was done in less than half the time. Near the end, at the stone circle, she paused. "I think I need to sit here a while. It's like a boil has burst and I feel exhausted." So I wandered back through the bamboo grove where the canes moved in the wind,

reminding me that our job as friends is often to bend and not always to present an alternative view. Trying to fix things for someone else is condescending and disempowering. It says that they don't know enough and are not good enough to fix it themselves.

Rather, the best we can offer is a darned good listening to. It's a gift to both parties. As the listener, you're honoured that they feel secure enough to tell you what has happened. As the speaker, you're gifted a safe space to talk your way through and make sense of what has happened.

Almost an hour later, she reappeared with a hug. "I feel much better! Could we walk back through the path and can I test out some ideas on you?"

So we did. And this time, acknowledging the seemingly relentless patterns of the past, she decided to look at the ongoing family dramas through a different lens. Not so much of what had happened, but what she was making it mean. Yes, he had always made comments that wound her up, but what if she chose to read them differently. Tricky given the history, but it was up to her to decide how to respond. Was she right to react? Did the ensuing drama warrant the outburst? And did she need to be right or was there another way that was more useful? Maybe it was time she took a different path, and if so, what would change?

My friend is very self-aware and yet she falls into thinking traps, just as we all do from time to time. Me too. The easiest road is to keep on repeating the same cycle with the same result. Breaking the pattern means doing things differently, perhaps with a jolt. Being listened to deeply gave her the chance to step back and watch herself with a third eye. To listen to herself reason, blame, justify and make excuses, and then, finally, to ask if there might be a better way. That's much easier to do when you aren't trying to convince someone else.

Her request that I give her a darned good listening to was exactly what she needed. Pure, attentive, listening can take a lot of tongue biting, but it's a gift to offer, rather than wait to be asked for.

Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life – How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from [www.jennymagee.com](http://www.jennymagee.com) If you are looking to make significant changes, contact **Jenny** via email to [jenny@jennymagee.com](mailto:jenny@jennymagee.com)

