Moral Imagination and Profound Listening

Her head scarf is sunny yellow. But black despair is etched into the lines on her face. Her age is impossible to guess. She could be 40 or 60. Her hands stretch to heaven. Her eyes send a silent plea understood in any language. "Why God why? Please God please!" Her picture is projected on the back wall of the gilt-edged stage of Carnegie Hall in New York. I am five rows back, but I know if I touched her cheek it would be wet. I don't know her name, but I won't forget her face.

I am here tonight with my fiancé, Sharjeel, (who is from Pakistan) to help raise funds for this woman and the 20 million other victims of the floods in Pakistan (just for context...that would be like 60% of the entire country of Canada waking up tomorrow with their homes destroyed and jobs gone). When the floods first happened in September 2010 I watched in horror. I cried at the images on the nightly news. I sent money. And then I got on with my life, occasionally thinking and worrying about the people in far off Pakistan, but not doing anything about it. It's all too easy (in my warm bed, with my full belly) to forget, isn't it?

Tonight is about remembering. More than 100 of the most talented musicians in the world have donated their time to perform Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Here I am, first time at Carnegie Hall, first time ever hearing an orchestra live. The violas and cellos start playing with a low humming intensity that builds like a swelling wave until I feel the hair lift on my arms. For the first time in my life I listen to music with my whole being, my full heart.
This bold, miraculous, compelling symphony has been played since 1824, but its message of hope and its appeal for humanity is as relevant today as it was almost 200 years ago. During the “Ode to Joy” finale I don't even realize I'm crying until Sharjeel brushes a tear from my cheek. The evocative music juxtaposed with heart-rending photos of the flood delivers a new emotion with every note...despair, joy, grief, hope. But most definitely, most certainly hope. In a world full of people who are this talented, this caring. In a world where geniuses like Beethoven create enduring masterpieces like this, how can we not succeed in using our collective power to solve whatever tragedy befalls our neighbours? Tonight I feel part of something much bigger than my single ray of hope. I feel like together... anything is possible.

And I have artistic director George Mathew to thank for this soul-stirring inspiration. He is well known for using his musical talent to support humanitarian causes around the world. In black tails and a crisp white bow tie, he walks slowly across the stage to take the microphone. He speaks in a low, measured voice about a big idea he calls "profound listening." He explains that musicians in an orchestra exercise the highest form of listening. Not only do they listen to themselves and the notes they produce. They use anticipatory listening to hear the individual and collective sounds of all their fellow musicians and then respond by producing notes that will mingle with all the other notes to create the most perfect combination of music at every moment.
"Imagine," he says. "Imagine the powerful, immediate impact if this profound listening was exercised by Republicans and Democrats, by Israelis and Palestinians?"

Imagine indeed. And when Jacqueline Novogratz (Foreign Policy's list of Top 100 Global Thinkers and one of Daily Beast's 25 Smartest People of the Decade) takes the stage I am transfixed. Wearing a traditional Pakistani shalwar kameez, she begins to tell stories about the horror and hope she has witnessed in Pakistan in recent months. She is CEO and founder of Acumen Fund. This is an extraordinary non-profit that raises and invests "patient capital" in entrepreneurial and business projects in poor countries to deliver affordable water, housing and healthcare. They have invested more than $11 million in Pakistan.

This is a woman who never forgets those in need. Never rests. Never accepts. A lot of us think about it, talk about it, dream about it. But she is actually doing it. Changing our world for the better. One of the most impactful messages I took from her speech was the concept of moral imagination. She was talking about solving problems and building bridges in complex, challenging situations by projecting yourself into the minds of others. And then using this shift in perspective to truly understand and become emotionally engaged in the worldview of the other person. If we all used our moral imaginations more fully, imagine the deeper insights this would bring, the creative solutions it would lead to and the deep human bonds it would build.

At the end of the day race, culture, geography, circumstances....none of it changes the basic human equation. Once our primal need for food and shelter is met, all any of us wants is to be known, listened to, understood and loved. I think that's why these two particular concepts resonated with me so profoundly – because they have universal application. If we all harness the power of profound listening and moral imagination, we can help Jacqueline and George alleviate suffering. We can improve that basic human equation and elevate the human condition. We can help the nameless woman in the yellow headscarf. In fact, in her honour I have set up an ongoing donation (which you can do at www.acumen.org). And I pray that somehow she knows we are listening.