

From a July 32,2017 blog by Michael Anthony Howard.

Nelle Morton (1905-1987) was an American theologian, professor, feminist activist, and civil rights leader. She taught at the Drew University School of theology and wrote and lectured widely.

## NELLE MORTON - "HEARING TO SPEECH"

We live in a microwave/internet society that teaches us to look for quick and easy answers. It takes time to learn to really see and hear each other. But our society teaches us that our first impressions are what matters. So we quickly decide what to think. No one wants to take the time to really get to know each other. Most of us have not learned the practice of listening to each other's stories. And that means that most of the time we cannot have any real conversations about the things that really matter. The late feminist theologian [Nelle Morton](#) said that hope comes from "a great ear at the heart of the universe—at the heart of our common life," that comes alive when we learn to *hear one another to speech*.

The real curse underneath the most important sins of our time (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) is not simply oppression, or greed, or power. It is the lies that human beings learn to tell about each other, shaping our imaginations, convincing us that we can be excused from the hard work of getting to really know each other. Society teaches us to look at our neighbors and imagine them as problem laden rather than promise filled.

The excerpt below by Nelle Morton comes from her 1977 essay "Beloved Image," which is found in her book [The Journey is Home](#).

**Hearing to Speech** It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that I first received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: "I hurt... I hurt all over." She touched herself in various places as if feeling for the hurt before she added, "but... I Frodon't know where to begin to cry." She talked on and on. Her story took on fantastic coherence. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one Howmoved. No one interrupted. Finally she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. "You heard me. You heard me all the way." Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: "I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story." I filed this experience away as something unique. But it happened again and again in other such small groups of women. It happened to me. Then, I knew I had been experiencing something I had never experienced before. A complete reversal of the going logic in which someone speaks precisely so that more accurate hearing may take place. This woman was saying, and I had experienced, a depth hearing that takes place before the speaking – a hearing that is far more than acute listening. A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech –a new speech—a new creation. The woman *had* been heard to her own speech.

While I experienced this kind of hearing through women, I am convinced it is one of those essential dimensions of the full human experience long programmed out of our culture and our religious tradition. In time I came to understand the wider implication of this reversal as revolutionary and profoundly theological. Hearing of this sort is equivalent to empowerment. We empower one another by hearing the other to speech. We empower the disinherited, the

outsider, as we are able to hear them name in their own way their own oppression and suffering. In turn, we are empowered as we can put ourselves in a position to be heard by the disinherited (in this case other women) to speaking our own feeling of being caught and trapped. Hearing in this sense can break through political and social structures and image a new system. A great ear at the heart of the universe –at the heart of our common life—hearing human beings to speech—to our own speech.

Since this kind of hearing first came to me, I have tried to analyze the process, but it resists analysis and explanation. It traffics in another and different logic. It appears to belong in woman experience, and I have found it in some poetry and some Eastern religions. The Pentecost story reverses the going logic and puts hearing before speaking as the work of the spirit.

There is no doubt that when a group of women hear another woman to speech, a presence is experienced in the new speech. One woman described the “going down” as non-speaking—or speaking that is a lie. Even though she used the common vernacular she said she used it in the clichéd manner of her conditioning. It was the language of the patriarchal culture—alien to her own nature. “Coming up,” she explained, “I had no words. I paused. I stuttered. I could find no word in the English language that could express my emotion. But I had to speak. Old words came out with a different meaning. I *felt* words I could not express, but I was on the way to speaking –or the speaking was speaking me. I know that sounds weird.” While all liberation movements may be expected to rise with a new language on their lips, I have been particularly conscious of the new woman speech. Perhaps because it portends such vast changes of both a personal and political nature. It is as if the patriarchal structures had been called into question and the powerful old maleness in deity had been superseded by the new reality coming audible in woman speech.

The phenomenon of women speaking runs counter to those theologians who claim that God is sometimes silent, hidden, or withdrawn (*deus absconditus*), and that we must wait patiently until “He” deigns to speak again. A more realistic alternative to such despair, or “dark night of the soul,” would see God as the hearing one—hearing us to our own, responsible word. That kind of hearing would be *priori* to the theologians’ own words. It might even negate and ruffle their words and render them unable to speak until new words emerge. Women know hearing to speech as powerfully spiritual, and know spirit as movement and presence hearing us until we know and own the words and the images as our own words and our own images that have come out of the depths of our struggle.