

**The Gift of Listening
by Leighton Ford**

The Call of the LFM Mentoring Community

**To advocate and practice the art of Christ-centered spiritual mentoring
from generation to generation
so as to enhance the spiritual, emotional, and relational health of
kingdom-seeking leaders
who have a passion to lead for Jesus, like Jesus, and to Jesus
and through his Spirit to be a part of God's transforming presence
in their communities around the world.**

Our call is not just to mentoring in general, but to spiritual mentoring in particular. And at the heart of spiritual mentoring is the art of listening: *wholly* and *holy* listening.

The late respected management guru Peter Drucker asserted that "The first leadership competence is 'the willingness to listen.'" And in *Leaders* Warren Bennis wrote that "The leader must be a superb listener ... successful leaders we have found are great askers and they do pay attention."

Yet listening has often been overlooked as a key attribute of leaders. When I was young in ministry I remember spending time with several well-known leaders. After long conversations I realized that I knew everything they did, but they knew almost nothing about me! They never asked a question. Starting then I determined to be a listener to others – and later on especially to listen to younger leaders coming along.

If listening is of great value for leaders in any field, it is most especially so for those of us who are sensing a call to be part of this mentoring community and to help guide others. Here is how we describe our call:

Our Rule (Way) of Life

We are called to serve as a community of friends on the journey - followers, companions, and learners - together in the way of Christ. We are followers of Christ as our leader, and the Way home to the Father. We are companions with those who seek to lead like Jesus and to lead others to him. We are learners helping each other to grow in the art of spiritual mentoring (or, companionship).

If this is our call and rule, then we need indeed to become a community of "superb listeners", who are "great askers, and who do pay attention."

A central mark of our community will be a commitment to help each other to listen: to God, to our own hearts, and to each other.

This is what spiritual direction is: *wholly* or *holy* listening (as Margaret Guenther titled her book, *Holy Listening*).

Spiritual mentoring/direction is not a program, or a technique, or a profession. It is an art: the art of listening to and with others in the presence of Another.

As the Celtic spiritual leader Aelred described times of holy listening in the presence of God: "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, in our midst."

Spiritual mentoring is a gift from God, for others – a gift of listening.

Like any art it is also a practice, an attitude of the ear, mind, and heart. And so we can learn through practicing the gift.

This is why our Mentoring Community Gathering is not a seminar, a conference, or a workshop. Rather it is a time and place to "gather" our thoughts and questions and learnings together, a time of listening together so we may discern God's calling for us, and offer this gift to others.

God Speaks, We Listen, Then We Speak

Frank Buchman once said, "When man listens, God speaks. When man obeys, God acts ... We are not to tell God. We are to let God tell us. The lesson the world most needs is the art of listening to God." (Quoted in Klaus Bockmuhl, *Listening to the God who Speaks* 2)

The entire Bible is the record of God speaking in human history and calling on his people to listen. Isaiah provided this remarkable insight:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious, I have not drawn back. *Isaiah 50:4,5*

God wakes us first to listen, then to have a word for others. What is this "word that sustains the weary"? It is the word that is apt, right, timely, helpful, convicting, sustaining. I think of many "words that sustained me" just when I needed them from friends and loved ones.

They came from people whose ears God had wakened and whose tongues God had instructed. Notice in the passage from Isaiah how divine guidance is offered not merely for our lives, but to help our weary fellow traveler.

I know that God has been given me this "word" at times for those who come for

spiritual direction. I also know it has come from what I myself have been taught, and lived, and especially through affliction.

Our Model: The Great Listener

Our model above all is Jesus who was the Great Listener. You remember his words about listening?

He who has sent me is true, and I speak to the world those things which I heard from him. I do nothing of myself but as my Father taught me, I speak these things.
John 8:26,28.

As the late Henri Nouwen described Jesus' posture of listening:

We will never understand the full meaning of Jesus' ministry unless we see how the many things are rooted in the one thing, listening to the Father in the intimacy of perfect love. *Show Me the Way* 90

Jesus also listened carefully to others, as shown in his conversation by the well with the woman from Samaria. Count the words spoken in this story, and you will find that she spoke four times as many words as Jesus did. He spoke powerful words, but he also listened. Jesus also blessed those who listened to him, like the servants at the wedding in Cana (John 2:5), the disciples who obey his commands (John 15:7), and Martha who sat listening to what he said. *(Luke 10:39,42).*

Learning to Listen

One of our greatest needs is to learn active listening. I like to think I am a good listener yet I have often found it difficult to listen attentively, in part because when I was a child my mother punished me by lecturing me, often and at length, so that I learned to daydream and let my mind wander. I have learned that listening takes much practice.

If we want to be effective servants and helpful leaders we must learn to listen to God, to those close to us, to our hearts and to strangers,

Listening to our own hearts. "Praying is first and foremost listening to Jesus, who dwells in the very depth of your heart" wrote Nouwen. "Set aside some time for active listening to God every day.

Listening to others. This is one of the greatest gifts we can give. When I listen carefully, with nuanced attention, not to frame a reply but to understand, I am saying "What you think and feel is important. Because God takes you seriously, so do I!"

Listening in sharing our faith. Speaking skills are important in witnessing to others, but so are listening skills. A layman, an engineer, described evangelism as “listening in on the conversation between someone and the Holy Spirit, and speaking when given permission by that person, and the Holy Spirit.” As Keith Miller put it, when we listen carefully to another it is like running our fingers around the rim of a cup until we come to a cracked place – the place of need – where we can help them to connect to Jesus!

Listening to those we lead. As Drucker and Bennis said, the best leaders know how to listen. They don’t just talk about “my vision” but about “our vision” because they have listened and the vision is owned and shared by others.

Max DePree, former chairman of Herman Miller, Inc., tells the story of a Frenchman traveling to St. Petersburg in the 19th century with a group of Russian nobles. They were discussing the pains of attending court, among which was the obligation to listen to boring conversations. They were trying to determine the best way of appearing to listen. The Frenchman made a simple observation. “The best way of appearing to listen,” he said, “is to listen”!

To listen to God in his Word and through his Spirit – to our own hearts – to others – to the world is crucial. Spiritual mentors must be good listeners.

So let my prayer and yours be: ***Lord, teach me to listen.***