

WHOLLY AND HOLY LISTENING
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For the Mentoring Communities

This is what spiritual direction is: *wholly*, or as Margaret Guenther says, *holy* listening.

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

It 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. 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.

The gift of listening

We often speak of someone we admire as a “good speaker,” or a “great leader.” But how often do we say that a leader is a “good listener,” and even a “great listener”?

Recently a couple told me they heard me speak at a crusade in their town half a century ago. “I went every night,” said the wife, “and took my two children.” And the man said, “We thought then you were a better speaker than your brother-in-law.”

It was a nice compliment, and appealed to my vanity. But these days I would just as soon have someone say that I am a good listener.

There are many “great” speakers who have left an impression on me by the skill of their oratory, how genuine they seemed to be, the power of their message. They have moved me.

But I think – and probably most of us would agree – that the people who have made the deepest, longest lasting impression on our lives are also those who have listened deeply and with understanding and patient hearts.

As Douglas Steere wrote, “to listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”

A great listener not only hears what we say, but senses the unspoken desires of our hearts, and, most of all, helps us to listen to our own inner voices.

Once I was asked to prepare and present a citation for a good friend, who was being recognized for his contributions to the school where he served and taught. I asked him to come by our house and to tell me about his life – not only his professional achievements but the events and people who had guided him along the way, and opened doors for him. For nearly two hours I listened, asking a few questions from time to time, as he described those people who God had sent into his life. He told me of the two older women who encouraged him to go into ministry when no one else believed in him, of the very liberal church leader who had the grace to support him for ordination when others dismissed him as too conservative. At the end of the two hours, he told me with tears, “No one has ever listened to me tell that story for so long.”

I was glad to listen, because I have had so many, men and women, who have listened to me across the years – my wife Jeanie, friends like our leaders in the Mentoring Community, my long-time associate Irv – who have helped me along through the darker times and have rejoiced with me in the very good times.

And listening does not only help others. There is a reciprocal, mutual blessing that comes from deep heart listening – “holy listening” Margaret Guenther calls it. Not only does the hearer help the other, but the hearer who truly listens finds their own heart stirred in the very listening to the other.

Once during a leadership week I took a walk down a mountain trail beside a stream in the North Carolina town of Blowing Rock. My companion that day was Danny, a young African-American who ministered to inner city gangs. As we sat on a bridge I got Danny to tell me about his own life. Then Danny helped me to listen to the sound of the stream as it flowed past us and taught me to pay attention to the voice of God’s river in my own life.

Poem: Riverspeak

Why does listening matter?

Because the God who speaks is also God the Great Listener.

One of my own morning prayers, one I repeat often at a certain time of year is from Psalm 116:

I love the Lord, because he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me

I will call on him as long as I live.

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“O Lord, save me.”

That prayer came to me in April of 2003, almost exactly a year after I had both prostate cancer and a heart attack within a few weeks of each other. During those weeks I cried out to the Lord.

A year later, fully recovered, I looked back and could say with great thanks to the God who listened:

For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.

God is Not Deaf

Deafness is a profoundly isolating affliction. Those – like my brother-in-law Billy at this time in his life - who have been cut off from normal conversation by the loss of hearing often say they would prefer to lose eyesight rather than hearing. It is a choice I would not want to have to make.

But God is not deaf. Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal because their god Baal might have lost his hearing, and told them shout louder to get his attention. But Elijah’s God answered his servant with fire on the altar, and he is a God who gives us hearing.

“He makes the deaf to hear,” sang Charles Wesley.

One of the great testimonies of Scripture is about the God who opens our ears.

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

What a joy when the God who hears also opens our ears so we can say with e.e. cummings:

now the ears of my ears are awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened.
Walking on Water 9

Getting out of the way

But listening – again, whether to God, the other, or our own deep places – means that we have to get out of the way.

The best writing, speaking, preaching comes from first listening – to God, to others, to our own innermost voice.

Madeleine L'Engle understood this. Here is her insight into writing:

When the words mean even more than the writer knew they meant, then the writer has been listening. And sometimes when we listen, we are led into places we do not expect, into adventures that we do not always understand.

When the work takes over, then the artist is enabled to get out of the way, not to interfere.

When the work takes over, then the artist listens.

But before he can listen, paradoxically, he must work. Getting out of the way and listening is

not something that comes easily, either in art or in prayer. *Walking on Water 15*

Jesus often spoke in John's gospel of how he listened to his Father. "Whatever I say," he explained, "is just what the Father has told me to say" (John 12:50). So his words were healing words that led to eternal life. His hometown people marveled at "the gracious words that came from his lips" (Luke 4:22), and wondered where they came from. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they wondered. They had heard nothing like that from the lips of his earthly father. What they did not realize was that he was listening with perfect attention to his heavenly Father.

This was true from the time he was a boy, when his parents realized he was missing after a trip to Jerusalem. When they returned they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. When his mother questioned him he said, "Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49).

And he was there to listen, to “get himself out of the way” so he would do his Father’s will, not his own, and seek his Father’s kingdom, not his own.

No wonder his words were the most saving and sane words the world has ever heard. He had heard them from the best source!

Is it any wonder so many of our remarks are so inane, unhelpful, even foolish because we have not “gotten out of the way.” Our word “absurd” comes from the Latin *ab+surdus*, meaning literally, “from deafness.” When we are so filled with chatter from every other source we become deaf to God’s voice. And absurd! And truly irrelevant.

Listening and silence

As I write now I have just come in from walking with Wrangler in the woods and by the creek. It is a place where I am most likely to listen – and not just to my own thoughts! I listened today to Wrangler barking at the birds, the moving of the water after some rains, and the sound of the birds. I am reminded of lines from poet Wendell Berry:

Best song of all is birdsong in the silence,
But first you must have the silence.

With his acute hearing Wrangler has taught me that rule for listening: first you must have the silence and not only the silence around, but the quieting of all the inner chatter that preoccupies my mind almost from the time I wake.

Of course just as soon as Wrangler hears the birds he breaks silence with his barking! So he has also taught me to expect interruptions and let them go.

Silence can make a profound difference in the way we listen.

A friend told several of us over dinner how silence has taught him to listen. Mike went with a group of men on a retreat to the Middle East. One day the leader took them out into the Sinai desert. He instructed them to start where they were and walk ten minutes in different directions into the desert, and then to stay there for several hours. At first he found the silence almost too much to endure, almost terrifying. But as the hours passed he found that his mind and soul sank into silence and eventually he entered into a space that affected him profoundly.

“I was changed by this experience,” he told us. “I am a different person.”

His wife Anne was listening intently. So I asked her, “Did it really change him?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “It did.”

“How?”

“He listens to me,” she responded. “Not that he didn’t listen before. He tried to. But he always seemed to be thinking of how to answer. Now I sense he just listens to what I need to say, and I feel he understands.”

Listening as an open space

My painting instructor, Sally, pointed out that in a good painting there is usually a place of tension, and that this is ordinarily the place where the vertical and the horizontal meet.

I thought immediately of Ben Long’s fresco of *The Good Samaritan* at First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. As I gazed at this with a friend, we realized that the “center of interest” in this work was the space between the eyes of the wounded traveler as he lies on the ground, and the eyes of the Good Samaritan who leans down to help him. That space between is the place of expectation, and of creative healing.

So in holy listening we offer a “space between” – holding between us a time, a space, which we empty of our own thoughts and preconceptions, so that God may fill it with his presence. That “holy space” also becomes a safe place into which the other can speak out, often haltingly, slowly, perhaps with some struggle, the tensions that they have been holding in, the hurts they have been holding out.

As Rachel Naomi Rumen put it: “Our listening creates a sanctuary for the homeless parts within another person.”

Listening, holding, imaging, and gathering.

As we listen to the other person, we do not let the words fall to the ground, or float in the air. After all this is “wholly and holy listening,” so that what we hear is sacred, and to be kept as a sacred trust.

So we gently hold their words (and also their silences) in our minds, our hearts, our imaginations. We hold them freely, until perhaps we see an image, a connection, that we can share; or we are reminded of a word from Scripture, or a voice that came to our own lives. This holding and gathering is a “value added” to the words that are entrusted to us.

A pastor came on a personal retreat, and told me of weariness he felt, the selfishness he often sensed in the church, and the way the gospel was often misrepresented. Cramped and worn down by this he was searching for a “spacious place.” How would he describe such a place? I asked. “Not where everything is comfortable,” he said, “but where the presence of God is real, and I can be fully myself.”

I asked him to close his eyes and see what place came to mind. He thought for a few minutes, then told me about going to a place on the north shore of Lake Superior.

“From the shore you can see for miles,” he said. “see the vastness of the lake. On top of a mountain is an incredible forest, where perhaps I see wildlife. I sense the awesomeness of God. It was a healing place for me, just before we began a building program. It was like an Elijah moment, when the Spirit of God passed by. I was alive again, ready to go back. God was really there.”

That was a moment of holy listening, when words of frustration, words heard, held, gathered, offered back in God’s presence led him to a fresh visioning of his life and ministry.

Even as the disciples “saw” Jesus transfigured, so that the glory shone through, when we listen in this way we are sometimes enabled to see the transformation which is taking place, the glory which is shining even through the pain and confusion, the hopes and longings which are being expressed beyond the present reality.

We can hear and see what the other may not be able to see and hear. As we open to God’s loving presence we are given faithful (“faith-full”) ears: hearing God’s voice beyond the actual words, and hopeful (“hope-full”) eyes: seeing God make something out of what is not yet visible.

The Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware wrote about artists, like Kandinsky or van Gogh, who could compose landscapes which glowed with a “divine transfiguration, in which we see matter re-rendered spiritual.” Even when the artist does not personally believe in God, writes Ware, “provided he is an artist of integrity, he is a genuine servant of the glory which he does not recognize, and unknown to himself there is ‘something divine’ about his work.” *Walking on Water*. 25.

If that can be true (and I believe it can) of artists who are not aware of God, how much more true for us who are called to be – as Jesus supremely is - “artists of the soul.”

Listening as a Sacramental Mystery

Listening is not a strategy. Listening is sacramental. In a sacrament God takes something ordinary and uses it for his sacred purposes– as with the bread and wine of holy communion, blessed to us in the mysterious working of the Spirit.

So listening is not a device to accomplish what we want. It is an offering of ourselves to God and each other so God will accomplish his purpose. It is the kind of listening reflected in Jesus’ words: “I come to do your will.” “We listen to do your will.” “I do only those things that I hear from my Father, that please my Father.”

The mystery of how God works, bringing life out of death, blessing out of brokenness, came home to me very much when I had lunch with Drew, a young Presbyterian minister who suffered a cataclysmic aortic aneurysm that very nearly killed him. “How are you now, after near death?” I asked.

“All of life is a sacrament,” he replied.

Then he went on to describe (with some tears) what happened in the twenty days he was in intensive care, and the month more before he went home. Someone anonymously paid for six hours of child care for their home for three and a half months so his wife could visit with him. A prominent heart doctor who seldom sees patients anymore came twice to see him, leading his nurse to ask: “Who are you, Drew?” “This doctor only talks to doctors who see patients, never to patients.” He told me also of the night they took him in a wheel chair to watch his wife give birth to their new child.

These gifts to him were sacraments. They came from God as offerings of grace at a time of need, and have been transforming to him. Now that he is recovering, Drew is helping to launch a new Presbyterian mission emphasis which will show the gospel as a compassionate ministry, and mission to be understood not as a strategy, but as a sacramental offering. This will be Christ-like mission, centered in the one who said, “For their sakes I sanctify myself,” and in the genre of Paul who saw his ministry as “a poured out offering.”

So listening is a sacramental space, where we meet each other in the self-offered gift of Christ, and enable each other to listen and serve as we ourselves have been heard and served.

Listening and Waiting

Very often someone who seeks spiritual direction is in a time of discernment, waiting for a clarified sense of call for their lives.

And often I will remind them that one of the old church fathers used to describe “the time between dreams” as a very difficult, but also very important time in our journeys.

I think of the “time between dreams” as like those middle of the night times when we wake from a dream, and everything seems hazy, and confused. We can remember bits and pieces of the dream, but not quite the whole thing. We wonder how it will turn out. And we are not quite sure what it is all about.

So one of our main roles in spiritual mentoring may be simply to provide “waiting room” for our friend, and to be with them as they wait.

Our prayer may be for and with them:

My soul waits for the Lord
More than those who wait for the morning.

In his study of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* Kenneth Paul Kramer cites a distinction which the philosopher Heidegger made between "waiting for" and "waiting upon."

Waiting *for* something involves having in mind a fixed and desired result of the waiting.

Waiting *upon* involves allowing insight and direction to emerge ... without a prior desired result. This kind of waiting allows mystery; it brings us to ground our desires and hopes and wishes in God's will; and, as Kramer suggests, it calls for a kind of "open-minded meditative thinking." (See his *Redeeming Time*).

Waiting upon is the kind of waiting Mary modeled in the gospel story. She pondered in her heart what the angel had told her about the son she would bear. She hardly could have known what she was waiting for, but she was ready to wait faithfully upon God to redeem her time, in his time.

For those of us called to be spiritual mentors, it is vital both to teach and to practice waiting. This may happen in a spiritual conversation when a pause comes, the other person either has nothing to say, or is struggling with their thoughts, and we perhaps have no clear words to share. Then it is time to wait, rather than to jump in just to say something. Instead of being anxious about silence we can allow it to stretch out, perhaps for minutes, while we quietly pray for God to speak, and wait for the Spirit to guide. Often I have found that the most profound insights and directions come right out of such a time of silent waiting.

It may be also that our joining with someone else in waiting may involve weeks, or even longer, until the way opens or closes.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet/farmer has a book of poems from his Sunday walks into the woods and fields at his farm. They have often helped me during times of waiting. Once a younger friend in ministry was with me during a time of uncertainty and frustration in his ministry. As we talked I reached for Berry's *Timbered Choir* and read these words to him:

To rest, go to the woods
Where what is made is made
Without your thought or work.
Sit down; begin the wait
For small trees to grow big ...
Your rest is in this praise
Of what you cannot be
And what you cannot do.
(From *Timbered Choir*, Wendell Berry 1478)

My friend wrote these words in his journal, and for many weeks after they stayed with him as he waited. And his waiting was rewarded.

Listening for Passion

Dan Sutherland spends much of his time counseling and mentoring pastors. At a session at Green Lake, Wisconsin, he sensed no passion in the eyes of the pastors in his group.

“What are you passionate about?” he asked.

One said, “I have no passion. I am burned out.” Another said, “I have some passion for people in my church but nothing left for those outside.” Most were like that.

So Dan said, “Here’s what we are going to do. I am not going to teach about it. I want you to take a piece of paper and go out and find some place quiet. Then I want you to ask, ‘Lord, what do you want me to do? What do you want me to do to find my passion?’ Don’t talk. Don’t say anything to God. Just ask that question. Then be quiet and listen to what God says.”

After an hour and a half they came back. Many had pages full. And many were full of energy.

Listening for passion. What a good thing it would be to do that: for ourselves first, then others!

What are We Most Listening For?

I would say we are listening especially for the clues to the places where God is disturbing, wooing, or comforting, places of consolation or desolation – which indicate the Spirit of God is at work in ourselves and our friends on the journey.

God is always calling us – down, and up – on this journey of leadership in the Spirit.

In nature we can see there is a passage of transformation from the lower to the higher. The higher reaches down to the lower, takes it into itself, and the lower is lifted to become part of the higher. We eat an egg, or a chicken breast, or an ear of corn, and as they “offer” their reality they become part of the human. The animal too chews on the corn, while the corn reaches down to receive the nourishment in the ground, so the mineral is “raised” to the vegetable level. The passage of transformation is from the lower to the higher. And this mirrors the passage of spiritual transformation. We are “born from above”

as God reaches down in his Son into our nature, and in his Spirit into our spirits, and as we surrender, responding in faith and trust, we too are transformed into his image, from one level of glory to another, and all this from the Lord who is the Spirit.

This is a painful but necessary process, and in our listening we look for the signs that God is calling someone to the next level.

Discussing Kohlberg's six levels of moral development Richard Rohr writes:

The greatest barrier to the next level of conscience or consciousness is our comfort and control at the one we are at now. (*Everything Belongs* 112)

Our first response to a call to the next level (up or down as the case may be, perhaps both!) is "increased anxiety" says Rohr. Like the warnings at the edge of old maps – "Here be dragons" – we sense there are dragons (Annie Dillard calls them the "monsters") in the unknown ahead. God alone, writes Rohr, is

capable of guiding us through these transitional and dark stages. We, by ourselves, will always panic and run.. So we need to understand the kinesthetic, the bodily knowing. Body-response are not always as obvious as sweat under the arms. They often involve getting in touch and starting to trust and feel. (op cit 115)

What will help us to become aware of the way God is moving?

Rohr recommends silence, especially extended times when we become aware of what we are feeling (and which may be the reason we avoid silence!). But most of all he writes that "Prayer and suffering lead us to those emotional depths. They are probably the two primary paths of transformation" (op cit 115).

And he writes

Without God's Spirit , we all stay inside our comfort zone and pull everything down to our level. 115

So when we listen we are looking for clues to help discern the deep places where the Spirit of God is at work. These clues may be

- words or tones of intensity, anxiety, concern,
- movements of the body – eyes down or looking off, shifting, shrugging
- difficulty in finding the words to express thoughts
- silences, punctuated perhaps by brief words or utterances
- emotions of fear, even hostility
- perhaps facial expressions
- especially signs and stories, meaningful encounters with God in prayer and Scripture, indicators of how God is calling, opening them to what may be next.

Who Can Listen Like This?

As Paul wrote about our ministry in one of the older translations of 2 Corinthians 2:16

"Who is sufficient for these things?"

With all the best intention and practice in the world, true spiritual mentoring – becoming midwives as it

were to someone else's heart and life – is far beyond us. It is a daunting task, and an impossible one. Unless we remember that the friends who come to us are “letters from Christ”, letters not written with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God. As we listen he is the Great Listener, attending with an attention beyond ours, understanding with an insight deeper than ours, speaking with a wisdom far greater than ours.

So we can listen with confidence because:

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (*2 Corinthians 3:4-6 NIV*)

A Prayer Before Entering into the Ministry of Listening

Lord, here's my mind, think your thoughts in me.
Be my wisdom, knowledge, and insight.
Here is my voice.
You told me not to worry what to say and how to say it.
Free me to speak with silence or words, whichever is needed.
Give me your timing and tenderness.
Now Lord, here is my body.
Release creative affection in my face, my touch, my embrace.
And Christ, if there is something I am to do by your indwelling presence,
however menial or tough, control my will to do it.
Lord, I am ready now to be your manifest intervention in situations,
to infuse joy, or absorb pain and aching anguish.
I plan to live this day and the rest of my life in the reality of you in me.
Thank you for making it so!

This prayer above of Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie's I have used for many years as I prepare to preach or begin some other ministry.