

The Listening Center
Parliament of the Worlds Religions December 8, 2009
The Sacred Art of Listening

Opening

Welcome to The Listening Center – TLC - is really your center, the innermost part, where you become the center for listening. Today we will explore the sacred nature of listening and practices that support becoming a listening presence, the art of listening.

Listening and speaking are two components of communication. Most often speaking is thought to be the more powerful role. However, listening can be more powerful, but is less well understood. The quality of our listening can make a profound difference in any conversation. As Quaker author Douglas Steere puts it: *“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.”*

Definition of sacred art of listening

1. It is the art of becoming a listening presence.
2. It’s a way of being that opens us up so we can listen to people from diverse, cultures, religions, belief systems and points of view, those not like us.
3. It’s about being a presence for understanding rather than for judging.
4. It’s about being open, curious, and attentive to others in such a way that at the end of the conversation they have fully expressed themselves and feel more alive. When we understand the power of sacred listening, we become aware that it is a key to communication in our global community.

Listening has become a lost art.

Research on listening indicates that we spend about 80% of our waking hours communicating: writing 9%, reading 16%, speaking 30% and 45 to 50 percent of our day engaged in listening, to people, music, TV, radio, etc. About 75 percent of that time we are forgetful, pre-occupied, or not paying attention. One of the factors influencing this statistic is that the average attention span for an adult in the United States is 22 seconds. It’s no surprise to note the length of television commercials, usually anywhere from 15 to 30 seconds. This constant change of focus makes it more difficult to listen for any significant length of time. Immediately after we hear someone speak, we remember about half of what they have said. A few hours later we remember only about 10 to 20 percent. Yet, less than 5 percent of us have ever concentrated on developing our skills in listening. When people hear these numbers, they often say: “This is so interesting. I know that I spend hours preparing to speak. I don’t think I’ve ever consciously prepared to listen.”

Prepare to listen

What I’ve discovered over these past few years is that the work that I do is all about teaching people how to prepare to listen—to become a listening presence. Most of us have had the experience of preparing to give a speech or make a presentation. There are classes in public speaking available in almost every community. We know where to go to learn how to refine and develop presentation skills. For the most part we never even think about what it might mean to prepare to listen—to become a true listening presence no matter what the situation much less how to go about doing so. Three practices are essential elements of this spiritual discipline: cultivating silence, slowing down to reflect, and becoming present.-Before discussing these practices, however, I want to introduce three concepts about listening that provide a context for that work

Listening as an art

Listening is more than hearing words and more than an action; it is an art. One of the common themes of an art is the sense of being at one with it. Thinking about listening as an art changes our perception of what it means to listen. Rather than thinking of listening as an act, something we “do,” we recognize it as an art, something that we “be,” as a part of who we are, a way of being. We become a listening presence.

Listening as a choice

We choose whether we wish to listen. Most of the time, we are completely unaware that we are making a choice. Learning that we have a choice to listen or to not listen is a very powerful insight. We discover how much better we listen when we know that we have chosen to listen, and how much less stress we have when we know that we have consciously chosen not to listen.

Listening as a gift

Listening to another with rapt attention may be the greatest gift we give to each other. When two people listen deeply to one another, we sense that we are present not only to each other, but also to something beyond our individual selves, something spiritual, holy, or sacred. Once we think about listening as a gift that we may either give or receive-, we find a new light shines on the value of listening.

Summary

Listening is half of all communication. It is often the forgotten part of presentations and conversations.. Knowing that listening is an art and that we have a choice to give it as a gift, we can now engage in the practices that prepare us to listen: cultivating silence, slowing down to reflect, becoming present.

Practices

There's a Cuban proverb that says: *"Listening looks easy, but it's not simple. Every head is a world.*

One of the keys to developing the capacity to listen more deeply is daily practice. Most of us know that if we want to excel at any skill we need to practice. It is in the daily practice, the spiritual discipline, that we prepare ourselves to listen. Then, when we need to listen deeply, we will be able to focus on the speaker, remaining fully present and aware of what they are saying and who they are being. Becoming a listening presence is critical to learning how to understand "the other."

Cultivating Silence

There is no listening without silence. Listening to the silence, listening beyond words is also called contemplative listening. It's about taking time to be quiet and simply be. Getting comfortable with silence is a practice that will transform your capacity to listen.

Slowing Down to Reflect

Reflective listening is listening to yourself - your True Self -getting to know the voice of your soul. Once we learn to know and trust this voice we find ourselves able to recognize when we need to speak and when we need to listen.

Becoming Present

Deep listening occurs at the heart level. It is present when we feel most connected to another person or to a group of people. Our hearts expand and our capacity to communicate with those of differing beliefs and customs increases.

Three Daily Practices

1. Silence: spend at least a minute each day in silence. Use intention to listen for God, source, wisdom.
2. Reflection: take a deep breath before you respond, listen to your soul – get to know yourself.
3. Presence: be mindful of each moment, pay attention – be with the person you are with.

For me, listening is really about opening up to love. *"Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people cannot tell the difference."* David Augsberg

Conference Practices:

Notice when you choose to listen and when you choose not to listen.
Notice what it's like to give the gift of listening to someone else and what it's like to receive it.
Notice when you experience the art of listening – being a listening presence with another.
Notice when you start to interrupt someone and what happens when you don't.
Notice what happens when someone stops speaking and you ask, "Is there anything else?"
Notice what happens when you let go of your agenda to be present with another.

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