

Listening's labor

By Father Joseph Kenna
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A story is told of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher.

On a cold day near the battle front during World War I, the young rabbi was visited by a soldier who confided that he wanted to commit suicide. The rabbi did his best to dissuade him and was satisfied he had succeeded.

But several days later the rabbi received sad news. The young soldier had taken his life.

Reflecting on the incident, Buber realized that although he had responded to the soldier, he had not really listened. The anguished youth had needed a sympathetic listener. But Buber only responded with information, with all the philosophical and moral reasons why the young man shouldn't commit suicide.

Buber later indicated that the event changed his life.

Buber was not alone in failing to listen well. Recent studies indicate that most people do not listen very well.

It is a common belief that listening is a passive activity that takes little effort. Quite the opposite is true. Listening is hard work. It takes constant dedication to achieve both the skills and the spiritual depth needed for good listening.

Are you surprised to hear that listening has a spiritual dimension? Listening has roots deep in the heart of the good news of Jesus.

His central theme was obedience to the Father who speaks in the midst of the human situation.

Ability to respond to the divine initiative implies a willingness to listen — to be attentive. The very word "obedience" comes from the Latin word "obaudire," which means to listen.

Caring people are good listeners. And listening has as much to do with feelings as it has to do with facts.

A good listener recognizes the mystery of the other person. Like Moses walking on sacred ground before the burning bush, the good listener has a sense of being in the presence of something holy as another person struggles for self-expression.

Being observant is an essential quality of good listening. To be observant means to be aware of the entire context in which communication takes place, identifying the style and language of the listener.

So listening involves more than the ears. It also depends on sight, touch, even smell. What another person really wants to say is often communicated through touch or visual signs. A tense brow, gestures which block and distance others, and perspiration are just a few clues to the fuller message behind a person's words.

It is practically impossible to hide one's true feelings from the expertly observant person. Being observant means being alert to the feelings, attitudes and experiences of the other person.

But good listening takes practice. As a skill it can be improved.

How do you know if you are practicing well?

There is a simple technique known as "feedback" that checks the quality of your listening skill. Feedback means telling the speaker what you are hearing in order to see if you are hearing correctly. This is satisfying to both persons:

- It gives the speaker a sense of being heard.

- It provides the listener an opportunity to know whether his or her listening skills are working well.

Practice at listening demands patient mental effort, but its rewards are great.

Listening is not just good for mental health. Listening makes a creative impact. It is an essential part of the human enterprise in which the Gospel is lived.

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who didn't

was the same story: The disciples "failed to understand his words" (Mark 9:32). Incredibly the disciples fell to arguing about who was most important among them. Listening would have shattered their selfish dreams.

The same is true in everyday relationships. Because of pride or stubbornness or for some other reason, people refuse really to listen to each other. Disputes go unresolved, misunderstandings deepen, chances for peace and happiness and love are lost.

If it seems risky to listen with care, there is an equal risk on the other side. By not listening, people risk missing the very words which hold the key to true greatness, self-fulfillment and happiness.

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FOOD...

...for thought

Contemplate this scene, if you will:

You are working around your house one day, getting some tasks done that long have needed doing. In the background, the folk music you like so much is playing on the radio. You hear it, but you don't hear it. Your concentration is elsewhere — on phone calls to make, papers to sort out, the dinner to get started.

Suddenly your ears perk up. The sound of a favorite song catches your attention. You stop what you are doing, adjust the radio's tuning for better reception and turn up the sound so that it fills the room.

Now you listen for each of the singer's words, you concentrate on the emotion the singer injects into the music and you appreciate the skillful guitar accompaniment.

This no longer is background music. You are genuinely listening. You have moved into a position to appreciate the music's fuller dimensions.

People can put the faculty of hearing to use in more than one way, as this musical anecdote suggests. There is a passive manner of hearing; one hears without really "hearing." And there is active listening; it gets you involved with what you hear.

Listening is closely related to understanding. If one listens carefully for another person's words, feelings or thoughts, isn't an obstacle removed from the path of understanding?

Carl Rogers, the famed psychotherapist, had some notes about understanding in his book titled "On Becoming a Person" (Houghton Mifflin). Among significant things Rogers said he had learned in his long career was this:

"I have found it of enormous value when I can permit myself to understand another person." Rogers quickly added: "The way in which I have worded this statement may seem strange to you. Is it necessary to 'permit' oneself to understand another? I think that it is."

Rogers said he believed that if people do not permit themselves to truly understand what another person wants to express, it is because they find it risky. "If I let myself really understand another person, I might be changed by that understanding. And we all fear change."

Rogers said he thought it was a rare thing "to permit oneself to understand an individual, to enter thoroughly and completely and empathically into" another's frame of reference.

Do you agree that this is rare? Why would that be so?

...for discussion

1. What practical steps do you think people might take to improve their listening skills?

2. Can you think of an occasion when just listening to what another person needed to say made a difference to that person and to you?

3. Psychotherapist Carl Rogers thought people avoided the routes available to genuine understanding of another person because they found such understanding risky. Understanding another person might bring change into your own life, he said, and people tend to resist change. What do you think he meant?

4. The season of Lent is a time when people concentrate on the Christian journey from death to greater life. How do you think greater skill at listening could figure into your journey into fuller Christian life?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Lent, Easter '85: Family Prayers and Activities," edited by Corinne Hart. "Jesus' friends were with him all the time but whenever he told them the sad news about his death they wouldn't listen," the writers say in this 64-page booklet. Obviously listening involves more than just hearing what we want to hear. And Lent is a good time for people to listen closely to what God is telling them. God asks his followers for help in "taking away heavy loads from people who are worn out, setting free everyone you know who feels trapped...looking after the one whom everyone forgets...and being kind to your own family." Being concerned about the problems of others, the authors add, can aid in healing whatever hurts in our own lives as well. (Franciscan Communications, 1229 S. Santee, Los Angeles, Calif. 90015. 25-99 copies, 40 cents each.)