

## **LISTENING, PRESENCE, AND DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS**

"To listen well is as powerful a means of influence as to talk well, and is as essential to all true conversation."

Chinese Proverb

"It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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### *What is listening?*

Listening is a form of communication that relates to our ability to pay attention. As humans, we communicate. It then follows that the urge for expression requires a space to deliver such expressions to, however aware this space may be. Listening, or being listened to, provides the room in which to fulfill this psychological nature; the urge to be heard, acknowledged, validated, or even criticized. Such room could be within the self, or external to I.

Within human relations, when a person writes, speaks or gestures, he/she is listened to in varying degrees. In a first situation, such a person might be completely ignored, or made to believe that they are being heard. Similarly, this individual might be hearkened, yet selectively. In these cases, the listener is typically preoccupied with one or more of the following:

1. Evaluating and making judgments in thought, based on personal beliefs or paradigms, about the speaker and his/her words.
2. Misinterpreting the behavior and motive of the speaker, without seeking clarification.
3. Formulating a response or counsel based on personal experience, and listening to the speaker mainly to find an opening to speak.
4. Thinking about things pertaining to unrelated issues.

In an ideal case, however, the speaker is given space, with the intent of the listener resting upon real comprehension. The listener is genuinely interested in understanding the expressions of the speaker, in getting inside of the speaker's frame of reference. In such a case the listener is present, influenced by

the speaker, and for the moment moved, or even changed. Such manner of listening uses not only reasoning, but also intuition.

*What does it mean to be present?*

Presence is a broad concept. Simply put, it is being here, being there. For the purpose of this essay, the writer confines presence to the realm of listening: It is the ability to provide “an other” (be it objects, events, places, people etc.) with deliberate attention; to reach out, to link and understand the state of affairs between segments and their entirety. It can be considered a state of mind with a motionless focus and acknowledgment on fluid, passing instants. Realistically and individually, the degree of presence varies moment to moment due to external events or internal processes.

Being present involves a motive to learn profoundly. It involves cognition of both the I and the speaker as living systems that continually recreate themselves, biologically and otherwise: A willingness to go beyond the surface of issues and circumstances toward the larger completeness of what is, what was, or what is to be. As mentioned earlier, presence gives a speaker the psychological field within which the need to be heard, acknowledged, or criticized is fulfilled. When one listens while being present, they do so with reason and intuition, achieving a high level of empathy using the frame of reference of “the other”. Thus, an attentive (present) listener tolerates the sovereignty of the individual speaker. There is a willingness to go past prejudgments and mannerisms – with or without compromise – as life is rarely constant, providing opportunities to learn anew.

*Why is it important to be present while listening?*

As humans we have a need to communicate, at least typically. Though this urge differs in degrees across personalities, it can be deemed necessary for cultivating and maintaining perceptual clarity. To truly hearken the self inspires personal confidence. To truly listen to “an other” stimulates openness and trust in that person; while also developing the character and broadening the world view of the listener. For instance, if I sense that you are truly listening to me as I share my thoughts on a job-related

problem, I will seek and be more open to the suggestions you may have. You might learn something new from me. I may even want to speak to you again, on a much personal level. However, if I feel that you are in pretext, ill-considerate to my point of view, or simply repeating what I say while looking for openings/flaws/weaknesses to push forth your own opinions, I will possibly not want to willingly speak (or listen) to you again. I may feel manipulated or controlled. You may feel like you are always right. You may find yourself mostly alone, only involved in superficial relationships.

When we truly understand the viewpoints of “an other”, we become more effective in showing the person faults in his/her position. Contrastingly, we may stumble upon newer understanding. Listening with presence also assists in identifying points of agreement, while placing in better perspective points of disagreement; a worthwhile method of making expectations transparent. Instead of the competitive, relationships become complimentary.

*How can I improve on my listening and become more present in the relationships I am a part of? What if I disagree with another perspective?*

Being present while listening is very challenging for a number of reasons. Because of the difficulty in maintaining a deliberate and tolerant focus, we tend to vacillate between states of fear and anxiety. In such states, we cater to the superficial by reacting, dictating, getting angry, and bringing up old memories: “It's your fault!”, “I have gone through the same thing, of course I understand!”, “Remember when you, five years ago...”. In addition, personalities differ in levels of clear expression, and in purposes for interacting; it can be confusing to know what a speaker may require of us. For example, note the differences in the kinds of attention required from the listener in the following scenarios:

1. A colleague asks for technical directions (which you teach regularly) in operating a new machinery.
2. A close friend sounds somber over the phone then gets angry and begins to cry, blaming

you for his/her problems.

3. A relative makes light jest of your attire as you prepare for a night out.
4. A child sings to himself while talking to you about a movie he/she enjoyed.

To improve on listening to others, it is beneficial to develop presence within the self, to intentionally observe ones inner processes. By looking into the self as that which is and a latency yet to be, we can converse with our I. The fact is we have the capacity to store up old emotions or memories from prior experiences. Hence, as humans, we develop inclinations to react to content we receive, based on expectations. But, we are not necessarily trapped in what happened or who we were – we can learn and do new things. By accepting our individuality and becoming more attentive to newer understandings that often come with reflection, we develop a sense of self-leadership; cultivating a motive to learn beyond the superficial.

When we learn to listen to ourselves, we can effectively listen to others. This is because listening to the self helps one keep open the space between stimuli and response. Instead of responding impulsively, we gradually cultivate intent and mindfulness: “Oh, she *doesn't* like school! Well TOUGH luck...but...I should *listen*. She's intelligent enough to make decent decisions”. We go beyond the cultural definition of words and body gestures towards the underlying meanings and feelings. We become more in tune to various levels of and purposes for interaction, and the requirements appropriate for listening. Because our intent is towards a more complete understanding, we learn to respect the humanity of “the other” as capable. This allows us to, slowly, accept people and experiences as they come.

Inferred from the last two paragraphs, present listening is one way of strengthening internal security and expanding patience. Because a listener can be moved (and sometimes changed) by being present with “an other”, it takes decent amounts of consideration, courage, and time. While the process exposes vulnerability, the benefits of internal security and patience both to our internal and external

relationships need not be mentioned. By genuinely seeking the welfare of others, we gradually develop a considerate propensity towards other points of view. We learn to create and uphold boundaries as listening with presence does not imply agreement. It simply means, “Oh! Now I see what you see, how you see....” or “I never thought of it that way...” and so forth.

Having differing viewpoints can become a strength in relationships. Because you genuinely seek the welfare of “the other”, avenues to creative solutions and inconspicuous alternatives are revealed. And as mentioned earlier, treating as worthy, such differences, broadens understanding. One is better able to tolerate differences without judgment or compromise. Relationships become complimentary, instead of competitive.

Listening with presence is an essential aspect of effective communication. And like anything valuable in life, to truly listen is not easy. But do let the writer know if it becomes worth the while.

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