

Listening: the gift of significance

by *Kirsten L. Klassen*



I have one recurring nightmare. In this dream, I am trying to tell my parents, my brother, and my sister something very important—something on which their safety or their very lives depend. And, yet they shrug me off. They don't listen. I wake up furious and terrified.

In contrast to this, one of the most memorable experiences I have of being listened to occurred about twenty years ago at a Laurelville retreat for single, divorced, or widowed adults. We were told to write our story as if it were a fairy tale or a heroic tale of mythological proportions. Then we were to tell our story to one other person. Afterwards, a surprise twist: our listening partners repeated our stories back to us. I cried, I couldn't help it. And all around me, I watched as others cried too—not because our stories were so important, but because someone had heard us and understood.

Few experiences validate us as much as being listened to; and, conversely, few experiences frustrate us as much as not being heard. In our families, with our friends, in our churches, in our workplaces—we long for validation. Ironically, it is usually our need to be heard that interferes with our ability to listen to those around us.

Practice humility. Listening carefully means quieting your inner voice that wants to talk when you're trying to listen. It means paying attention to the person talking, measuring the value of her words, or even evaluating whether she needs to talk more about a topic, rather than rushing to get your response in. When I am listening the best, I do not need to be wise or witty. It's not about me. I am trusting the other person to find her own wisdom through speaking her truth out loud.

One of my friends contacted me and said she needed to tell me something. She had been married at least ten years and found herself drawn to another man. We met and she talked. I mostly listened, asked her questions. It was clear she was

appalled by her attraction and her flirtatious behavior. Later she told me she had ended her contact with the other man and also discussed the situation frankly with her husband, which was courageous.

Cultivate reciprocity. More than once I have met a person, had a fascinating conversation, and then realized later that my new friend had spent the whole interaction asking me great questions to keep me talking—while I had learned nothing about her.

We must enjoy a wry laugh at ourselves for thinking our own words so fascinating. Still, there's a place for that: a journal. But seriously, there are times when we do need to talk and for someone else to listen. This is how we are vulnerable, one of the ways we offer ourselves to others. Just as important is finding opportunities to give that gift of our attention back to those who have listened to us, taking an interest in their lives, asking them to share with us what is important to them.

Pay attention to feelings. I was composed when I told one of my professors that my husband and I were getting a divorce. But when his eyes filled with tears, so did mine. He had listened beyond my words to realize their emotional impact.

Avoid judging. We were all created imperfect, yet sometimes we think we are better than each other. Somehow we can allow ourselves to presume we know how other people should behave. Especially when someone honors us by confiding in us, especially then, we need to be careful how we respond.

I cannot forget the kindness of some people in whom I have confided—a pastor, a close friend, a high school teacher—who blessed me with empathy and reassurance, conveying the unconditional love of God.

Invite the speaker to continue. Especially when someone is expressing a strong opinion or passionate feelings, we may want to cut them off. If we instead invite them to “say more,” we'll learn more and they may gradually become calmer because someone is listening to them.

Repeat back what you're hearing. Assumptions are part of communicating. Sorting out the assumptions we're making can be tested by saying, “I understand you to be saying...” and then repeat what you understood. This exercise helps two people refine the accuracy of their communication.

I can remember moments in my life where the world stood still because either I was listening intently to what someone else was saying—hanging on every word; or someone was listening to me. We all need more moments like these in our lives, moments where we love enough to listen; when we are loved enough to be heard. ❏

Mennonite Women USA's Sister-Care seminars provide interactive skills training for developing listening skills and for sharing one's own story. Kristen Klassen reflects on the life-changing importance of hearing and being heard in her own life and provides core components of effective listening.

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