

The Heart of LISTENING



■ by Janet Irvine, PsyD, Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Clinical Coordinator

One day I got hopelessly lost, and found myself in a maze of cornfields. All of a sudden, rising out of nowhere, was a huge, brilliant white monastery. With time on my hands, I drove in to look around. No one was around and it was fascinating to walk the grounds. I came upon a little chapel, curiously named "The Place of Holy Listening." I went into this tiny jewel of sacred space, and spent a bit of time there. It occurred to me to pray that I might be a "holy listener."

The thought has intrigued me ever since. Since listening is a big part of a psychologist's job, I began to think of listening as holy; a consecrated act, a ministry, a means of healing. And while I miss the boat an awful lot (as we all do) it always is a joy to hear someone remark, "thanks for listening."

Listening is a rare commodity these days. Our western culture extols noisiness, loudness, talking over others, interrupting, making the point. However, if we want relationships to develop, heal, or deepen, listening to another is essential for that to happen.

Listening takes effort and patience. It requires us to put our own selves aside, take in thoughts, feelings, emotions and facts from another, and resist the temptation to simply wait for the noise to be done so we can make our own!

Listening is more than waiting for one person to get done so we can talk. It requires quite a bit of energy to stop what is going on within us, take in and process what the other is saying. At times, it can be a simple exchange of information; an easy give and take. But there are times when we share words that go far beyond exchanging factual data, into the complex world of feelings and emotions, which may not always be responded to with ease.

Our minds are acutely aware of complexities in the exchange of information, and without knowing it, arouse in us either a sense of safety or a sense of danger. A simple tone of voice, the volume, the quickness of what could be a neutral response is quickly processed by our minds and we often mindlessly respond with anger (when we perceive danger) or warmth and openness (when we sense safety.) A neutral written message may often make us angry, depending on how it is read, leaving the poor hapless sender rather bewildered after our response. If any written communication upsets you, take some time before you respond, or talk to the person face-to-face.

In conversations, listening with the goal of interpreting the other correctly and creating a safe place requires us to develop a stance of neutrality rather than being on the defense. We sometimes need to "set ourselves aside" and put ourselves in the other's shoes. Many times we assume that "getting in the last word" makes us the winner, but in reality, it serves to make for further division and strife.

Silence is also an important part of listening. When an emotionally charged discussion ensues, simply wait a bit before responding. Sometimes the speaker needs more time to develop a thought, and sometimes we need time to process, ponder and get in touch with own feelings.

Listening in our spiritual relationships is no different. When Jesus began His ministry by being baptized in the Jordan River, the importance of his initiation was marked by the presence of the Trinity. As the Holy Spirit, seen as a dove, hovered over Jesus, the Father's voice boomed from the heavens, "This is my beloved Son, LISTEN to Him". God was very clear that listening to Jesus would be important. We take in His Words, mull them over, wonder, wrestle and respond. And so, God spoke early on in His introduction regarding what should be our response to Jesus: L I S T E N !



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