OBSTACLES TO GOOD LISTENING

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The author of this article was a Jungian analyst who trained at the Westminster Pastoral Foundation when this institution was trailblazing an integration between the healing ministries of the Church and psychotherapy. He spent some forty years in private analytic practice and was much appreciated. On his death, at the age of 71, his widow, Katherine, undertook the posthumous publication of his works. The following is an extract from a book entitled Heart-to-Heart Listening, *intended as a resource for the Year of Mercy.*

LISTENING IS IMPORTANT to all of us, in various spheres of life: with members of our family, in social life, in a pastoral—or, indeed, any professional—role, and particularly in ministry and spiritual direction. The basics of good listening—found in the therapeutic model—can aid fuller listening in most forms of relationships: with friends, partners, parents, parishioners, teachers and work colleagues. No matter how experienced we are, we can always learn to be better listeners.

It may be helpful for you to assess your own listening powers by considering the following typical obstacles, as prompts for self-enquiry, and to aid continuing self-observation while listening to people. For adults, relearning how to listen begins by unlearning—shedding negative habits and patterns in a fundamental re-examination of how we relate.

Body Language

Be very watchful of your body language. Obstacles to good encounter include:

- a restless, fidgety manner;
- many glances at watch or clock;
- eye-contact that is infrequent, or so long that it becomes a stare;
- breaking connection to check electronic devices or, worse, take a call.

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Time Pressures

If speaker and listener do not have enough time to meet at depth, and yet meet anyway, one person (or both) is likely to feel impatient, thereby putting pressure on the speaker and hampering encounter. To avoid disappointment or rush, both parties can be helped to articulate the amount of time they have available. Two of the preliminaries needed for real contact are a sense that the listener is trustworthy and security of time.

Careful joint judgment is needed so that the length of each meeting does not overtax the concentration, emotional stamina and absorption rate of either person.

> Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded one to another … wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ received us to the glory of God. (Romans 15:5–7; KJV)

Distractions

These may come from external factors, such as the speaker's mannerisms, or from internal ones—the listener's thoughts and feelings, sometimes leading to self-preoccupation. These intrude on that inner space which is so necessary if one is to be receptive to another person.

Tiredness

The more tired you are, the more inappropriately verbal you may be, because so much energy and continuous self-observation is needed to

attain, and then retain, an attentive stillness. This is especially hard when faced, for example, with a self-pitying tone or mood. Tiredness often leads to impatience and to interventions that are too frequent and/or too long. Tiredness also makes it much harder for a listener to bear a speaker's repetitions, such as when grieving, or after a shock or trauma, or if the speaker is stuck in a groove and seems unable to move on.

For these reasons nothing is more important for relaxed and alert creative listening than the constant nurturing of one's own energy: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. This requires space, inner and outer: time to rest and reflect; time to be renewed in any wholesome way; and time for the comfort of being listened to by family and friends, or by a work supervisor or counsellor if necessary, and especially, if one has faith, by God.

Stock Responses

'Don't worry' is very often a verbal blemish, for two main reasons. It may be heard by the speaker as presumptuous, patronising, possessive or invasive. And even when it is reasonable advice, it betokens a lack of empathy for, and understanding of, the speaker's own feelings of doubt or despair. We invest so much in our feelings. Even when seemingly wrong-headed or self-pitying, if feelings are not heeded and respected, then a large part of the speaker's identity is not being heard.

'I know how you must be feeling', however well-intentioned, is not a necessary statement. Speakers will know if you are with them, alongside them, at both emotional and intellectual levels. Verbal assertions and assurances of support count less than that more profound reassurance received from your whole person and presence.

Superficial Listening

One-dimensional listening attends only to the surface material, and its overt message and more obvious signals. There could be many reasons for this, ranging from inexperience, or relative lack of training as a listener, to a wish to avoid negative feelings and/or sad and painful subjects.

Diverting the Speaker's Line of Thought

Some listeners have a tendency to intervene at a tangent, introducing a radically new topic (which the speaker is not at that moment ready to absorb and work with), rather than following one step behind the line and flow of the speaker's thoughts and feelings. In good listening, as in many areas of life, the timing is all.

Labelling

Labelling the speaker (either to oneself or out loud), as 'a worrier', or unduly 'anxious', is to be avoided. Preserving a flexible and adaptive view of the speaker allows room for potential and change. Watchfulness over what you say is important because, like material labels, verbal labels have strong adhesive, and can get stuck in the speaker's mind, which may already feel bound and strapped by a negative self-image.

The listener's attitude is the primary factor: more crucial than choice of method or technique. The Sufis speak of 'seeing with the eye of the heart'. In the insight attributed to Hippocrates, 'I prefer to study the person who has a disease, rather than, primarily, the disease a person has'. A listener who values the person first, and sees the presenting problem as secondary and in relation to the person, gives the speaker space to relocate the central area of assessment and responsibility in the self, rather than in other people. The centre of gravity is moved from outside to inside.

A listener who values the person first

The more emotional space there is, the more speakers feel free to be themselves. The ultimate aim of all rich relationships is to allow and encourage the other person to find, and express, his or her own voice, his or her God-given uniqueness. This is only possible in an atmosphere and climate of freedom, grace and spaciousness.

Judging

Moralising or being judgmental—outwardly or inwardly, or both—severely hampers the warm, open-hearted and tolerant attitude and acceptance which form the foundation of good listening and healthy encounters generally. Acceptance of speakers includes their thoughts and feelings, their values, personality and behaviour. Even the internal type of moralising, which is not articulated, will be instinctively felt by the speaker, and will usually close off whole areas of self-disclosure. When there is a spirit of mutual trust, the speaker may feel free to reveal personal material—such as sad memories, loss, guilt, shame or fears—possibly for the first time. This is one of the listener's prime privileges.

Compassion comes from escaping the narrowness of opposing categories: 'attractive' or 'unattractive', 'like' or 'dislike'. This relative detachment requires a balancing act, because it is part of our basic biological drive to be drawn towards beauty, truth and goodness. The listener needs to attend to his or her own emotions and reactions, but not become caught or trapped by them.

Any tendency towards moralising, or imposing the listener's own values or standards, even in subtle ways, might prompt the listener to do more self-work: for example, seeing in the speaker unwanted aspects of him- or herself.

Projection

> Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the log that is in your own eye? (Luke 6:41; RSV)

Projection is, literally, throwing in front of oneself. It is the process by which specific wishes, impulses or other (usually unwanted) aspects of the self, inner or outer, are supposed or imagined, largely unconsciously, to be lodged exclusively in some other person or object.

Projection is preceded by what psychologists call 'denial' of the unwanted characteristic or impulse, and a desire to unburden and to escape from one's shadow (or repressed) side. However, projection is sometimes looking to another person or people, often in an idealized (and therefore unrealistic) way, to make up for longed-for qualities or positive attributes in oneself.

According to the ground-breaking theories and insights of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, the origin of projections can usually be traced to early babyhood, when the infant is being breastfed and perceives the mother as having, and proffering, one good breast and one hateful or fearful breast.[1]

Transference

Transference can be described as a wholesale form of projection. Transference is the re-enactment, usually as repair work, of a previous relationship, usually with a parent or a sibling. In transference, the speaker displaces on to the listener aspects of, and feelings about, a person who was, or still is, important and significant.

The essence of transference is that the speaker views and treats the listener, especially in the early stages of their relationship, as if the listener really were the person towards whom the original, intense emotions were felt. This person who is being displaced or transferred can be a positive or a negative figure: friendly and benign or cursed and resented. Transference

[1] See Melanie Klein, 'Our Adult World and Its Roots in Infancy', in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946–1963* (London: Vintage, 1997), 247–264.

is an unconscious ploy to draw (or drag) another person into the drama of one's life.

The listener will experience his or her own counter-transference (the reactions and fantasies evoked by encountering the other), and would do well to listen to and register these—both as prompts to self-work, and as the most valuable sources of information about the speaker's current difficulties and manner of relating to significant others.

Typecasting

Typecasting people or situations leads to assumptions which may not be on target, and to a tendency to think in terms of stereotypes, thus missing the speaker's individuality and uniqueness or the complexity of the scenario under consideration.

> What thing so good which not some harme may bring?[2]

Just as failure brings challenges, so does success. There is no unmixed blessing. A new opportunity may be seen by the speaker in an ambivalent way—as a potential test or threat, as well as possible joy. No gain is risk-free. And so, when, for example, he or she hears about an engagement or a pregnancy, a listener would do well to blend congratulations with careful, waiting observation for any underlying apprehensions.

Statements

When listening to adults, open questions should usually be chosen in preference to making statements and assumptions. For example, to say to someone as a greeting, 'You are looking well', is well meant, but could be premature. The person's appearance may be better than his or her health, feelings or circumstances.

If the listener makes a statement, this carries a risk. It may rob speakers of self-discovery by describing things in their own way, and in their own words. Continuous self-discovery (by both participants) is the most rich and rewarding element in the whole process of dialogue.

There is another reason why questions should precede statements. You may not be an accurate reader of another person's feelings. Appearance may be worse than reality. For example, what may seem to you like a

[2] William Alexander, *The Tragedy of Darius*, in *The Poetical Works of Sir William Alexander*, edited by L. E. Kastner and H. B. Charlton (Manchester: Longmans Green, 1921), volume 1, 126.

depressed tone of voice may just be a sign of tiredness. To label feelings inaccurately is to cast oneself as 'the authority' on another's inner world. To do so may recapitulate a misnaming of feelings by parent figures, leading speakers to doubt and distrust their own reading of their emotional life.

Questions put with a sense of genuine interest, and in an open-ended way—*How are you?* or *How are you feeling?*—are to be preferred to *You sound …* , or *Are you … ?* Let speakers identify and describe their own feelings, in their own way and time. If and when he or she comments, the listener should gently nudge; and, where possible, rephrase a would-be statement into the form of question. An unselfish listener has one aim, and one aim only: assisting speakers to interpret themselves to themselves.

Being listened to with deep attention is a life-changing and a life-enhancing adventure, an inner journey of joy and self-discovery, a finding of one's authentic, original self, freed at last of conditioning—by family, schooling, workplace, society's trends, fashions and shallow values. This is the route to true liberation.

> In the cloud of the human soul, there is a fire stronger than the lightning, and a grace more precious than the rain.[3]

Proving Oneself

Probably the biggest and most frequent trap for a listener is over-activity. This is often triggered when a speaker seems stuck in a life groove. Listeners may mistakenly see this impasse as a reflection of their own ineffectiveness in the relationship; and—to prove themselves—insecure listeners may try to force change, or the pace of change. What my analyst once said about psychotherapy applies, with equal wisdom, to listening in any form or setting: *You achieve more by doing less*.

Total listening or complete cure are not realistic goals. Often, the most you can jointly achieve is for the speaker to face, accept and come to terms with past or present grief, or pain, or illness. Whatever resists cure will have to be more patiently endured—perhaps for the rest of the person's life.

Always remember and keep in mind that you are not the prime healing factor. Inwardly kneeling at the feet of your Maker, and opened to God's power and mercy, you are a channel of God-given insight and compassion, flowing through you.

[3] John Ruskin, 'The Mystery of Life and Its Arts', in *Sesame and Lilies* (London: Smith, Elder, 1871), 125.

Advice

A core danger of advice is that it may be based on what has worked for the listener or someone known to the listener. These solutions and ways forward may not be appropriate for the speaker. Another major disadvantage of advice is that it tends to foster dependence.

Rather than giving advice, especially if unsought by the speaker, the farthest a listener should usually go is to review options with the speaker, so that the speaker can decide and determine his or her own path, however slowly and unsteadily, and however painful the journey. In the charting of their own path, speakers may become more able and more aware advice-givers to themselves. The long-term goal is to strengthen speakers' confidence in making choices and decisions.

Responses which encourage self-listening, self-awareness and self-expression are more enabling than directional guidance. Such responses by the listener assist newness, self-finding, adventure into the self, a greater sense of self-worth and tolerance of one's limitations. A listener who is non-possessive and non-authoritarian is content to be a catalyst, respecting the autonomy of the speaker as a self-directing person. The core and essence of good listening is to support and accompany speakers while they connect or reconnect with their own unique wisdom and self-belief.

> The true teacher knocks down the idol the student makes of him.[4]

The adventure of self-discovery has much in common with creative processes: these recapitulate the spontaneity and the spirit of exploration found in childhood learning, with its increasing sense of power and mastery.

Controlling

There are many drawbacks if a listener tries to direct the course and shape of an encounter. To be asked leading (rather than follow-up) questions may be felt by the speaker as intrusive, even invasive, putting him or her on the defensive, and hindering free and open self-expression and self-disclosure. The topic that the listener thinks is interesting or important may not be the subject of paramount concern to the speaker.

Creative listening does not use or abuse power, or even seek power. Listening, when dedicated to its true purpose and vocation, uses its innate strength to empower.

[4] Attributed to Mevlâna Jalâluddin Rumi.

> Now the greatest good that we can do to other men is not the gift of a treasure of our own, but the revelation of something which was theirs already.[5]

Doing

If you are too much in the mode of doing and advising, you may be avoiding your own feelings and memories. In effect, you are saying to yourself: *I won't let your hurt remind me of my hurt*. An over-emphasized helper role creates a duality, a gap, between the supposedly strong helper and the supposedly weaker recipient. This gap reinforces dependence. Dependence hampers growth in each of the two people as individuals and distorts the balance of their working relationship.

A good listener is reliable and dependable, ready to yield the ego's desire to control, and thus is willing to let go graciously when the span of meetings has come to a natural end. The central aim of an unselfish listener is to reinforce the speaker's own authority and originality, and to elicit the speaker's innate wisdom, so that the speaker may listen to his or her inner voice, and his or her own wisdom, and learn from it.

Keep replacing the anxiety or compulsion to *do* with the courage to *be*.

Seeking Solutions

The listener may see a valid solution to a problem, sometimes weeks or months before a speaker. This possible solution is often best kept to him- or herself, so that speakers do their own finding, in their own way, and at their own pace. Strong growth needs—depends on—strong roots.

Self-realised solutions are more readily owned and acted on, and are more likely to bring long-term benefits than the adoption of what someone else suggests—however respected and experienced the other person is, however useful his or her suggestions, and even though there might be short-term gains for the speaker if the listener were to offer advice.

Listeners will therefore be reluctant to relate how they or someone they know has coped or dealt with a similar situation. What worked for one person may not work for another; and being offered a ready-made, second-hand idea may, then or later, seem to the speaker likely to erode his or her sense of uniqueness.

[5] Louis Lavelle, *The Dilemma of Narcissus*, translated by William T. Gairdner (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), 143.

Education and business life foster, encourage and reward problem-solving: the search for practical and pragmatic answers. But some parts of an individual person's life pattern resist outer change, and thus resist solutions. In some cases, the most to be aimed for is a shift in attitude towards more understanding and acceptance, coming to terms both with one's own limitations and with the constraint of circumstances.

Salvation does not necessarily or always come in the form of solution. But it may be healing if speakers share with the listener their own sense of the scale and intensity of a life problem, and its seemingly impenetrable or intractable nature. Hope comes not only from finding meaning, but also from bonding and belonging, having a fellow traveller by one's side, and feeling understood, respected and accepted.

Expectations

Lightly held hopes, for the listener, are a vital part of the tone and quality of relaxed concentration and hovering attention. It is one thing to have lightly held hopes for the well-being of another person's life. It is quite another thing for a listener to bring to a relationship his or her own expectations, for example about the possibility of change or the pace of change.

The safest and soundest approach is consistently to leave to the speaker the core initiatives, such as aspects of decision-making, and also the choice of main subjects or themes, both within each encounter and in the overall relationship. *The listener's central focus should be on care, not cure.*

Expectations have two main defects: they are often rigid, and too high. By contrast, hopes tend to have a living, flickering quality, but may nonetheless be deeply ingrained and influential in the psyche (in a positive, life-giving way). Hopes nourish if they retain some flexibility—lightly clasped, not tightly gripped. Expectation narrows; hope widens.

Over-Reacting

Just as an instrumental player can create a musical note from a wide spectrum of sound, from very soft to very loud, so a person-to-person listener has all-important choices to make: not only whether and when to speak, but also, for each response or intervention, how to grade and select with care the strength or weight of expression as to tone and content. The potential range extends from the subtle and allusive to the overt and blatant.

A frequent error of technique is to make an overstated response. Over-reacting—especially if the topic is emotive—may result in the listener taking a position or stance that is difficult to amend or retreat from. By

contrast, an understated response, at least initially, is almost always safe: it enables the listener to find the apt tone during future exchanges, and it gives emotional space to the speaker.

Research shows how quickly both body and mind react to a threat, actual or possible. Studies of psychogalvanic skin-response have shown how sensitively people respond to even a minor lessening of a listener's degree of acceptance, or to a single word which, in meaning or in the tone spoken, is only slightly stronger than the feelings the speaker is currently experiencing.

Over-Identifying

A listener should avoid extremes: being too distant from, or too close to, the speaker, or to the mood or content of the encounter. A frequent danger for listeners is in getting over-stimulated by what they are hearing. This over-involvement may come, for example, from curiosity about some aspects of the material; or because something said jars or offends; or, which often happens, because what they are being told finds an echo in their memory.

If you do hear such an echo from your own life, past or present, you can usefully draw from your own experiences: the use of memory can assist you in showing empathy. But, at the same time, keep in your mind and approach a clear distinction between yourself and the other person, your life and the equally unique life of the speaker. And be especially careful, when you find parallels, to avoid the trap of projecting causes and outcomes from your own experience on to the other person.

Over-tiredness is often a sign—a warning—of being emotionally over-involved, or of being too active during meetings, or both.

> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4; RSV)

Unintegrated Parts of the Self

Aspects of oneself can get in the way of pure listening and of true, unimpeded encounter. Such obstacles might include an unfulfilled side of yourself, which you are attempting to live out vicariously in and through the speaker; or an insecure side, which seeks false power by wanting to control or even dominate; or a defended side, an unwanted part of yourself; or a sore spot which turns away discussion, or perhaps the very mention, of some particular subjects.

Listening is challenging and potentially life-enhancing, not only for the speaker but also for the listener. Listening inspires work that is never-ending: constant self-listening, willing and brave self-learning, resulting in continuous self-healing. The speaker will sense, and may grow stronger from knowing, that the learning in and from these encounters can be a two-way process.

The healing elements of listening include not only what happens in the speaker—catharsis, the unblocking and easing of repressed memories, and insight, integration, more sense of identity and self-esteem—but also the degree of relatedness the two people attain, often while or after walking together along awkward paths, sometimes bumpy, sometimes steep.

And the healing includes the amount and degree of self-work which each person stimulates in the other. Extending Jung's famous dictum, 'Only the wounded physician heals', it is also true to say that only the continuously-being-healed person heals.[6]

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[6] C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, edited by Aniela Jaffé, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage, 1989), 134.