

Helping People Feel More than Welcome

3. More than welcome

to share stories with people who will listen

“The best way to grow as a listener is to spend time around a great listener.”¹

Reflect on your own for a few minutes, and then share with someone else:

Think of a person in your life who has been a great listener.

- How did you feel when you were in that person’s company?
- What was it about that person that enabled you to share your thoughts, feelings and stories with them?
- What difference has that person make in your own character and relationships?

Time to listen...?

In the 21st Century culture, we have so many opportunities to fill our days with activities that we hardly have time to reflect and listen to our own inner world - let alone to others. We are resource rich, and time poor.

While we may find satisfaction in all our “doings”, it can leave us exhausted and empty. If we are obsessed with our own plans, we will not make time to enjoy people, care for others, or build relationships.

Our emphasis on individualism tends to diminish the importance of caring relationships – because they require focussed attention, emotional energy, and time!

Loneliness is epidemic in our culture. Millions of people are searching for someone who cares enough to listen to them, understand how things are in their world, and take an ongoing interest in their story.

Discuss what these passages tell us about God’s listening – and our listening

The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. (Exodus 3:7 NIV)

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry. (Psalm 40:1 NIV)

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry...
The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:15, 17-18 NIV)

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. (Psalm 116:1-2 NIV)

¹ Adam S. McHugh, *The Listening Life – Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction*, (IVP: 2015), 136.

To answer before listening - that is folly and shame. (Proverbs 18:13 NIV)

Job speaks to his "friends":

"You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you!

If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.

Hear now my argument; listen to the pleas of my lips."

"Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may."

"Listen carefully to what I say; let my words ring in your ears" (Job 13:4-6, 13, 17NIV)

"Listen carefully to my words; let this be the consolation you give me. (Job 21:2 NIV)

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry... (James 1:19 NIV)

Speaking versus Listening

Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them... Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render.

They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking... Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies...

Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by him who is himself the great listener and whose work they should share.²

Any comments on Bonhoeffer's statements?

Are we really listening...?

What's the difference between hearing and listening?

W.A. Schmeling suggests five "jumps" that indicate that people are not listening:

1. People often **jump ahead**, assuming they know what the speaker is saying or wants to say.
2. People often **jump into** the person's problem and try to remove it by giving an immediate solution.
3. People often **jump down** the speaker's throat by criticizing him for whatever he is thinking, saying, or feeling.
4. People often **jump on** the bandwagon, saying they understand because they had a similar, but of course, worse problem.
5. People often **jump away** from the topic because they are afraid of the direction in which the conversation is heading.

All these jumps silence the speaker and do not help that person. Rather they indicate that we are not listening to the one speaking - or taking him/her seriously.^{3 4}

Discuss

Can you think of a time when someone did one of these jumps to you? How did it feel?

Which of these jumps have you made in the past?

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (London: SCM Press, 1954), 82.

³ William A. Schmeling, *Hey Family, Let's Talk*, (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 3-5.

⁴ For a more detailed list of lousy listening, see: "How to be a Bad Listener" in Adam McHugh, *Learning to Listen*, 139-142.

We can all improve our skills in listening. Eg body language, giving our attention, asking “open questions”,...

Yet does our silence always mean that we are listening! What’s the difference?

The incredible gift of listening does not happen by closing our mouths, but opening our hearts to God and to others.

Some insightful quotes from Adam McHugh (page numbers in brackets)

Who do I have to become in order to have the capacity to listen? (136)

...are you truly motivated to learn how to listen to others? There are costs. Character building is always expensive to the ego. (136)

For what purpose do I enter a conversation?

Is it an opportunity to express my opinions, a chance to be heard?

Am I seeking attention or adulation?

Do I try to entertain or perform for the other person, to convince them that I am likeable or attractive?

Am I trying to show others that I’m right and convert them to my way of thinking?

Is it a setting for solving a problem? Do I have a rigid agenda?

Related to these questions, how do I view the other person in the conversation?

Is he a sounding board for my thoughts? Am I the presumed expert and she the novice who needs to learn? A captive audience for my stories? A sparring partner, someone that I am trying to defeat? Someone who will inhale my hot air? (137)

The opposite of a listening heart is not a talking heart but a selfish heart. (137)

The listening heart is one that seeks to give, to learn, to welcome, to serve. In a small but real way, listening imitates the self-emptying act of Jesus, who voluntarily released his claims on ruling in order to serve and give his life. The listening heart strives to put away control, all the ways we can manipulate a conversation for our gain... The listening heart seeks to be present, to be focussed on something other than itself and to give its attention away. (137-138)

Trying to fix, judge, rescue or change others are all subtle ways of exerting power over other people. Instead of entering into the world of another person, we try to force them to enter ours. Good listening flips the power dynamic on its head. He who would be the master becomes the servant, and he who would be the captive audience becomes the storyteller. (138)

People are complex, layered, multifaceted, beautiful, wounded, contradictory, beloved image-bearers of the Creator. They are minds, hearts, souls, and bodies, spilling over with dreams, passions, hurts, regrets and fears. As H. Jackson Brown puts it, “Remember that everyone you meet is afraid of something, loves something, and has lost something.” (138)

“Pushing the Arrow”⁵

When listening to people, we often have a propensity to turn the conversation towards ourselves: our thoughts, feeling, experiences, dreams, goals, interests.

⁵ The next sections are totally from Adam McHugh, 143-149. Direct quotes have page numbers at the end.

“Good listening starts with the premise that this conversation is not about you.”
(143)

Imagine there is a big arrow hovering over the space between two people engaged in a conversation. It is a very smart, mind-reading arrow, and it swivels to point at whomever the attention of the conversation is focused on. To listen...is to pay focussed and loving attention to the other. So, as the listener in this conversation, your goal is to keep the arrow pointing at the other person for as long as possible. That's it. Push the arrow toward the interests, needs and heart of the other person. Encourage the other person to keep talking, to take an idea further, to go deeper into a story, memory or emotion. Then you're listening. (143)

Just like a compass always points north, the arrow will seek to bring the attention back to you. A good listener must be ruthless in pushing the arrow back towards the other person.

HOW can I keep the arrow pointed at the other person?

Adam McHugh suggests 4 ways:

1. Asking good, open ended questions

Closed question: “Did you have a good weekend?” -> Yes/No.

Open question: “How was your weekend?”

An open question is an invitation, welcoming discussion and elaboration from the speaker.

And then the second question that unlocks the conversation:

“Can you tell me more about that?”

Or a variation of that:

- “How were you feeling when that happened?”
- “Tell me more, why did that interaction bother you.”
- “Help me understand more about that.”

If a person has a story to tell, a grievance to air, an idea to share, a confession to make, an emotion to vent or a secret to tell, a good listener will say, “Tell me more.”
(145)

2. Reflecting back what you have heard.

“What I'm hearing you say is that...”

“It seems like you're a bit concerned/upset/miffed/frustrated about...”

You are listening to the feelings that lie underneath and validating the person's emotions.

“When someone has had a feeling validated, it has a way of opening up the conversation. Things are about to go deep.” (146)

3. Answering a question with a question.

“People love to ask for advice, but when they ask for advice they usually don't want it; instead, they want an opportunity to discuss their struggle. Every generic request for advice has a personal story or trouble behind it. If you dispense advice too quickly, you are not hearing them. A simple response of “Why do you ask?” will take the conversation to the level of motivation, which is where the true meaning lies.
(146)

4. Active listening.

Not passive, blank staring at the speaker; but being present and visibly engaging with the speaker. “The classic active listening expressions...are nods of the head, eye contact, sounds like “uh huh”, “hmmm” or “really?” and an attentive posture, like leaning forward and facing the speaker.” (147)

Active listening requires energy and focus. If too tired, “I really want to hear your story, but I’m exhausted right now, and can’t give you my full attention. Can we catch up tomorrow so I can be present with you and listen to what you have to say?”

Listening towards understanding others

The complexity of communication: we filter everything through the grid of our own world view, life experiences, beliefs, values, feelings, first impressions.

Since people are complex, we never completely understand another person. “...there is always more to learn about another person, no matter how long you’ve known them. There is always more to the story. There are more layers to unpack, more memories to relate, more fears to usher us into silence. It should not be lost on us that listening for understanding assumes we *don’t* have understanding of the other person.” (148-149).

“Listening for understanding means taking the side of the other person, trying to see and think and feel as they do, creatively imagining yourself into their world.” (149)

Out of love and respect, we give people freedom to share whatever they are comfortable in sharing; and the freedom to keep things to themselves. The depth of what people share will depend on whether they feel safe in our company. When people feel safe, accepted, loved and valued they will become increasingly open and vulnerable with their stories.

It takes time and numerous encounters to earn trust, but it’s a privilege when given.

Trust can be nurtured through 1:1 conversations, where we have no agenda other than to listen. “Hey I’m interested in your story. Would you like to catch up over a cuppa sometime?”

What are some things that destroy trust?

Introvert / Extrovert?

Both have strengths that can powerfully bless others:

- Extroverts may find it easier to initiate contact and talk about themselves. Yet they may find it difficult listening to others.
- Introverts may find it harder to initiate conversation or reveal much about themselves. Yet they generally find it easy listening to people’s stories.

Regardless, we can introduce ourselves, ask for their name, and try an open question:

- “So what have you been up to this last week?” Or: “How’s your week been?”
- “What brought you to this part of the world today?”
- “What’s your interest/hobby/passion?” Or: “What are some things you most enjoy in life?”
- “Can you share with me something about your family?”
- Others:

Conversation starters may include asking about people's History, Highs, Hurts, and Hopes.

Or you could try the acrostic WHEAT:

- Where are you from?
- Hobbies/interests?
- Experiences (what you've been up to lately)
- Acquaintances (people you know & love)
- Travel (places you've been/you'd like to go)

As you listen, keep pointing the arrow back to that person: "Can you tell me more about that?"

But also give the person freedom to change the topic, or ask you questions.

Sharing your story

When we are honest about our own histories, weaknesses, problems and vulnerabilities, we demonstrate that we do not have it all together. We can also share how the LORD is helping us in our struggles through his promises and his people. As people caught up in God's story, we have a hope and a future with Jesus.

We pray and look for opportunities to season conversation with God-talk – without being preachy or pushy.

Ongoing connection and care by recalling conversations

Ongoing connection is powerful. People are often blown away when you remember not just their name, but what they shared in a previous conversation:

- "Last time we spoke you mentioned that.... How did that work out for you?"
- "Last time we spoke, you shared a story about I was wondering how on earth you've managed to come to terms with that."
- "You shared that you've recently lost a loved one. How are you processing your grief in this season?"

People feel valued that you remembered... and cared enough to ask.

So reflect on conversations you've had. Some find it helpful to write down notes after the conversation. Pray for that person. Ask Father God what he might want you to follow up with that person next time you meet.

In the body of Christ, weekly gathering in worship is important for ongoing care of others. If people attend sporadically, how can caring conversations continue?

As we are able, how about arriving early and/or staying for a while after services – just to make people feel more than welcome. We can be praying and looking for opportunities to listen to their stories, encourage them, bless them, cheer them on, help them, or offer to pray with them.

Imagine how that could shape this congregation over the months and years ahead!