

Listen From Your Heart

Nature gave us one tongue and two ears so we could hear twice as much as we speak.

Epictetus

Think of a time when you were listened to wholeheartedly. How did it feel? Perhaps you sensed a deep acceptance of yourself and your feelings by the other person. Perhaps you experienced the expansiveness of freedom to be yourself. For most of us, this experience is rare. Especially when we want to express difficult feelings, we are afraid of being rejected or brushed aside. As children, we may have had our feelings negated by an overwhelmed parent saying "Stop crying" or "You shouldn't get so upset about that." We may also have experienced this as adults, perhaps from a defensive partner. If we think back honestly, we have all been closed-hearted listeners at one time or another. Where does this inclination to block out what someone else is saying come from?

I believe it is a defensive mechanism to protect our vulnerability. To the extent that we have trouble expressing our own feelings, another person's expression of her feelings threatens us. We are afraid of being overwhelmed or losing control. We sometimes don't hear what's being said because something in the message triggers hurt, anger or fear. Perhaps we feel attacked by what our partner is saying, forced to look at something in ourselves that we don't want to see. Perhaps they are trying to make us responsible for how they feel. Perhaps what the other says challenges our truth and instead of listening all of our energy goes into hacking at the validity of their truth.

This intellectual skill of discussion that we honed at school may be good for winning debates, but is destructive in a relationship. The word *discussion* originates from the Latin verb *discutire*, to strike asunder, shake apart, scatter. To discuss is to dissect meaning. We can speak of "winning" or "losing" a discussion. If we base our communication in relationships on this model, we are headed for misunderstanding and conflict. A partnership model for communication is dialogue. There are no individual winners or losers in dialogue. *Dialogue* comes from the Greek roots *dia* meaning across or through, and *logus* meaning word or study. When we engage in dialogue we let meaning emanate. We are not engaged in a battle of right and wrong but are striving for mutual understanding. Martin Buber wrote: "Dialogue is a mode of exchange among human beings in which there is a true turning to one another, and a full appreciation of another not as an object in a social function, but as a genuine being." Listening wholeheartedly means letting the other be, just as he is. Doing this requires me to let go of what's on my own mind in order to hear what's on the other person's mind, allowing me to entertain the world from his point of view. As long as I want to change the other, I cannot really listen to him.

Closed-hearted listening takes many forms from subtle to overt: ignoring, interpreting, qualifying, defending, contradicting, denying, changing the subject, walking away. These reactions are all attempts to change or negate the other's reality. One of the things that hinders us from acknowledging the other's feelings is that we mistakenly think that acknowledging is agreeing. This comes from the limiting right/wrong duality paradigm. The both/and paradigm allows our realities to stand side by side. Becoming aware of and accepting the other

person's reality does not mean taking responsibility for it. Even when someone is blaming me, what he really wants is to be understood. If I consistently deny him that, we will remain stuck. Even if I did not intend to be hurtful, if my partner feels hurt, what do I lose by saying "I am sorry that I hurt your did not intend to be hurtful, if my partner feels hurt, what do I lose by saying "I am sorry that I hurt your feelings?" Does a sincere apology make me less worthy? Instead of trying to convince him that I didn't intend hurt, why not accept that he feels hurt?

No matter how hard we try, we cannot force another person to change. I can tell you from failed attempts of my own at reforming others that this applies to bosses, children, spouses and parents. However, if we change our way of relating to them, approaching them with a true curiosity and willingness to understand the world from their point of view, we open the space for dramatic shifts in the relationship to occur. Listening is a magic wand. A workshop participant asked in an exasperated tone how she could finally get her mother to listen to her. I think you can guess my response: listen more to her. When we have the sense that someone isn't listening to us, we usually attribute it to a shortcoming of theirs: "he's inconsiderate" or "she's just stubborn" and so we try harder by repeating, insisting and speaking louder. You know how you react to those strategies. Communication is a give and take process. If I am not open to my partner's opinion, then why should I expect him to be open to mine? My working hypothesis for life is what I call the 50% rule. I am always at least 50% responsible for what happens to me and my 50% is the only part I have any influence over. So if I have difficulties communicating with someone else I need to change my behavior.

Listening is not a passive activity and cannot be reduced to holding your tongue (though that is a place to start). Feigned attention will not work, nor will feigned acknowledgment. If you are genuinely interested in wanting to understand the other person, you will naturally apply the skills of active listening: asking questions to clarify that you really understand how she sees things, reflecting back the sense you have of how she feels about them, partnering with her to ensure that you truly understand what's going on with her. As long as you focus your energy on making the other wrong, you will never discover who she really is and you are blocking the relationship from going anywhere. If you are not authentically open to the other person's reality, all the active listening phrases in the world won't have an effect. Similarly, if you assume that you already know what she is going to say or cut her off with an "I know just what you mean" only to launch into your own story, you are hijacking the conversation. "Oh I know exactly how you feel" is essentially a slap in the face. Sympathy is about your own feelings. Empathy is a bridge to the other person's experience. Empathy is when I just listen and then respond by acknowledging the other's reality. I am willing to partner on equal ground, accepting that each of our realities is valid and we are equally worthy of respect.

The Chinese character for listening includes the characters for ear, eyes and heart. Listening not only with your ears, but with all of your senses, your intuition, your mind and your heart will help you reach mutual understanding with others.