

## LISTENING

### **Background and Context**

When we are not listened to or seen, we may begin to wonder if we are even real. Tara Brach tells a story about a family ordering dinner at a restaurant that illustrates this. When the waitress came to take the orders, the parents made their choices and then their five-year-old daughter chimed in: "I'll have a hot dog, French fries and a Coke." The Dad, ignoring his daughter, turned to the waitress and said "Bring her meat loaf, mashed potatoes and milk." The waitress ignored the Dad and keeping her eyes on the child said, "So, hon, what do you want on that hot dog?" The waitress left and the parents sat there flabbergasted. The daughter, though, was beaming and after a long silence said, "She thinks I'm real."

"There's probably nothing in our lives that brings us more pain - that could easily be avoided - than the breakdown of communication with our loved ones and others around us. Very few topics are more important, but few of us receive any education in this field."

### **Check In & Activity**

#### ***Foundation:***

Dependent upon a lack of foreknowledge on the topic at hand—that is, the students are not to know that the lab is about listening.

#### ***The Check In:***

*What is your favorite dessert?*

#### ***Instructions (post Check In):***

1. Take out a sheet of paper.
2. Write down the names of everyone in the class.
3. Beside the name, write down the person's favorite dessert.

#### ***Discussion:***

In one ear and out the other. It's just the way things go for many people. Even in the case of a check-in, where we all may appear interested and attentive, this may still hold true. In fact, consider this: it is entirely possible to "be" nice—to be warm, friendly, attentive, and encouraging—in conversation without actually hearing a thing the speaker tells you. You aren't "playing" nice, you're being it—honestly, genuinely, sincerely—yet, you haven't listened. In our group check in, no one interrupts, all are quiet, people smile, we let the other person speak. But who really listened?

Who was able to remember everybody's favorite dessert? Did anyone come close? Whether you were able to or not, might you say a word or two about listening?

#### ***The Check In, redux:***

We all know what a greeting is: "Hey!," "Yo!," "Good evening," "... Jim" (with a nod). Here is a new one: "I am here, if you are here." Implicit in this greeting is the question: Are you here? So, let us begin again: I am here, if you are here: *What is your favorite dessert?*

## **Activity 1: If a person speaks in the forest ...**

*If a person speaks in the forest, and no one is there to hear her, does she make a sound?*

### ***Instructions:***

- 1) For the chalkboard: What are examples of bad listening habits? (not making eye contact, looking at your watch or out the window, interrupting, offering advice when it is not asked for, changing the subject, fidgeting, nodding off, having a blank expression.
- 2) Pair up.
- 3a) One member of the pair will tell the other person *how breakfast went* this morning (or, the last time s/he had it). There is more to say than you may at first imagine. Before you speak, take a moment to delve into the wealth of what you might deliver. You have five minutes to express how breakfast went for you.
- 3b) The other partner—the one "listening"—will engage in poor listening habits, as outlined on the chalkboard. That is, be a bad listener.
- 4) After this conversation ends, switch roles.

### ***Discussion:***

What happened is both funny and serious. Absent attentive listening, a speaker can experience frustration, and discover that s/he soon loses interest in her/his own words. S/he may even go mute. The point of the exercise is that it is the listener, through his/her presence, that brings life to the conversation. Indeed, what are words without an ear to receive them? Can it be true that one is not speaking until someone is listening?

In your journal, compose a list of all the people in your life—past and present—who do or did not listen to you. Who cannot hear you? Or, who couldn't? Who fails to listen to you? After a few minutes of journaling, we will share.

Now, let us turn the question upon its head. If every soul on this planet sat down in peace to make such a list, and after they had finished, you found the time to read through each and every one of them, would you find your name? Would you find your name upon some soul's list? We have asked ourselves, "Who cannot hear me? Who doesn't listen?" Now, let us ask, "Who do I not hear? Who do I fail by failing to listen?" Compose this list in your journal. After a few minutes, we will share.

Remember, for many people, there is little in their lives that settles them into more agony than the breakdown and loss of communication with those they love or those they simply live with.

## **Activity 2: In the Country of the Deaf**

Desiderius Erasmus wrote, "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." And in the country of the deaf? We all know what is to come upon a king or queen, upon a person who does the most remarkable, regal thing: When you speak to them, they stop, they listen, and they hear you. Stephen Covey—the Covey of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*—wrote, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to

reply." Let us be Kings and Queens; let us listen without the intent to reply, and with the intent to understand.

- 1) Bring to your attention to a story, a friend, a time of your life, a way you used to feel (or now feel) that holds meaning for you. It may be anything, yet, let it be something you will share with a partner.
- 2) Find a partner. We aren't wiping the slate; we're throwing it out and getting a new one.
- 3a) One partner will speak to the other of this "thing" that is meaningful. S/he will have at least ten minutes to do this.
- 3b) One partner will listen without interrupting, without speaking. Listen attentively and honestly. You are not to speak; you are not to reply; all you have to do is understand. If you are here, your partner is here.
- 4) After the speaker finishes, you may switch roles.

### ***Discussion:***

Notice your reactions to having to play the role of the listener without talking. Are you learning something about what motivates you to talk? Do you find yourself wanting to interrupt to make a point, or to explain something to the other person? Does it make you nervous not to be able to talk? Do you think you may sometimes resort to talking when you are anxious, to avoid empty spaces in conversation, to prove that you're listening to someone, to take care of them, or to show that you have something to say?

How does refraining from talking affect your listening skills? Do you notice that you can really hear what the other person is saying when you don't have to think about what you should say back? Do you become more relaxed because there is no pressure on you to say something, to be brilliant, or to take care of the other person?

What about when you change roles, and you become the talker while your partner listens? Does it make you nervous to have the other person listen without responding? Or do you find that after a while, you feel like you have truly been heard?

Spend a moment to deeply ponder the whole span of your life—from munchkin to now—for encounters when you felt heard. In your journal, start a list of these people who heard you. If there are those who hear you so regularly that no specific encounter need be mentioned, add their name to the list, too. What makes a good listener? And what makes a good listener such a good thing?

### **Checkout:**

Think of one word (or a few words that denote one thing—such as, "Rainbow Sherbet"). Just a single word for you to express and for us to hear. Any word. You speak. We listen.

## OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: LISTENING

### 1. "Willing to Listen"

A woman by the name of Fran Peavey once traveled the world, park bench to park bench. In every city she visited, she found a seat, then sat. Soon enough, someone would come to sit with her. It never failed. Someone always came. Perhaps they were tired. Perhaps they simply didn't mind sharing ... because everyone who sat with Fran talked to her, at length. Maybe she was gorgeous. Or, possibly, it had something to do with the fact that Fran Peavey draped a cloth sign before her which read: "American Willing to Listen."

It's that easy. And it's your field study.

- A. Create a sign of some sort which expresses a sentiment similar to that of Peavey's.
- B. Find a seat, post your sign, and wait.
- C. When someone comes, LISTEN. Remember what Covey said: Do not listen to reply; listen to understand. And as you listen to understand, listen with acceptance. "**Accept their truth.**" As Tamarack Song says:  
*Because there is nearly always the possibility that we are not able to hear what another is saying, it is good policy to—without exception—hold the speaker in Honor and Respect. (Truthspeaking, p.47)*
- D. This part of the assignment is complete when at least three people have spoken to you. Of course, you may hear these three over a succession of sittings. And, of course, you may certainly listen to more than three people; in fact, the more the better.
- E. Compose a response piece to this experience.