

## How to Increase Deep Sharing and Listening in Covenant Groups, Part II

By Susan Hollister, UUSGMN Board, Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC  
and Alicia Hawkins, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico

In the Winter *Quarterly* we identified six elements that enable a covenant group to grow in deepness: clear guidelines, a safe space, the facilitator's example, a group covenant, an atmosphere of trust, and compelling topics. In Part II we'll explore listening and sharing deeply, the role of silence, elements that inhibit deepness, and the influence of group characteristics. Again, we are grateful to the many people whose comments formed the basis of these articles.

### Learning to Listen Deeply

Mary Schwartz from Albuquerque, NM, calls covenant groups "a ministry of listening." At their core is listening from the heart. Look below at the Chinese symbol for listening. It is made up of characters for eyes, ear, undivided attention and heart. You will note that the mind is not included. Listening from the heart differs from listening from the mind.

If we give the speaker our undivided attention, we've taken a step towards listening from the heart. If you notice that you are judging, analyzing, or evaluating, you aren't listening with your heart. You've made their sharing about you—your assessment, your thoughts. You are listening with your mind. This is the I-it relationship described by philosopher Martin Buber: treating people as objects to be used and analyzed.



In contrast, Buber says, we are in I-Thou relationships when we interact by being open to the other person with no agendas or judgments. We come into relation with the other, focusing wholly on the other. We call this deep listening or sacred listening.

Sometimes we get sidetracked when the speaker's story evokes a strong response. To stay in deep listening mode we can make a note of our response to think about later, then return our full attention to the speaker. To be able to sit quietly when others are sharing is based on the premise that our quiet and patient presence plays a powerful role in healing. Deep listening is a process that we'll be working on for the rest of our lives.

Before one can be asked to listen deeply to others, one must first get in touch with listening deeply to oneself. "To that end," says Daniel DeVaney of East Lansing, MI, "I enter into an early discussion with the group about letting go of culturally ingrained practices of communication: those that rely on interrupting with questions or affirmative declarations that signify paying attention and empathy. It is freeing to be absolved of overtly demonstrating interest. Instead, one is placed in a position to let the other person's words wash over them. As a result, connections and insights will be made that are not otherwise possible."

Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker writer Douglas Steere puts it, "Holy listening—to 'listen' another's soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery--may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another." [Martha House, Georgetown, TX; \* See source at end of article] Alexis Grasso of Stony Brook, NY, agrees with the Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy that the purpose of SGM is to experience "loving your neighbor" through deep listening, which allows us to connect to the heart of the other.

## **Learning to Share Deeply**

Deep listening creates a safe space and invites deeper sharing. In a sermon at the UU Church of Bloomington, IN, the Rev. Mary Ann Macklin stated, “This kind of deep listening is very different from our typical ways of communicating. Often, I have heard Chalice Circle participants say that this deep listening is initially uncomfortable. But then as the group grows, they learn the gift of ‘hearing each other into speech.’ (ala feminist theologian Nelle Morton).”

As Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund of Marietta, GA, recount, check-in can be an unforgettable bonding experience when members share personal or family concerns in the safety of their covenant group. It can unleash a torrent of similar experiences. Suddenly everyone realizes they’re not alone. “Deeper conversations happen naturally when people commit to speaking from the heart and feel safe enough to speak through their own stories and life experiences.” (Bill Mahony, Durham, NC)

Chris Cleveland (East Lansing, MI) observes that deep sharing is more likely to occur when participants share from their inner being and "bare their souls," and when others are listening sincerely with an open mind and heart. Deep sharing is less likely to occur, she says, when participants speak from their "ego," trying to impress the others.

“In my experience, the deepest moments have been when someone has shared about crises they are facing in their lives. Although we are not a ‘support group,’ the willingness of people to share the immediate concerns of their lives moved us all to a level of intimacy which did not previously exist. The group was able to listen with compassion without feeling an obligation to give advice or to make things ‘right.’” (Penny McDougal, Frederick, MD)

Wendy Sapp (Chattanooga, TN) observes that groups need one or two people willing to take the risk to share deeply. The first can be a facilitator, but better yet if the person is a group participant. Everyone has their own comfort level about sharing; some share profound experiences freely while others hold those tightly inside. Some may share about certain experiences without reserve but keep others private. Once one person takes the risk and shares deeply, others will follow. Being present and listening without judgment or comment, is just as critical for deep sharing as for speaking.

## **Learning to Deepen Silence**

Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. This process allows others time to fully listen before reflecting on their own reactions. (\*Martha House, Georgetown, TX)

Early in the life of a covenant group, people ask what they can do at the end of someone’s sharing; the silence seems not enough. Some use the hands in prayer mode and a bow of the head. Some say thank you quietly. Others nod and smile. These are all attempts to say, “Your sharing was deep and courageous. Thank you.” Later, as the group settles into the process, someone may comment on how the silence during and after sharing is a powerful sacred time. The intimacy is so rich that silence seems to be the only response.

Wendy Sapp (Chattanooga, TN) adds that silence gives people time to gain courage to speak their truth. It also allows the speaker to take a breath. Silence can be uncomfortable, but it is essential for going deep.

Covenant groups in Albuquerque often read a quote on the power of silence as meetings begin and just

before the deep sharing/deep listening time. Here are some favorites:

*I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. - Rachel Naomi Remen*

*You heard me. You heard me all the way...You went down all the way with me. Then you didn't smother me. You gave it space to shape itself. You gave it time to come full circle. - Nelle Morton*

*If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself. - Parker J. Palmer*

Several facilitators contributed ways to bring a covenant group to a quieter presence. Kate Goss of Manhasset, NY, shares, "Going deeper can happen when the group is comfortable with silence, and gives each speaker room to keep expressing him or herself for a little while. Members seldom get into the deeper matters as soon as they open their mouths. It has to develop, and for that the group has to be willing to listen and not jump in."

Dez Papendorp of Chattanooga, TN, adds, "Have a moderate to slow-paced session, no rushing through. Let questions sit and sink in the silence, allowing people time to form words for their thoughts." The meeting format helps to set the tone.

"As we enter the room," says Carol Schwyzer of Santa Barbara, CA, "most of us are in 'go-go-go' mode. Check-in allows people to enter the quiet space of sharing." Facilitators often find that "a spiritual practice such as music or sounding a chime or singing bowl helps to move the group into quietness." (Ingrid Deckman, Devon, PA)

### **Elements that Inhibit Deep Sharing**

Not surprisingly, the elements that prevent deepness are the opposite of those that promote sharing on a deep level. Factors cited most often by our contributors are covenant breaches: judgment, side-talking, domination, and overstepping boundaries. Strong opinions or the presence of a "know-it-all" also inhibit deepness. (Rev. Axel Gehrmann, Urbana, IL)

Carol Schwyzer (Santa Barbara, CA) lists these inhibitory elements: not knowing the guidelines; not knowing whether confidences will be shared outside the group; thinking others might interrupt, respond, or try to fix; worry that others will take up all the time or you will not be given enough time; and a sense that you must "bare your soul" against your will.

Additional elements are related to the atmosphere of the meeting space or container. A perception of unfriendliness or coldness from participants diminishes the feeling of safety, as does a format that is overly rigid, and an environment that is too casual or "social" or too stern and strict. Trust and deep sharing are fragile, says Kate Goss of Manhasset, NY. "Any hint of a group member who is not adhering to the ground rules will create conditions where members don't feel safe enough to go deep."

Dan Grandstaff of Durham, NC, observes that “if going deep stirs anxiety for people, they will undercut the process by making jokes or diverting the conversation in some way.” He suggests that giving the group time to talk about what comes up for them during silence could lead to deeper sharing. In addition, group members could explore the difference between “safety” and “comfort.” What helps them be more open and what causes them to shut down? “We can never expect to feel comfortable all the time in a group, but an important goal is to always make it ‘safe’ for everyone.”

### **Group Characteristics and Depth of Sharing**

Consistency in all areas seems to foster group development and deep sharing. Kathy Kellison of Augusta, ME holds up regular meeting times and commitment to the group as prime examples. Committed people who show up to the group meetings on time are imperative to the group process and going deeper. (Karen Brown, Swampscott, MA)

“I was impressed at how faithfully the members of my first group attended; it was rare for anyone to miss a session. We developed a bond within the group that still lingers when we see each other at church. My second group was the polar opposite. Several dropped out before we started; others came infrequently or dropped out. We didn’t get a chance to become a cohesive group. In such an environment, deep experience is unlikely to occur.” (Martha Beyerlein, Albuquerque, NM)

Comments from our respondents were mixed on the relationship of group size to deep sharing. Some like 7-9 members, others are comfortable with 10-12. The important thing seems to be having a number that enables all members to open up on a deep level during the allotted meeting time.

There were many opposing comments on the topic of group duration. Some suggest that length of time is not important: “I have been in brand new groups where there is a lot of depth if members share a desire to get there.” (Kate Goss, Manhasset, NY) “Groups can achieve deep moments even while meeting in our introductory One Time Chalice Circles.” (Sally Hattig and Cathy Olson, Ann Arbor, MI) “I have seen deep sharing with long-term groups and groups that have just formed, although the newly-formed groups often reach this depth when they know their group is short term.” (Rev. Heather Janules, Bethesda, MD)

Others feel that length of time together is a determining factor: “In my experience, ‘going deep’ happens when the group has been together for a while so that a good level of trust is in place.” (Ann Davis, Easton, MA) “Deeper sharing tends to develop after the group has met 4, 5, or 6 times.” (Richard Loescher, Eugene, OR) Eliot Chapel facilitators were unanimous in their belief that groups that meet over the long-term (versus groups that meet for a year or other specified period) have the best chance of developing the trust necessary for deep sharing to occur. (Rev. Terry Davis, Kirkwood, MO)

Past group experience may play a role: “If group members are practiced SGM participants, deepness can happen. If participants are new to the SGM experience and aren’t comfortable following another’s lead, the group dynamic remains uncertain.” (Dez Papendorp, Chattanooga, TN) “It helps greatly when some people in the group have had experience in similar groups before and have seen the value of the closeness that developed.” (Facilitator, SW District)

Deepness often depends upon the the facilitator, expectations, and make-up of the group rather than its longevity. “Establishing a culture for deep listening—by the minister, by the training, by the covenant, by the session plans—can lead to deep listening for groups that have long or short histories together.” (Alan Backler, Bloomington, IN) Susan Jordan and Vickie Ecklund (Marietta, GA) have been in groups where some members shared at a deep level very early, their second or third meeting together. “If this

happens, it may set the stage for a more introspective group. However, we don't believe most individuals or groups are able to go deep without some of the elements in place that we listed earlier." [See Part I, Winter 2012 *SGM Quarterly*]

"Groups can develop norms that get stronger with time. If the norm is for a 'not too deep' level of sharing, it will continue unless the norm is questioned and consciously changed." (Dan Grandstaff, Durham, NC) "Our experience," says Richard Loescher of Eugene, OR, "is that depth of sharing is greatly influenced by the particular mix of people in a group, their 'chemistry,' and how comfortable and safe people feel with each other."

"Some identify as affinity groups, and express that their ability to go deep comes from their commonality. On the other hand, some groups have established significant cohesion despite their diversity." (Kathy Kellison, Augusta, ME)

Deep listening and sharing are vital for moving groups to a deeper level. Perception of a safe, trusting environment and adherence to the group's covenant are essential. In comparison, group size, mix, and longevity are minor determinants of sharing level. In Part III we will explore training strategies that prepare facilitators to lead sessions of depth and substance. Meeting format, topic selection, session plan design, and the spectrum of deepness in groups will be included.

*Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force..When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life..When we listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other...and it is this little creative fountain inside us that begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom...It is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way. - Brenda Ueland*

\*Prepared by formation facilitators with considerable help from the writings of Judy Brown, Parker Palmer and the Dialogue Group. Center for Renewal and Wholeness in Higher Education

*Susan Hollister is on the board of the UU SGM Network. She leads a covenant group at Eno River UU Fellowship in Durham, NC, and serves on the steering team. Alicia Hawkins leads a covenant group and is on the steering committee at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM. She is co-author of Heart to Heart and Soul to Soul, collections of 14 gatherings for small group ministry.*

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