

## **Bringing SGM Growth Into Our Practical Lives**

*By Rae Ramsey, All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City, New York*

It was late, and I was preparing last minute details for the next day's clients when the phone rang. I knew it must be an emergency, as I've asked my clients to spare me from late night calls unless there's an urgent issue. Sure enough, it was a dear friend, with an anxious tone in her voice. "Mom's fallen and broken her jaw, and I'm at the hospital with her now." Immediately, I sat down and let go of all other thoughts. "How bad is she? What do the doctors say? How are you handling all this?" Out came a torrent of emotion, concern, fear, frustration, confusion, and anxiety.

I went into listening mode, offering a steady presence so that she could let it all out and start to sort out all the possible next steps. A question here, a calm "uh-huh" there, an occasional "...and then?" She finally got to the end of her tale and I then summarized what she had told me and the options she felt she had at this crucial moment. Not offering advice, I helped her sort it out until she came up with a plan for the next couple of days. As she was wrapping up our call, she sighed and quietly said, "Thank you for letting me rant on. I feel so much better and strong enough to move ahead with my plan for Mom."

This and countless other personal experiences have, in part, been special gifts I've received by participating in the small group ministry program at my church, All Souls, in New York City. As a facilitator since the program's inception four years ago, I have consistently observed how participants blossom in the light of the group's presence, listening, and compassion.

In family encounters, friendship challenges, and professional issues, my experience with the SGM program has helped to deepen the level of communication, enhance trust, help solve problems presented to me, and has increased the peace and confidence of those with whom I interact. Seeing this in my personal life and hearing similar experiences from fellow facilitators supports my sense of the crucial role this work plays in the UU community.

Given the success of SGM within our groups, the question occurs to me: "How can we apply what we've learned in an effective way to all aspects of our own lives?" Using our new awareness to enhance our relationships beyond the group is the next step in the process. The ultimate goal, in my view, is to transform lives throughout the larger sphere around each individual who becomes part of the SGM program.

To be effective out there in our own worlds, we need to adapt the skills we've learned in our small groups to the outside world, which has often not had the privilege of attending a small group. How can we do that? From my experience as a Small Group facilitator and as a professional trainer of corporate managers in communication skills, I have some suggestions that have proven to be highly effective in many aspects of life, both personal and professional.

The focus is on attentive listening and compassion, two powerful commitments that tend to open up deeper communication and more profound outcomes. To me, compassion is the underpinning of true listening, and listening is the path to greater understanding, trust, and collaboration. Magic happens when people feel heard! This is a demanding commitment. My own path shows me constantly that the learning curve is infinite.

Being in touch with who you are is essential in relating to the deeper level of each person you

encounter. I'm sure you've found a way to do that on an ongoing basis. Next, I suggest that you focus on being present, being available to the person you're listening to. I love this quote by the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh: *"The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers."*

There are many ways to do that and I'll leave that to your own discernment. One of the ways I do this is through meditation and grounding my feet on the earth. You may have very different ideas that would be perfect for you. A very powerful way to become more present is really simple: make an intention to be present in the moment. Ralph Waldo Emerson has said, *"Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."*

Now you're ready to use some specific listening skills that can be very helpful in your life. It doesn't matter if it's listening to a family member's upset, handling a challenge a friend is having, solving an issue with a colleague at work, or even listening to someone at coffee hour on Sunday! People want to feel heard and feel known. These suggestions will be helpful to you in those situations that require not only listening, but demonstrating to the speaker through your manner, speaking, and actions, that you care about them.

#### **Simple Guidelines for Attentive Listening:**

1. Listen with an attitude of caring, compassion, and empathy with the speaker.
2. In person, use body language and eye contact to demonstrate your attention to the speaker.
3. On the phone, use those little indicators that you're following what they're saying: "hmm, of course, yes, oh, etc."
4. Listen for the speaker's thoughts and feelings about the experience he/she is sharing.
5. Look for the hidden meaning behind the words he/she is expressing.
6. When the speaker is finished with sharing, put into your own words the thoughts and feelings you heard expressed.
7. When the speaker indicates through words or facial/body language expression that you "got" what they said, you'll know that they feel heard and known.
8. Don't:
  - a. Offer your opinions
  - b. Express your own judgments
  - c. Give advice

#### **Life situations that call for using Attentive Listening:**

1. When someone needs support in a difficult situation.
2. To resolve a conflict with your significant other or children.
3. In business, when you need to understand a complex process or project goal.

#### **How to Use Attentive Listening in the Above Situations:**

1. If appropriate, share with the person that you'd like to use skills you've learned that may help you to understand them better and to help them feel heard. If not, go straight to #2.
2. Ask them to speak about the issue that is concerning them and use the Attentive Listening skills, as listed above in the Guidelines.

These skills will build on the listening skills you've been using in your small groups. You may be uncomfortable initially, but you'll get better quite quickly with a little practice. The important aspect is your intention to be a helping presence to the person who needs your attention.

Happy Listening!

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**So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.**

~ **Jiddu Krishnamurti**

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2014