

THE POWER OF DEEP LISTENING

Alicia Hawkins, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM

"Ours is a ministry of Listening." This is how covenant group facilitator, Mary Schwartz, at 1st Unitarian Church of Albuquerque describes the covenant group process. For many deep listening is at the core of the covenant group process. One covenant group member said, "It was the first time I was listened to and responded to from a point of view that wasn't trying to convince me."

Recently at the Mountain Desert District Conference during a session on small group ministry, a group participant showed me the Chinese symbol for listening. This symbol is made up of Chinese characters that tell us something significant about this skill. The characters include eyes, undivided attention, heart and ears. It is interesting that the mind is not included.

Listening from the heart differs from listening from the mind in this way. If I give the speaker my undivided attention, it's a good step towards listening from the heart. Whenever my mind intrudes, a part of me has stopped listening and I am no longer focusing 100% on listening. Just as my mind gets distracted when I meditate, it also distracts me when I am trying to listen from my heart. If I am aware of thoughts like "I wonder if this is a pattern for her" or "I remember a time when I experienced this" I have moved from deep listening to listening with my mind. Anytime I hear my mind use "I" it's pretty clear that I've moved part of my focus from the speaker to myself. Just as when I am meditating, I try to let the thoughts move away and, again focus 100% on the listening. It's a process and not a natural one in our world of multi-tasking and mind driven way of living.

In our covenant groups we often include some input in our leaders' guide on deep listening since it is so important in the small group ministry experience. Here are a few quotes we have used. Our facilitators say that it is helpful to them and helps set a tone for deep listening in the meeting.

The truth of it is that if you really listen to another person, whether on the surface he is talking about the weather or predicting the outcome of the World Series or even preaching a sermon, if you really listen, you begin to realize that what he is really talking about is himself. He is saying, "Love me" or maybe "Hate me" or "Pity me," but always he is saying one way or another, "Listen to me. Know me."
Frederick Buechner

But if we can bear to let it be, silence, of course, can be communion at a very deep level indeed, and that half hour of silence was precisely that, and perhaps that was the greatest part of it all. Frederick Buechner

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

What are some of your favorites quotes on the power of listening in small group ministry? How do you help your group members?

Alicia Hawkins