

Being Imperfect Together – 07-30-15

The Art of Listening, Part 2

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Last week we started considering the art of listening, taking a look at the Chinese character expressing the thought, "to listen." We explored the essential ingredients in good listening, including your full presence and undivided attention. Now we will go deeper into active listening.

This style of listening combines an active practice of bringing your presence, your undivided attention, and your compassionate heart into your conversations and exchanges with others, in addition to gentle paraphrasing of what the other person said to check for understanding. Here are 5 Guides for Active Listening:

1. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.
2. Accept the person's story as what's real for them.
3. Give your undivided attention to the speaker.
4. Use silence effectively.
5. Paraphrase skillfully.

Seeking to understand before you seek to be understood is a beautiful part of the much-beloved Prayer of St. Francis. This simple step puts you in the intent to learn, which opens your mind and heart to the other. It's a lovely way to foster safety and pave the way for closer relationship.

Accepting the person's story as their reality furthers your empathic connection to them. When practiced with authenticity it further strengthens the safety of the connection by forestalling inadvertent domination of the other. We've all probably heard someone say, "You don't feel that way!" or some other well-meaning but dismissive statement. In relationships, perception is reality.

Giving your undivided attention to the other person directly addresses one of the two basic questions we seek to answer in many friendships and all intimate relationships: Do I matter? Paying full attention to your friend or loved one speaks volumes about their importance and value to you, the listener. Another benefit of giving your undivided attention is you can catch the speaker's body language and facial expressions, which experts agree comprise much of the communication that occurs between people.

Using silence effectively is truly an art. Silence in a conversation can powerfully communicate what words fail to accomplish. It begins with simply not interrupting the other, and then moves into realms where meaning comes through in what is not said more than what is actually spoken. Many people feel discomfort when the other is silent, but it may be that the other person is merely gathering their thoughts or searching for just the right word to convey a subtle shade of meaning. Letting them take their time with a difficult thought or emotion while you remain silent signifies respect.

Paraphrasing is the aspect of active listening that most people think of first. It's the gentle repeating back of the other person's words, not in a parrot-like fashion, but in a way that indicates you have been listening and grasping their meaning. "What I hear you saying is ____" is the classic form a paraphrase takes, but it can be as skillful as just repeating a strong, emotionally-loaded word or two the other person used. For example, someone might say how sad they are that their mother has been diagnosed with a serious illness. It might sound odd to say, "What I heard you say is that you are sad because your mother is sick." More skillful could be something like this: "Deep sadness." This is hard to convey in writing, but it's sometimes enough just to speak the strong emotions the other expresses. This demonstrates that you not only "get" their emotions, but you "get" them.

I encourage you to pay attention to your listening skills, reflecting on how well you feel you did after a conversation with someone you care about. Everyone can improve their listening, and the rewards to you and your relationships will be enormous.

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