

## **LISTENING WELL: CONNECTING WELL**

I am writing this at the Chautauqua Institute (See [www.ciweb.org](http://www.ciweb.org)), which is a haven for adventurous life-long learners. The institute seamlessly blends time for education, recreation, spirituality and the arts. The soul of Chautauqua is dialoguing/conversing with others who may or may not share your perspective. Listening well is essential for learning, for growing and for connecting well with others.

When I think of listening well and connecting well I can't help but think of Mary. She will be 94 next month. She works two or three days each week as executive secretary for her local Rotary Club. Mary is full of life and joy. She is effervescent as she listens with total absorption to what the other is saying. She's my poster child for listening well, connecting well.

### **Do We Listen Well?**

#### **Step One**

As we age, are we filled with a preoccupied mind? Are we worrying, planning and then missing the moment? Or are we training ourselves to be totally in "The Now"? (See The Power of Now by Eckhardt Tolle).

So the first step in listening well is setting aside our own agenda, quieting our mind so we are able to fluidly take in the messages being sent to us. Ideally, we discipline ourselves to observe without judging, experience without thinking. How can we take in the message being sent if our mind is already filled with our thoughts?

This is particularly relevant and important with those who are closest to us. It's so easy and comfortable to label someone very close to us as being closed or rigid or unrealistic. We don't have to make the effort to connect with the evolving uniqueness of that person. Marcel Proust said it well, "the real voyage of discovery is not in seeking new lands but in seeing with fresh eyes." New or fresh eyes require an open or quiet mind.

How do we develop a quiet mind? We'd certainly have to exit our digital cybernetic culture where we cling to our smart phones with total devotion and determination. To acquire a quiet mind, like any type of skill, requires time, practice and dedication. Generally, we need to go off and be by ourselves (See The Relaxation Response by Herbert Benson). We need to meditate. We need to embrace the sweet sound of silence. Our truth is within us (See If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him by Sheldon Kopp).

#### **Step Two**

Step two is paying attention to our nonverbal messaging. We must strengthen our "attending skills". How attentive are we to the person we are

attempting to hear? Remember that the first rule in communication is “we cannot not communicate”! We cannot help ourselves! We are always reading one another and then probably making judgments, whether these judgments consciously register with us or not.

Of course, our nonverbal stance or presence simply tells the other person what our attitude toward them is. My friend Mary does this so well. Her eyes light up, she turns toward you, she is with you 100 percent. What a gift! What is she communicating? She says, “I like you. I value you. I accept you just as you are. I can’t wait to hear what you have to say.” Love gets operationalized in being accepting. Acceptance is our gift to the other.

When someone listens to us really well, we open up to them. We trust them. We feel safe with them. We feel connected. What a precious gift to give one another! A gift for our spouses, our children, grandchildren and friends! I saw a sign at Chautauqua, “Nothing is more important than this day.” We could alter it to say, “Nothing is more important than this Moment.”

### **Step Three – Levels of Listening**

Thomas Gordon in Parent Effectiveness Training articulates three levels of listening. The first level is passive listening where we tune into the person speaking but we don’t give much feedback. This generally sparks some level of anxiety in the speaker because we frail, fragile human beings tend to be a little shaky without some feedback.

The second level is termed “door openers”. We say brief things like “Oh”, “interesting”, “really”, “tell me more”. These door openers powerfully facilitate the speaker’s willingness to further open up to you. They also restrain you from taking over and sending your messages, which may tend toward giving advice, teaching, moralizing, etc. The sender then shuts down because he or she perceives that your agenda has priority. Connecting ends.

### **Active Listening**

The third level is active listening. We mirror back or repeat back what the sender has sent so they feel totally understood, accepted and supported. Mastering this skill takes tenacity, time and practice. It doesn’t happen overnight.

It requires “listening with the third ear.” The “third ear” is to tune into the underlying feeling and to feed it back first. We say, “you feel” followed by one word. You feel worried. You feel excited. Or you are worried. You are excited. When we tune into the sender’s feeling, we tune into them, into their personhood. We then experience “limbic resonance.” This is what transpires when we visually connect with an infant or anyone we love. The limbic part of our brain lights up, and we resonant with one another. Some term it “empathic resonance” (See A General Theory of Love by Lewis, Amini and Lannon). In the deepest part of our souls, we need limbic resonance.

Of course, we also need to feed back the factual content, but the most efficacious sequencing is to mirror back the feelings first. An example is, “You’d feel

embarrassed if we arrived late for the dinner party.” I call it “balancing feelings and facts.” The bottom line is that when we want to have a positive relationship with someone, feelings are more important than facts. We can argue facts ad infinitum but feelings just are. They are unarguable.

### **Listening as Joy**

Most of us have heard the truism that having two ears but one mouth, we are wise to listen twice as much as we talk! We’ve also probably heard several variations of “hearing but not listening or understanding.” Listening well will bring us the joy of connecting well. My 94 year-old friend Mary reminds us, “Don’t postpone joy!”

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