

The Lost Art of Listening

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Digest by Sharon McLean

Introduction

Listening, or rather, not listening to each other separates us from family, friends, co-workers. We have not learned to listen and truly hear with empathy. We listen to prepare our responses, whether to tell our own story or to offer advice.

We need to talk to others to clarify our own thoughts. Most of us are preoccupied with the rush of our own lives and give little thought to the needs of others to be heard. We listen as though we are expected to respond. When we want to be there for someone, we listen for where we can help. When we are spoken to heatedly, we become defensive and either talk back heatedly or withdraw. Our lives become empty and we do not always understand why. We distract ourselves with entertainment or busyness that keeps us from talking to each other.

It takes time and effort to listen. We do not know how to listen objectively. We react. Learning to listen takes time. There may even be times when we are not appreciated for listening until we develop more skill. Listening is an art that gives us great fulfillment when we learn to give and to receive.

PART ONE:

"The Yearning to Be Understood"

Chapter One:

"Did You Hear What I Said?"

"Why Listening Is So Important."

When we attempt to listen we can impart to the speaker our unawareness of hearing them, by the shift of our the eyes, our glance away, letting our eyes

glaze over, looking around, or interrupting them to speak to someone else. All of these signals leave the speaker knowing they have not been heard.

Not being heard limits our responsiveness in all areas of our living. We long to be understood by someone listening to and hearing us, with understanding and compassion. We become stronger when we are recognized. The simplest things can trigger a sense of rejection, even an unreturned phone call.

The trouble is, we think we do listen. Imagine a time of joy you wanted to share and no one was there to take time to pay attention to you, especially someone you want to do the listening. They are too busy. Actually, they are so caught up in their own lives, they do not realize you need to talk, to share. Not being listened to is especially hurtful with those closest to you whom you expect would understand. When you are talking, how soon does your listener break in to speak?

Two important aspects of listening are to obtain knowledge and to be fully available to someone who is speaking, not to switch the conversation to yourself. Being listened to sincerely motivates us. We know we are appreciated.

For example, a young person goes away to college and sees others with many possessions which leaves the new attendee feeling less than competent to compete. This young person attempts to confide in the parents, but is brushed off with platitudes of, "Everyone feels this way at first", "Make more friends", or "Study harder", none of which indicates any compassion for the real problem of needing to be heard and supported as a person. Often this very lack of being heard is most painful between us and our parents, children, spouses.

Habits of not listening continue throughout life and invade our relationships with our intimates. Couples complain, "He doesn't listen to me", "She doesn't understand my pressures", "He tells others more than he tells me".

When we are not heard, we feel isolated. There is nothing so satisfying as a good conversation in which neither person tries to top the other, in which there is a feeling of safety to say anything, knowing you will be heard for the person you are and you will listen to the person they are, without losing the friendship. When we have the courage to really listen, misunderstandings can be avoided or healed as we allow deeper meanings to be expressed.

Chapter Two:

"Thanks for Listening"

"How Listening Shapes us and connects us to each other."

Definitions of ourselves develop in our verbal interactions with others. We function in relationship to others through talking and listening, striking a balance of equals relating to one another. Listening is a major key to the development of healthy relationships with ourselves and with others. Our inner experience is shaped by what we are approved for saying or doing, and by that which we are disapproved for saying or doing. Parents shape their children's inner perceptions by caring listening that supports inner self esteem, or by inappropriate statements said in defeating ways that contribute to a child being unsure and requiring outside approval for inner choices. The thoughts that are never shared create an inner split within the self and affect the very character of the child.

We are not born with an identifiable self intact. It is built by how we are heard and responded to from infancy. Daniel Stern, in "The Interpersonal World of the Infant (New York: Basic Books, 1985) explained his discovery of the continuing symbiotic relationship of the infant to the mother and the need to function within that relationship as the beginning of relating. Being understood is of critical importance to us.

1. "Here I Am": The Sense of an Emergent Self

The baby (Birth to 2 Months) once thrust into the world, makes demands in, often, loud voice. Those caring for her must figure out what the baby wants. These parents then begin to assign meaning to the noises of the baby, "You want that?", "You're hungry?", "You want to be held?", "You did that?", etc. Unresponded to, the infant can become panicky, feeling abandoned, misunderstood, setting the stage for life beliefs.

2. "Hey, Look At Me!": The Sense of a Core Self

This is the age (2 to 7 Months) when the baby becomes outgoing with smiles, sounds, and seeing those around. The temptation is to over respond to these signals. Or there are parents who are so preoccupied that they do not respond. The baby is a person with her own feelings and needs. The parent who over responds or ignores the baby is abandoning the child's emotional needs. The appropriate response is to relate to the baby as she is, not as the parent wants her to be. Loneliness and self-doubt result at this early age.

3. "Honey, I'm Cold. Don't you Want a Sweater?": The Sense of a Subjective Self

This is the age (Birth to 2 Months) the child begins to get messages across about what she wants. This is the time of mental telepathy and exploration. If

the message is understood the child is validated. If the exploration is reprimanded, the child is confused and upset. Attunement is the goal for the child to feel accepted and encouraged to continue the communication and explorations.

4. "No, I Don't Want a Nap! I Want to Play.": The Sense of a Verbal Self

At this age (15 to 18 months) language develops. Language is a major step in learning communication. However, if the child is ignored at this important stage, she begins to withdraw and, at the extreme, can develop into a permanently sad person.

By the age of four or five, the child who has been listened to is more confident and trusting of his teachers. The child who has been ignored, whether by disapproval or by strong discipline, tends to withdraw rather than reach out in stressful situations in school.

Mutual understanding is how we relate, usually verbally. We want to "share" our experience with another in the simplest ways that let us tell about ourselves and have someone listen to us. Empathic relating helps us to feel appreciated and cared for, just as we are, without being judged. When the child is secure, he becomes the adult who continues to be secure in relationships.

When people are listened to and appreciated as children, they grow up being open and trusting with people. But people are lessened by not being heard which leads to holding in thoughts and feelings and, therefore, hurts full communication. Both listening and being listened to improve our attitudes and even improve our physical vitality.

Chapter 3:

"Why Don't People Listen?"

"How Communication Breaks Down"

Conflict between people happens. Each of us processes information that we want to say in a way that seems clear to us. Conversely, we think we hear others clearly. But each of us is processing the information through our ingrained thoughts and expectations. We also transfer our expectations onto others, expecting them to behave in a way that fits our notions of responsiveness. And they listen through their own habits of responding. Then, when communication breaks down, we become defensive.

To be able to really listen means we must, for the moment, abandon what we expect to hear and listen attentively to what is being said. As we grow into

adolescence we form protections against things that have the potential to hurt us. Listening through this inner voice sets us up to protect ourselves from antagonistic messages. When we do trust someone and they do not hear us as we need, we feel severely betrayed. Listening can be learned, even if, at first, it seems contrived. We need to learn to listen with our whole selves, not just our ears.

Emotionally, the tone of speaking can convey various meanings with as simple a statement as, "Have you fed the dog?" Intimate relationships give rise to emotional interpretations that respond to a simple statement easily, or defensively.

When we aren't listened to as we need, we tend to attribute fault to the other person, only rarely checking ourselves and our manner of speaking. Changing patterns of communication requires us to change the way we relate. We can't change others.

Sometimes the intended point is not stated clearly. We tend toward innuendo, expecting the other person to understand and figure out the real point. We talk all around our real point with a variety of tactics to avoid saying what is really on our mind.

Conversation usually happens on more than one level, that which is said and that which is meant. We know what we are saying and we assume others hear us as we intend. For instance, we may have a need just to talk, to vent, so we begin. The other person then offers answers or advice to solve our problem. But, we may not have explained that we just wanted to vent, not to be "helped". It is important to listen for a person's need at their emotional level and for us to regularly check to be sure we are being heard as we need.

Choosing the right time to talk to someone is important, too. When someone is clearly occupied, or you have a sense of their pressures, you can choose best times to talk to them, either seriously or just to chat. Choosing the appropriate conversation for the situation is important. A family problem is not well discussed at a cocktail party. Who is present during a conversation also alters the context and what is divulged. Some serious conversations are better reserved for private time and place. We are also affected by the attentive attitude of the listener.

Some people are difficult to listen to, such as those who give too much description, or those whose primary interest is all they talk about, or those whose conversations seem very one-sided. Another difficulty of listening is when innuendos infer judgment of our behavior or words. Some people do not respond much and you wonder if they are listening at all. Perhaps we could

occasionally check with our listener, about how ready they are to listen to us, or, conversely, find out if they feel we listen to them. Listening is interdependent.

Men and women are described as thinking, speaking, and listening differently from one another. But perhaps the best suggestion is that wholly listening might bridge the gaps of differences and bring us back to more effective relating.

PART TWO:

"The Real Reasons People Don't Listen"

Chapter 4:

"When Is It My Turn?"

"The Heart of Listening: The Struggle to Suspend Our Own Needs"

The author reports on his first interview when he learned that he did not listen to the client so much as try to be a "good therapist", which illustrates the most important ingredient of a good listener: to take real interest in the speaker leaving our own agendas. Good listening requires us to withhold our input until the speaker has had her say. Active listening requires great self control.

Listening is a burden we take on to experience the other person, particularly when we lose interest in listening and want to jump in with our opinions, advice, judgment, or our own story. A story is related of a daughter and father meeting in a restaurant to talk. The daughter hears her father begin with the same old complaints about his work. At first she is irritated because she wants to talk about her concerns, too. Then she finds herself really listening to him and discovering that he has been shut out by the family, rather than being heard. She acknowledges his feelings; he experiences tears and thanks for her listening to him.

Listening requires effort. But just being still while another speaks is not necessarily listening. They can feel that we are just waiting. Nor is encouragement always helpful. It is necessary to let the speaker express feelings that they need to say. When a child is asked what went on in his day and responds, "Nothing.", perhaps that's true but it may be more useful to listen and respond to his feelings, not continue to search for facts about his behavior or accomplishments.

Varieties of not listening include

1. Telling my story that your story reminds me of.
2. Overdone sympathy that becomes condescending. Empathy is sincerely, quietly listening and responding to the speaker.
3. Giving advice - giving solutions.
4. Joking about everything to cover our discomfort.
5. Telling a person not to feel they way they do amounts to our discomfort at being upset by their concerns.

Stereotypes of how men and women listen differently are evened out in that the art of listening and being listened to is similar for all of us.

Chapter Five:

"You Hear Only What You Want to Hear?"

"How Hidden Assumptions Prejudice Listening"

Listening is complicated by the interference from our own inner feelings and attitudes. What we think of the speaker affects what we can hear from them. Perhaps you have experienced a situation when you heard one side of the story and had the opportunity to later hear the other side. Did you notice how it affected and expanded your understanding of the picture of what took place. In both cases you listened and heard from two different individuals, two versions of what took place between them. We are also affected by our opinion of the speaker and our experience of his/her typical ways of speaking: truthfully, clearly, fudging, exaggerating, etc. Listening is an interaction and some people prey on our goodwill by talking too long or fast or complaining or dominating. Some people we listen to out of courtesy, but notice how our minds wander.

Object relations theory refers to the mental constructs (objects) that we hold in our minds from early training and built-up expectations as we react from inner pictures, not always to the outer experience. So we relate to others based on our own training and respond from old ideas. Over-reaction to being criticized comes from how we were treated as children, approved or rejected. We continue to react from that childish part of us by going on the offensive or shutting up when we feel criticized. Our childish part does not relate adult to adult. We tend to grow up and leave home before our relationships with our parents are matured, thus we carry the same responses into our adult

relationships. Later, older, we attempt to balance our relationships at home, but tend to approach them with the same feelings we had before we left, which often leads to no solution. Many people are unable to extricate themselves from the old patterns of relating within their families.

What may be helpful is to realize that only parts of us are having trouble listening. We may be reacting to our parent from that little boy or girl part who is anxious. Most of us are aware of more than one side inside of us with which we have arguments. The same is true in interactions with others. Consider those times when you ask another to help you make a decision, or someone asks you. Notice that we have a tendency to ask of those whom we expect to answer us with what we want to hear. Instead of responding with advice, how about listening to what part of them (or you) is speaking in order to understand what part of them (or you) is calling out. Giving advice rarely does any good. It is more useful to let the person talk while you encourage them to explore the facets of their dilemma.

The definition of the voices within is called a 'vertical split', the parts that war in us to do or not do. 'Horizontal split' is repression. When we are in a disagreement, it may be helpful to notice what parts of them and of us are engaged, such as a rebellious part, an angry part, or a protective part.

Instead of berating ourselves for being poor communicators, it may make more sense to pay attention to what parts of us are awakened in a particular situation. Then we can learn to release those emotional reactors within us and find a more reasonable voice.

Chapter Six:

"Why Do You Always Overreact?"

"How Emotionality Makes Us Defensive"

Criticism is the most likely to trigger emotional reactions in us. Emotional reactions include anger and fear at whatever is being said. Sometimes we can understand someone who usually does not speak harshly and expect that they are in a bad mood. But someone who overreacts to making mistakes is harder to understand when they collapse into cowering contrition. Then there are those people who are super critical. Any return comment sends them into a defensive rage making them extremely difficult to listen to. We can make generalizations to explain their behavior, but it is more important to realize that the person's individual history will more likely reveal the cause of their inappropriate reacting. Our wounds can be deep and hidden until something

triggers our reaction, usually of shame or insecurity. Criticism strikes at our very self, our identity, what we do or say, or even our appearance.

We are most intolerant of those things we do not like in ourselves making it difficult to be a good listener. When we realize this and begin to pay attention to others with consideration for them, we can improve our ability to listen objectively.

Our emotions and how we react are the main reason dialogues turn into quarrels. Consider the last time you dashed to answer the phone, only to have it be a sales pitch. Our overreaction is our emotions erupting. Emotions are not wrong, but they are what interfere in our relationships making it hard to be rational. It is important to pay attention to these reactions, but in the heat of the moment they can be wrong timing. They come from parts of us that we don't like that need to be understood and accepted. We tend to generalize about ourselves as wholly bad persons when we feel criticized.

Conflicts often arise with those closest to us because we do not like or want to hear what they are saying or doing. For example, when our children are exhibiting negative behavior we want to help them but feel helpless, so we would rather avoid or ignore them. Then we can't listen without advising which leads to arguments which leads to one or the other leaving the room or your life. The next time you witness or are a part of an argument, notice the other person, and notice that either of them or you could just stop arguing. Feeling threatened by what another is saying often triggers feelings of shame for not being more able to deal with the object of the criticism. We react most strongly to those things in us that we don't like.

Spouses often complain that they are not heard by the other, but the same information may be received by someone else. For instance, a wife talks to her husband about her back hurting. He advises her to see a chiropractor. Later, the wife tells the husband that her friend suggested the same thing. The husband reacts, "I told you that. Why didn't you listen to me?" The wife did not want advice from her husband, she wanted caring and compassion, so rejected advice. She couldn't hear the suggestion from him.

Learning to be a good listener can be complicated by speakers whose tone of voice and belligerence defy being properly listened to as they abuse our willingness to listen. Listening to someone like that makes us feel pressured and anxious. Individuals who are clear about themselves as persons can listen more freely. Problems arise when two people's feelings overlap and interfere with each other and issues come up in an already charged atmosphere. Individuation emerges when we learn to separate our thoughts from our feelings and allow other people to be who they are.

Elevated emotions can interfere with clear communication leaving a listener feeling attacked or belittled. We need to listen to how we sound when we express how we feel. We need to lower the decibel of our emotions to let others hear us, particularly in difficult situations.

Therapists hear many of these reasons expressed by people in an impasse in their relationships in family. Healing broken relationships can begin by finding ways to express to the person your understanding of their feelings to encourage them to talk. Mostly what a person wants to hear is a simple apology, with no defense of your position nor pressure to elicit a response. In fact, the person's initial reaction may be one of anger. Let that be all right.

People in close relationships who are quiet or withdrawn have a protective coating around them, where it is safer to be in their own heads than out in the hazardous world of relating. The pursuer-distancer dynamic is activated when one partner attempts to communicate and the other partner retreats even further. Pressure from one creates a dance with the other moving equally away.

The hardest people to hear are those we are closest to in family and work relationships. With persistence to stay open and responsive, we grow stronger, mature, and enrich our ability to continue learning to listen and to be heard.

PART THREE

Getting Through to Each Other"

Chapter Seven:

"Take Your Time — I'm Listening"

"How to Let Go of Your Own Needs and Listen"

Listen. Practice focussed listening whenever you have the opportunity, with family, co-workers, friends. Stop other things you are doing, tune in to the person, and listen. People will respond to being understood and connected. Two common mistakes we make when learning to listen is timing and the type of questions. When another person is rushed is not a time to expect them to be able to focus on answers other than short ones. When the timing is better, asking open-ended questions about specifics you are aware of in their present experience can lead to more response. Listening involves caring about the person and the response they make more than learning routines to follow. Studied or faked interest does not work. Let yourself go and really listen.

People are more likely to listen to your point of view after you have taken the time and interest to explore their vantage point. When you can listen with objectivity, and not interject your attitudes, while you are exploring the other person's view, creates an atmosphere of trust in which they are more likely to open up to you. We are not automatons and sometimes we have pressing needs that preclude our listening well.

Just say so. Tell a person you would rather talk a little later, or ask if you could say your say first. Don't pretend to listen. Listening quietly is being involved with the other person, not shut down. Ask questions that pursue what they have said, perhaps for more clarification. Listening is an active state. Letting the other person know you are hearing involves responding with interest, with questions or restatements of what you are hearing. Reflecting what the other person is saying is basic to good communication. Arguments feed on each one repeating their viewpoint over and over, unaware if they are being heard. Acknowledging another's point of view does not mean taking responsibility for them, only being aware.

The difficulty with this prescription is that conflict stirs emotions and attempting to restate the other's words in the heat of the moment can feel like giving in to them. Acknowledging that each person has the right to their feelings is the beginning of really listening.

Listening involves letting go of your position, temporarily, leaving a feeling of losing control, particularly when we expect not to like what we will hear. Tolerating conflict arouses feelings of being threatened. Just the words, "I understand how you feel" can open up communication.

A therapist usually becomes aware of individual's unsatisfactory sex lives. People are embarrassed and reluctant to talk about something that seems hopeless. They could talk it out between them if they were able to be less reactive in a discussion. Feeling heard is more important than being agreed with.

Control includes interrupting another with your own story or comments about your experience, thinking that is listening. But the speaker feels invalidated, not listened to. Giving advice mostly does not help. Just listen. However, listening without responding, staying silent, is not enough to convey to the speaker that you are listening. The speaker needs your input, including eye contact, smiling or frowning in response to the words, nodding your head. Controlling the speaker includes leading or manipulating them in relating their story by irrelevant questions or opinion statements in response to what they are saying. When someone needs to talk about a problem with a spouse, questions about where they were and what they were eating are controlling the storyteller's

flow.

It is useful if a speaker is clear about what they need. "I just need to talk. OK?" "You don't have to agree, but let me express my view." If your listener starts giving advice, ask them to just let you explain how you feel. If your listener interrupts you, ask them to wait until you are finished. Retain control of your speaking.

Some people are hard to listen to. But, consider: the person who relentlessly talks about themselves may feel unlistened to because of half-hearted listeners. Taking a real interest in them, delving deeper can lead to real communication, more satisfaction for them, and possibly their taking an interest in you.

We can control others by subliminally ignoring them, eg, no eye contact, trying to make them go away. But, once we have established that we will listen without interrupting or turning away, our speaker learns to trust us and to speak more freely and easily.

Chapter Eight:

"I Never Knew You Felt That Way"

"Empathy Begins with Openness"

Preconceived notions of what you expect from any one speaker limits your ability to hear. Preset methods of relating also limit our ability to be responsive in each different interchange. Allowing ourselves to be open to really hear another opens ranges of delight and surprises when we touch deeper aspects of people. Empathy is that quality that is open to what and how others express, being aware of the variety that is presented. Being prepared to be sensitive to others vastly improves communication.

In our home life, we expect to relax and be "natural" which usually contributes to less than satisfactory efforts to relate. "Responsive Listening" takes practice. Pay attention and start the practice intentionally. Improvement is to be expected and much better relating.

We also have a tendency to "jump to conclusions". Cutting others off, interrupting, not letting them finish. All contribute to the control issue. We think we are being supportive, when, in fact, we leave the other person feeling not listened to. If you forget to listen well, stop yourself, say, "I'm sorry", or some such, and continue to listen.

Real listening lets us transcend ourselves as we listen with empathy. The goal is

to set aside memory, desire, and judgment. Sharing thoughts and feelings bring us closer together with understanding. We validate another's feelings without judgment. Empathy involves the ability to listen caringly while thinking about what is being said to comprehend meaning and feelings. Don't assume you understand. The other person's experience is unique and he/she needs to be able to express it. Be interested, ask questions, then listen. Especially in conflict is it important to set yourself aside to listen.

Negotiating with someone who is angry is helped by listening to all they have to say. Let them run down, a wonderful way to discover how it looks from their world.

Assumptions are usually what we think the other person is thinking. We know what we are thinking. After sincerely listening, then it is important for us to firmly expect our view to be heard.

Being sensitive includes understanding other people's rhythms and volume. Some people prefer to be quiet to think when things are rough; others need to talk. Some people expect you to understand subtly; others expect you to say right out what you want to say. Relax into another person's rhythm to learn even more about them.

Our insensitivity shows itself mostly with those we love. Anxiety usually stems from something specific: stress, real or threatened change, power. Powerless people tend to be the poorer listeners. They are afraid no one will pay attention. On the other hand, the more powerful person may also not listen well due to inner anxiety. When we ask a child what is wrong and they try to tell us, we may find ourselves lecturing them more than listening. We are afraid of anger. It is threatening.

Truly making the effort to listen to another, especially when they are angry, by becoming more aware of what parts of them are acting out, may help us gain perspective and deeper understanding (of ourselves, too).

Be sensitive to timing, when is good time to talk. Pay attention to their body language. Do they look preoccupied? Or ask, before you interrupt to talk, "Have you got a minute?"

Nagging includes saying the same things over and over, either criticism or orders. Nagging tries to change another person, and belittles him/her. If you are the nagger, try speaking fewer times on the same topic and limit comments to those things that are truly important to you. Ask them for input, "What do you think?"; "Thanks for listening." Give time for them to respond and care what they say. You may not like their reasons, but being heard can help

the negotiations. If you are the naggee, try saying, "No". Get the message clear about what is being requested.

Giving criticism, without upsetting everyone, requires considering the importance to you of what you are criticizing, whether it is a child, spouse, or employee. When you decide those things that matter, find a way and time to talk to the person. Ask them to hear your point of view. Sometimes it is just better to let your need for them to put the dishes in the sink go, rather than continuing in the nagger role. Always criticize in private. Explain how you feel. Ask the other person to respond, even you don't agree.

Self reflective awareness includes stepping away from yourself to see how or what you are contributing to a miscommunication situation. Do you listen to yourself? Do you give yourself permission to have your feelings and thoughts? You must listen to yourself so others will listen to you. Stand up for yourself and your thoughts and feelings, so you are prepared to stand up for yourself when you need to speak out to someone else. Learn your own habits and patterns. You will have more patience for others.

Chapter Nine:

"I Can See This Is Really Upsetting You"

"How to Defuse Emotional Reactivity"

Reacting emotionally is the main reason people do not listen and can lead to warlike conditions including feeling battered and wounded. Some people are naturally irritating, others overreact to the slightest criticism. The real problem is our own reacting to them. We are naturally more defensive by nature, but relating requires us to expose ourselves to vulnerability.

Much money is spent with therapists because people need to be listened to. Allowing others to get their feelings out comes from empathy and tenderness. From inside of us, feelings are facts. Not reacting emotionally helps us retain control of ourselves in relating. To listen effectively we must learn to endure some amount of anxiety, without fighting or running away.

Instead of responding right away, learn to listen harder. We become defeated, not by the other person, but by our defensive reaction. It takes courage to engage in confrontational situations, but we only fool ourselves into thinking we are in control if we avoid them. Being willing to engage actually reduces our anxiety in the long run. Pay attention to the real message from the other person.

Formula Number One for Resisting Reactivity is: hear the other person out. Say,

"Tell me more." Your speaker just wants to be heard, not necessarily agreed with.

One way to adjust your own reactivity is to plan ahead. When you realize a condition is escalating, plan to listen next time and give the speaker time to fully express. Plan to ask questions instead of reacting. When rhetorical statements are made, respond literally, really answer the statement or question.

Crying is a tool of release of emotions, not necessarily something that needs to be comforted or stopped. Expressing anger angrily gives it a chance to diffuse. Learn to allow a person to express their *feelings*. Often what is said is not exactly the point. A wife asks her new husband to agree to give her grown son some money. The husband gets angry. When they talk and she is allowed to express her real concern, she is just worried about her son. The money was just one idea of how to help. After you have listened to the tirade, respond with your own *feelings*, not your ideas.

How others feel is not your responsibility. They just want to be heard. When someone is very angry, it can seem like the end of the world. Allowing the expression can diffuse the situation to a manageable size. Listening to someone who is angry is not easy. It can help to listen to the upset child within them. Focus on your job-choice to listen. In order to actively respond, repeat back to them what you hear them say. If you find your control weakening, try squeezing your thumb and index finger hard as a distraction to yourself. If you have really had enough, tell them you must have some time out and that you will return to talk later.

When you are the one being criticized, listen. Is it valid? And stay on the topic. Try to avoid taking it as about your whole person. Listen critically. Focus. Ask the other person to elaborate on their position so you can understand. If the assault is especially abrasive, you can respond to the aspect of the attack that offends you. Ask them to be more specific if necessary.

People who complain incessantly also need to be listened to. What is the core problem? The issue is more likely about what bothers them, than about you. Talking does help.

Defensiveness or self assurance stems from the way we were responded to as children. When the desire arises to change the way we react to our parents, we can examine what they do or say that we react to. This is an excellent chance to become more calmly responsive in the rest of our world. Practicing at home can lead to a greater sense of control and can help us discover that reactive part of us. We may find a super-critical mother who was threatened

by the family growing up and out; or a father who never said much was desperately afraid/unable to talk about anything remotely intimate or close. Step away. See who they are, how they see. The change of our perspective can relieve a lot of pressure. We don't have to change them.

Reacting emotionally develops as relationships continue. Topics that once had no emotional needle, turn on our inner anxieties. Trying to preserve equilibrium by giving in or avoiding just heats us up more. Only you can control you. Pay attention to how much you are critical or avoidant. Aim to be more open and caring. Respect yourself and your partner. A fluid relationship moves together and apart in a dance, neither one threatened by the movement. With people who don't talk much, keep the pressure off and allow them to feel safe enough to open up.

Calm yourself down before launching into any interface. Being anxious can escalate any situation into lack of communication. Remember you are married to a human person with limitations and assets. Making constant demands from your point of view about what he/she does or does not do won't help anything. Sometimes it is more important to just love them and take them as they are. And watch your tone of voice and your timing. Preparing another for a need to talk on sensitive topics can be verbal or even in writing, especially if you expect them to react strongly. And remember that you do not need to be upset just because someone else is upset. You are always in charge of yourself.

Sometimes we must release from our lives people who are intractable. Unfortunately we often think a person close to us is intractable when, with a little effort, the situation could be vastly improved. When someone reacts poorly to something we say, it is possible they are deeply ashamed about something in them. Be sensitive.

Feelings are important to express, whether it is crying at a significant event, or telling someone off. Both are appropriate sometimes. Here, we are discussing overreacting, not denying feelings.

PART FOUR

"Listening in Context"

Chapter Ten:

"We Never Seem To Talk Anymore"

"Listening Between Intimate Partners"

When communication has broken down between partners and one of them meets someone of the opposite sex who is fresh and new and listens, the temptation is to abandon the marriage. Marriage does not bring perfection; it brings problems and difficulties, some of which can be solved; we need to learn to live with others.

An example of how our view can be limited to use a stroboscope, a flashing light. Turn on a fan, watch the blades turn. Adjust the flashing light to a certain point and the fan blades appear to stop. The stroboscope puts light on only one spot on the cycle of turning, an analogy of how we limit our view within relationships.

Complementarity governs the connections between people. Our behavior is relative to the other person. Commonly we look outside of ourselves for validation and caring. When it is not available or given, we tend to blame the other person. We expect much too much and begin to focus on those things that hurt us.

To begin understanding, it is helpful to notice the main pattern occurring between each other. How does your partner hurt you? And what is your complementary part in the exchange? We can only change ourselves and our responses. Begin by listening.

Courtship is the time when we ignore or pass off not being listened to, or we forgive and plan to bring in our view later, which may never happen. We even fudge the truth here and there or do not open up with truthfulness. Later, couples revert to their truer selves and begin to wonder who they married. The quality of listening to each other would greatly enhance the developing relationship. Be yourself. Talking comfortably with someone is likely to result in a friendship/courtship that can last.

Couples vary in their needs. One may need more space; the other may prefer closeness. Both feel either attacked or abandoned by the other. Finding a middle ground and awareness of each other's patterns can help them relate better. Entering an intimate relationship brings two people into relaxed boundaries, but the ongoing pressure of too much togetherness can lead to conflict. At the other extreme is the couple who do little together, lead separate lives. In both cases listening becomes limited. Avoidance of conflict builds walls. Family patterns are brought into each relationship with its attendant expectations of the other. Needing each other too much, the couple can become exclusive of others, expecting fulfillment only from each other. Both partners need to enter into a new form of exchange that encourages communication. It is possible, but difficult when only one makes the effort.

We tend to fall into some form of pursuer and distancer. The pursuer talks too much or too loudly, and the distancer pulls away. The pursuer can back off and find other outlets for their needs, not in pouting, but to give the distancer more space. When a pursuer back off, they are likely to notice a rising anxiety inside, which could represent anxiousness in other parts of their life. The distancer needs to be allowed consideration whenever they come forward, no matter what they express, without the pursuer becoming defensive. The distancer can initiate communication on his/her own terms by planning times to talk and to listen. Three steps then have taken place: You changed, the partner responded (sometimes annoyingly), and you now respond. Your response is critical at this time. It can look like there has been no progress. Stay with it, give your partner time and remain calm.

The natural method of behaving for pursuers is being open and experiencing closeness in many relationships. The natural method of behaving for distancers is keeping space from relationships or spending time in busy activity with others. (Emotional distancers can be those who sexually pursue, which is activity but not closeness.) And some people act differently with different people. A person can be a distancer in a spousal relationship and a pursuer with a mother. For a distancer, safety is in distance, especially in those areas where they feel inadequate. The inner anxiety can lead to marital conflict that stems from other areas of the person's life. Pursuers tend to continually talk, often with no resolution, which keeps wounds open.

Couples become a unit in which they are identified as a Couple that makes decisions for the Couple, but each must retain their own identity without disappearing into the other. Dealing with problems needs to be addressed ongoing. Waiting only lets the steam build. It is important to plan to listen. Listening does not imply agreement. But not listening impedes understanding. Keep difficult discussions short and to the point. Wise listening leads to the good accommodations that enhance a relationship. Hearing the same complaints over and over from your spouse about their job may get boring, so enter in, ask questions, create interest. The little things make the difference.

Throughout a marriage the cycles continue. Conflict alternates with peace. Building a history of successful resolution in conflicts builds confidence in the relationship. Trust builds. It is safe to disagree and know you will be heard and will hear and arrive at some understanding. When resolutions do not occur, bitterness and greater distance can happen between two people. Melting these barriers can begin by looking at your expectations. Did you think you married someone else or could change your partner. Expecting others to be like what we liked in our own family and filling the gaps of those things we did not like is making unreal demands. Gauge your partner on his or her own

merits, not on your built-up expectations nor on your disappointments with him/her. Maturity is looking within ourselves to be who we are and to connect from that genuine self of us.

Chapter Eleven:

"Nobody Around Here Ever Listens To Me!"

"How to Listen and Be Heard Within the Family"

Discovering that communication is a process contributes to understanding that relationships are flexible. Families develop patterns of exchange that are often resistant to change. The greatest limitations to listening within the family include the rigidity of roles, fixed expectations, and pressures to conform. The first time we do the things we do, we do not stop to decide who will do what, under what conditions. We act and react and patterns are begun. The more one does one thing, the less the other does it, such as doing for the children. There are subsystems within the family made up of each individual and each one's relationship to any one other, wife-husband, mother-son, etc. Time to talk and listen between these pairs is often foregone for the whole unit. Having children often starts out bringing husband-wife closer, but more often than not leads to more attention on the children than on the primary two persons with each other.

Parental errors occur primarily in two ways with children: 1) failing to set boundaries and 2) interfering too much with them. There is a difference between allowing children to "express" as they want and allowing them to "do" what they want. Being loving does not abandon rules. Nagging to control is often the method used. It is important to listen to the children first, then respond.

As children grow the relationship between each parent and each child progresses through alternating levels of closeness and growing apart. But when one parent does not listen or talk to their child and begins to complain to the spouse, a triangle is created and direct communication is blocked. Triangles are often shadowed by other strong relationships: a relative, a friend, the parents, sometimes a memory, even your journal. The best-known triangle is the affair in which one partner tries to find that part that is missing in the marriage. Any time we complain about someone to someone else (creating victims and villains), we have a triangle which may seem innocuous, but subtly or overtly undermines the primary relationship. Talking it over with someone else is not wrong, but avoiding direct conversation with the person involved with you undermines the relationship. Taking sides is the name of this game.

The parent role includes nurture and control of the children. Take/make time to listen to them. Distancing from conversational interaction with our children builds barriers. Remember two things: Flies like honey better than vinegar and prepare to hear complaints when you start and continue listening. Distancing is only used for self protection.

Closeness can enhance or inhibit intimacy. A healthy boundary between parents and children allows the parents the proper authority and the children the appropriate amount of autonomy that lets them develop wholesomely with everyone respected for their feelings and point of view. Parents need to "accommodate" to bring a unified front based on communication, compromise, and agreement. Parents in unity back each other up. Parents who are not united can polarize, one being over-strict, the other over-lenient. Polarization occurs around one's inner conflicts. We project onto our partner our inner conflicts. A partner who is angry baits the other until the second partner is angry and acts out the baiter's inner conflict, a classic dependency circle. On the other hand we devalue complementarity that enhances each other.

Listening begins with the baby, the ability to tune in and know what the baby wants or needs. An "easy baby" is one we are tuned to. A "difficult baby" is one we are not tuned to. Some clues that a parent is not listening to their young child come in the form of statements. "Watch out! Don't touch that!" indicate a parent more concerned with the external environment around the child than with the child. "Quiet down; Go wash your hands; and for goodness sake don't touch yourself there!", indicate parents who are selective in terms of what is acceptable, thereby writing into the child lack of self respect or worthiness. For instance, a parent or parents who try to cheer up a frightened child rather than listening, teach that child not to turn to the parents for comfort later. "Don't brag, Honey. It's not nice." indicates squashing a child's dreams along with their self worth. Trying to make children behave can preempt natural growth in them. Remember to react to what they are saying, not just what they are doing. Failing to respond to a child's joy is like a collision making the child pull in and not share so much in the future. Listening with empathy, not sympathy, enables a child to strengthen their own view of themselves that helps them with their peers and instructors.

Major obstructions to listening occur because we need to defend, disagree, or solve any problems. An analogy of empathy is two hands clasped. They are still distinguishable hands but are touching with warm contact. Listening is about following the lead of the speaker, reflecting their statements or behavior, without judgment. Failing at empathy does not harm a child, but deflates them over time. Empathy is vitalizing.

By the way, why do parents sometimes fail in part or all of these ways? Children are difficult and it is difficult to always be there for them. Parents are human, too. Timing of needs is not always convenient. The outbursts we make at our children are actually less harmful than a pervasive atmosphere of not responding. But, when parents are clear about their roles with the children, messages are more consistent, firm, and loving. Parents must remember to be in charge to give children a dependable structure. As children grow into their own persons, it becomes more difficult to be the empathic parent who can let them grow independently. Children can be given choices in those things that they can choose and can be given a voice in those things in which a parent will retain decision making. Parents want to mold and control children, rather than allowing them to express their own unique personhood.

Parenting is an amateur sport because just when we get the hang of one age, the child grows into a new set of predicaments. Battles of control contribute to teenagers reputation for being unmanageable. Teenagers are striving to establish autonomy and we react. We can say, "You're right", without losing control. Talking down to teens encourages them to respond rudely. It is important to let them say what they want, then explain why you are saying no, but don't let it escalate into threats. Conflict arises when parents forget the role of the teenager is to grow away from the family as they test themselves. Continuing to listen to them can preserve the connection with them. Working through conflicts can help the teen learn how to navigate through disagreements and confrontations. Listening well leads to trust of your teen. Teenagers who withdraw and then leave the family have not solved their problems of communicating and tend to stay frozen in adolescent patterns.

Family patterns keep family members stuck in roles that support the established system. But families are made up of individuals who often act in courageous new ways to reconfigure the family relationships.

Chapter Twelve:

"I Knew You'd Understand"

"Being Able To Hear Friends And Colleagues"

Friends and colleagues can be the best listeners because they rarely have the high stakes in us that our families do. Friends are able to listen without needing to control us or feel protective. Sharing a change of career plan with a friend can be easier than with a spouse. The friend is not so threatened, nor needing to take part in the decision in the same way as a spouse or other family member.

Within family relationships there are some subjects that are just not safe to broach. Little misunderstandings are easier to pass over or ignore between friends than in the day to day contact of family. Friends choose to be with us and we choose to be with them. We can talk about almost anything with friends and friendship strengthens and broadens us as we learn more about ourselves and learn more about them. Being listened to makes us feel interesting and vital.

Some things can come between friends, such as lack of time to nourish the friendship. When friends take sides, such as in a divorce or breaking-up situation, friends sympathy for us can be over-protective and castigating about the other person. Friends who try to tell us what to do step over the boundary from listening to telling. We may need to complain about a family member or significant other because we need to vent, not to get advice. Taking sides is judging us and our relationships and has no place in friendships. Empathy includes understanding your friend is in conflict and needs a listener, not a judge. Being with people authentically requires that we take them as they are, not as we want them to be.

Conflict between friends is less likely to be resolved when serious problems erupt between them for two main reasons. First, there is no imperative to remain in the relationship. Second, we are afraid that friends may abandon us if we express feelings of envy, jealousy, or resentment about them. But brooding about it just makes it worse. A way to deal with it is to bring it up with as much awareness of your friend's position as you can. Such as: you find you are the one who calls first all the time. Does your friend really like you? Bring it up by stating that something is bothering you, but you don't want it sound like you are blaming them. Otherwise friendships can just wither away.

Offering suggestions is sometimes something you really want to do with your friend. Ask them first if they would like to hear a suggestion from you. Give it, if accepted. Then drop it. What your friend does with your suggestion is up to them and not an affront on you. You do have the right to state your opinion if your friend is pressing her/his opinion on you.

Sustaining friendship over time is often a function of changing life patterns, behavior, and choices. Sustaining a friendship over time includes continuing to listen when it isn't easy to do, working at it. We do change. Sometimes a friendship can change with us, and sometimes we just need to let the person go.

The workplace is not necessarily a place we expect friendships, but personalities do enter in. It is important to avoid grudges. Grudges occur when our expectations of friendships at work don't materialize. What we want is to

be respected and have the dignity to speak up when appropriate, firmly and directly, not with defiance which is attack, but with an ability to dissent which is standing up for oneself.

In the workplace, a good manager is also a good listener. More than that, he/she is a proactive listener, taking an active role in finding out what employees and coworkers think and feel. Listening, sincerely, whether you agree or not, demonstrates care and respect. A large percentage of people are promoted into management with little or no people skills training.

But, what if you are not listened to at work? Workers often degenerate into gossip and chronic complaining. Those who have tried to talk to superiors without success are often trying to change them. We can't control others, but we can change ourselves in relation to them. Bosses are not our parents who will give us kudos just because we are good kids. We need to take ourselves seriously as independent adult persons working in different positions. Don't fall into personal issues, stay focussed on the job and be willing to speak up.

Epilogue:

Good listening is transforming of people, personally and professionally. Effective listening is more important and sometimes more difficult than we have realized. Reflective listening can be learned, but as with any new skill, it takes practice. Practicing like this may seem artificial at first. But when our communicating has not been effective, it is time to develop more skills. Look at it like a new attitude, an attitude of caring and compassion by postponing your own interests for awhile to listen. It takes effort. Listening is most difficult with our most intimate relationships, but vital. Listening also raises our own emotions and reactions, but gives us an opportunity to learn more self-awareness.

People who don't listen are those who have not been listened to. Our society has many victims who are encouraged to express their victimhood. And, when they become chronic, we get uncomfortable and tune them out more. They then become even more powerless, a feeling reinforced by a world society of poverty, AIDS, crime, pollution, and inept bureaucrats, where it is difficult to imagine that the individual can make any difference. This self-immolation separates people and contributes to even less listening to each other.

Even though it is difficult to move out from this linear thinking into more circular thinking, the rewards of truly listening to one another are great. We become more open, responsive, caring. Benevolent self-interest includes interest in others and contributes to deeper feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment. It brings

us a feeling of being part of a greater whole, of more deeply respecting one another.

Listening to those close to us brings us to a better understanding of them as autonomous individuals and of ourselves as independent persons within the unit.

Listening is learning to let go of others, while controlling our own words. Listening better helps restore a sense of balance in relationships and expands our ability to care, to discover that the people we relate to are truly worth listening to.

Listening contributes to our feeling more related in this world. Listening is a gift we give others.