

Pastoral Care

Newsletter

*For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

Vol. 10, No. 1 • September 2002

To Listen with Love

by Patricia Brown

There have been times in my life when I have felt myself bursting with problems that were insoluble. During one particular period I was going round and round in tormented circles, overcome by feelings of worthlessness and despair. I was able to find people who listened to me and rescued me from the chaos of my feelings. People were able to hear my meanings a little more deeply than I had known them.

Being listened to permitted me to bring out the frightening feelings: the guilt, the despair, the confusions. I was really heard. My crying was a comfort, and I was met with empathy and strength. All the bottled up turbulence within me, so resolutely guarded, broke loose. Feelings of fright, appreciation, embarrassment, wonder, and relief were experienced and released. I did not have to hide! I could be me! And it was OK.

This experience gave me a new awareness of the blessings of listening. It opened up a new direction for me to see and hear others who were in crisis or at a point of new growth.

Listening in Pastoral Care

Pastoral care in our meetings is based on listening. It is sometimes to heal, often to remedy, and always to comfort and support. It is a gentle touching with voice, with hands, and with presence. It is knowing the importance of joy and laughter. It is knowing that we need one another. It is taking time to listen to another's story. We can't solve all the problems

or do all the caring we would like, but I believe that we can be aware, and we can listen and be present where we are.

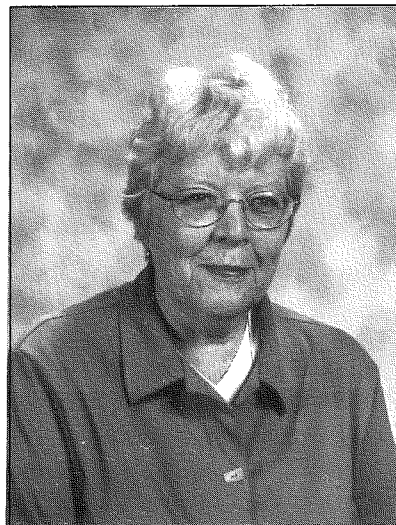
The shepherding task of ministry is expressed in this listening work. It is the first level of pastoral care: the level of friendship and trust, bringing a presence into a relationship. It is caring for one another. It can happen in a sick room, at a funeral, at a committee meeting, over the phone, or on a street corner.

Whether we continue in the next steps of pastoral care depends on each situation. When a level of trust is attained a person may be ready to say more about his or her circumstances. Hearing a story in depth can bring comfort and deepen relationship.

Listening First to Ourselves

What does it mean for you to listen to me and for me to listen to you? Oh, so very much! Listening is a miraculous key for looking within ourselves. It can open us to listening to ourselves with more care and understanding. It opens up our inner being, bringing up new thoughts, unexpected laughter, and wisdom. It is like releasing a spring bubbling up within, helping us to bring up new thoughts and expand our awareness. Having heard ourselves we may be able to pay more attention to other people and to things that matter all around us.

Listening requires that we embrace, accept, and gradually let go



Patricia Brown

of our own inner clamoring. If we are worried, uncertain, unhappy, or apprehensive we will not be good listeners. When we are not feeling well or we are worrying about how to accomplish everything we have to do at home, we can be distracted into thinking about our own concerns instead of paying attention to person we are with.

A simple and very potent practice for listening is simply to be still.

A simple and very potent practice for listening is simply to be still. Being still in ourselves, quieting the inner chatter of our minds, we can open up to a way of being present where we are. Listening from the depth of silence means listening for and receiving the meanings that rise up from deep within ourselves and others.

Bringing an openness

There is no magic formula for listening, every person is a mystery that must be learned slowly, reverently, with care and tenderness and pain—and is never learned completely.

As I am listening, I try to listen with care and try to feel how it would be to walk in that person's shoes. I try to listen to another person without my mind pressing against theirs or arguing or changing the subject. I find that I cannot listen to the words another is speaking if I am preoccupied with my appearance or with impressing the other or with trying to decide what I am going to say when the other stops talking or with debating about whether what is being said is true or relevant or agreeable.

I try to listen without passing judgment, without trying to take responsibility away from the person I am listening to, without trying to mold or define the person or the problem. In our caring we need to respond to the longing to act *with* others — not *on* them, helping to draw concerns and solutions out of them—not for them, allowing others to do work for themselves. When we succeed at listening in this way, it leaves an open space for self-discovery. Perhaps we will be able to touch the button that releases the bubbling spring within.

I had an experience of providing an opening for self-discovery when listening to a gentleman whose wife had recently died. He had taken care her through several years of illness. Following his wife's death, he seemed very agitated and upset, as would be natural at a time like this, but there seemed to be

more than just grief. After a while, as I listened, he felt able to say that he felt guilty. Guilty for not giving his wife better care? No, guilty for not being able to express his true feelings to the family. He was embarrassed to tell them that he was relieved. A burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He felt a freedom that he thought his family would not understand. As I listened he put more words to his feelings and decided that he would share these feelings with his family when the way opened. We ended our time together with a prayer thanking God for being present with us.

Listening with attention

Simple, silent presence is a strong positive way of listening. That doesn't have to mean just sitting there. We can let the person know that we are interested by showing our interest in our faces and bodies—leaning toward the person, making eye contact, when appropriate reaching out and touching the person's hand or arm.

In listening deeply, we can develop sensitivity for what is unsaid, the inner thoughts that words often hide. It is easy to hear only the words and miss the real message. We can improve our ability to hear the real message by listening with our whole self, our whole being, by using all of our senses. We can listen with our eyes and touch as well as our ears.

A young woman in our meeting came to me, hysterical, after she had been raped. I held her in my arms for a long time. Her sobbing slowly diminished.

We can improve our ability to hear by listening with our whole self, by using all of our senses—our eyes and touch as well as our ears.

There were no words to say. The silence surrounded us and up held us, until she was finally able to stop crying and face the next step in her process.

Sometimes more active listening is called for. I put into my own words what I hear the person saying or the feelings that I am sensing. "What I'm hearing you say is..." Did you mean that you want to..." "You seem to be very angry." This can help a person see more clearly what is going on. His or her response also helps me to understand more fully. Even if I'm wrong the person knows that I am paying attention, and I learn more about my own listening.

Listening doesn't have to be grim. We want to take the person's concern seriously, even if it seems silly or scary. But even in the worst of situations, there are funny ironies and ambiguities. If the two of us can share this humor it can help keep things in perspective. Humor is a healthy and helpful tension reducer when used with sensitivity. We want to take care, however, not to crack a joke to relieve *our own* tension when the person gets too serious or too deep.

Being aware of barriers to listening

We can experience barriers that trap our listening ability. Our patterns of listening are subject to a myriad of influences such as the way we filter messages through our own attitudes and assumptions. Perhaps a person's appearance turns us off, or the room is dirty or hot or smelly. The story the person is telling us may make us uneasy or tempt us to be judgmental. Or the story may remind us of a situation in our own lives has been painful. Our uneasiness can be reflected in several ways: voice levels, facial expressions, body gestures, and the words we use. The person will sense when we are feeling uneasy.

Some of us maintain permanent barriers or biases to certain people or particular subjects. We may put up a wall against age, religion, cleanliness, type of dress, where people live, what they do for a living, authority in relation to us, and many more. When we assign stereotypes to other people, we are not open to their individuality. Instead, we listen to what we expect from folks "like them." We create a preconception of what others *will say*, that can keep us from fully hearing what they *do say*. Whether our labels are positive or negative or whether our bias is favorable or unfavorable, we edit and distort.

Biases can be complicated but they are not really mysterious. We can ask ourselves why we are having a strong reaction to someone, particularly when we feel ourselves withdrawing or tending to be judgmental. Is the problem with this person or within me? By paying attention to our emotions and

reactions, we can become aware of and begin to overcome biases that may be barriers to our listening with clarity and compassion.

At one time I struggled with hearing people with accents, particularly with German accents. On one of our monthly meeting committees, I had to work with a Friend who had such an accent. I had great trouble hearing what she was telling me, but as I worked with her and learned to love her my problem slowly disappeared. It took a lot of work on my part as I learned to hear beyond and above my bias.

Listening is pure love

I have come to believe that listening is pure love—a primitive act of love in which a person gives of him or herself to another's word, becoming accessible and vulnerable to that word. True listening is not easy. It means exposing oneself to the fright, anger and despair of another—and also the joy—and it so worthwhile.

This takes practice but don't give up. Remember that practice may not make perfect but helps us to grow in the discipline of listening in pastoral care.

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Patricia Brown is a member of Abington (PA) Meeting, where she has served on Overseers and on Worship and Ministry over the years. She has a Masters of Divinity from Earlham School of Religion with a major in chaplaincy. She lives at Foulkeways a Quaker retirement community in Montgomery County, PA, where she enjoys doing pastel paintings of animals.

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*To "listen"
another's soul
into a condition
of disclosure and discovery
may be
almost the greatest service
that any human being
ever performs
for another.*

Douglas Steere

Two Ways Of Listening

Clear Listening is like the listening in a worship-sharing group. All you do is center yourself and listen. You don't interrupt, you don't comment, you don't agree or disagree. You don't even reflect back what you are hearing. You do your best just to be present, listening and taking the words into your heart. You can convey your interest by your attentive posture, eye contact, a nod of understanding here and there, and, perhaps, touch. Your loving attention conveys that you are ready to hold tenderly whatever comes forth, and this allows a person to express what is inside, perhaps putting pieces together in new ways and coming to new understandings.

Reflective Listening is more like the listening in a clearness committee. By reflecting back what you have heard, you can assure the speaker that he or she is being heard and understood. If you haven't heard accurately it provides an opportunity for the person to clarify what he or she intended to say. Sometimes the person realizes that it wasn't clear even to her/himself and in restating it comes to a new understanding.

Discipline, attention, and practice are required to listen and reflect without insinuating yourself, your opinions, and your reactions into the conversation. One hint of disapproval can choke off the flow of trust between you and the speaker or a comment can distract him or her from an emerging insight. It takes discipline not to comment on what has been said, or offer advice or solutions to a problem. It takes attention and self-awareness to be clear that your body language, expression, and your tone of voice also convey acceptance and not judgment.

In reflective listening, you seek only to reflect your understanding of what the speaker is saying. You might reflect back the words that you have heard: "Are you saying...?" Or as you tune into non-verbal clues of tone of voice and body posture you might pick up feelings that aren't explicit in the words: "It sounds as though this makes you happy/sad/angry/confused." Often naming feelings helps a person move to a new level of understanding. He or she may begin to laugh or to weep at the recognition of the feeling, and your role is just to be present to that newly discovered feeling. Occasionally you'll observe that the non-verbal

messages seem to contradict the verbal messages: "You say you're happy about this, but somehow you don't look happy."

At any point the person you are listening to may say that you are not accurately reflecting what has been said, or your reflection of feelings is not what he or she is experiencing. In reflective listening it is nearly always best to accept the person as the expert on her or his experience and acknowledge her or his perception of the situation. It is not your role to insist on your perception—even if you are convinced that you are seeing something important. You may, in fact, be wrong. Or you may be reflecting a truth that she or he is not yet ready to acknowledge. Occasionally a person will come back later and say, "You know, you said to me the other day that I seemed angry. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but later I realized that I am angry about that."

Deciding when to use clear listening or reflective listening. Sometimes it just comes naturally, you sense what would be most comfortable and useful for the person you are listening to. And sometimes the person will explicitly ask you just to listen without responding in any way. Often, you move back and forth between the two, listening without interruption for long periods and then reflecting back when there is something that seems unclear.

Clear listening can be most useful when a person is exploring something that is painful or sensitive. Reflective listening is helpful when there is a practical problem to be worked out. In both cases, your role is to listen attentively, without judgment, and without taking over the problem solving process.

Compiled by the editor based "Two Ways of Listening," prepared for the FGC Couple Enrichment Program by Merry Stanford and Peter Wood. Their paper was based on the book, Do You Feel Loved by Me? by Philip Rogers.

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*Loneliness does not come
from having no people about one,
but from being unable
to communicate the things that seem
important to oneself.*

C. G. Jung

One Meeting's Experience

Four Friends Share Their Experience of Listening and Being Listened To

As a member of our meeting's Membership Care Committee, I invited to lunch a member who had not attended worship for a few months. Not knowing him well, I wanted to hear all that he had to say, about his history in Quakerism, his family's involvement, his long and faithful work on a difficult committee, his worries about whether he was a good enough Quaker. In the process he told about his clearness meetings for marriage and membership both of which he experienced as perfunctory and social affairs. He told me why he hadn't been coming to meeting recently, a little embarrassed that he'd found another meeting that felt like a more comfortable fit. Though I'm sure I said some things, I mostly just listened for an hour and a half. He said that this was far and away his best experience of pastoral care.

*Pamela Haines
Central Philadelphia Meeting*

In 1994-95, when I was going through a particularly difficult phase of my chronic mental illness, I asked my meeting for a committee of care to meet with me periodically and pray for me daily. My committee and I quickly worked out an agreement that in our meetings we would spend 45 minutes in worship, and then talk for 45 minutes. Both parts of the procedure were invaluable to me.

Because of the mental illness, ordinarily I spent lots of time and energy behaving as if I were sane: keeping the outward manifestations of my inner state as invisible as possible. The silence at the beginning helped to break down that barrier. And then they listened, truly listened. The combination enabled me to tell the committee exactly what was going on. Having finally said what was really on my mind, in full, to three trusted Friends, not only was my barrier against revealing the mental illness lower, but my barrier to addressing the illness was lower. With their help I found more effective ways of addressing my illness. That committee of care continues to meet, now once a year or less, but I sometimes email or call a member, mostly to report little successes. And I know they're there if I need them.

*Mariellen Gilpin
Champaign-Urbana (IL) Meeting*

Several years ago, I became extremely anxious and fearful about a project I was responsible for in my work as executive of a small social service agency. As my distress reached a peak, I spoke of it in meeting for worship. Following worship a dear friend who is a member of the meeting's pastoral care committee approached me.

He asked, "What will happen to you if this project fails?" I began to answer about the consequences to my employer. "No," he said. "What will happen to *you*?" I started to think of consequences to me, and none of them seemed important enough to warrant the degree of desperation I was feeling. As we continued sitting there in the meetinghouse hallway, the conversation drifted to other matters. Suddenly, as though projected from the very back of my mind, the answer to his question leaped into my consciousness. I was embarrassed to speak it, "I will be proved incompetent and nobody will ever love me again."

That was a serious enough consequence to explain my extreme anxiety. Once it was spoken out loud it also revealed itself to be patently untrue. We both laughed at the demon that had been pursuing me. Thereafter I approached my project with less anxiety. Though the results did not live up to my highest hopes, it was not a failure. And, to this day, I am still blessed with people who love me.

*Patricia McBee,
Central Philadelphia (PA) Meeting
Editor of Pastoral Care Newsletter*

A few years ago when I had a layover between air flights, I decided to use the time by making some business calls, including one to a member of my governing committee. As I introduced the concern about which I was calling her, she heard more than my words. She also heard the stress and hurry in my speech. "Take a breath," she gently admonished. Startled, I complied. I felt less stressed, the Spirit was able to enter our conversation. We did our business, and I finished refreshed. Since that time, in moments of hurry and stress, I hear that admonition, "Take a breath," and it helps to bring me back to myself.

*Deborah Fisch
Paullina (IA) Meeting
Coordinator of the Traveling Ministries Program
of Friends General Conference*

Please Return the Enclosed Questionnaire

With your help we can more fully tailor Pastoral Care Newsletter respond to the concerns and interests of Friends providing pastoral care in our meetings. Please let us know how PCN has been useful to you—and how it has not. What sections of PCN do you read most regularly? What topics are of greatest interest? What concerns challenge your caregiving committee? And, what experiences can you share with other caregivers through the pages of PCN?

We look forward to hearing from you.

Readings on Listening

Adventures in Listening: Remarks to the Quaker Universalist Fellowship, Abington Friends Meeting, eleventh month 10, 1990, by Herb Walters. Landenberg, PA: Quaker Universalist Fellowship, 1992.*#

Deep Listening: Applying the disciplines of an elder to pastoral care by Robert Schmitt, *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, March 2001.*#

Do You Want to Help Me? The art of relating: a handbook for volunteers, relatives and professionals, by Stephen R. Henderson. Full Circle Counseling: Stauton, VA, 1978.#

I Was Sick and You Visited Me: A guide to visiting the sick, by Mary R. Ebinger. Cincinnati: United Methodist Church, 1983.#

Listening as a Way of Becoming, by Earl Koile. Waco, TX: Regency Books, c1977. #

Nurturing Silence in a Noisy Heart, by Wayne Oates. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979. #

On Listening to Another, by Douglas Steere. New York: Harper, c1955. #

The Wounded Healer; Ministry in Contemporary Society by Henri J. M. Nouwen. Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1972.#

*Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.

#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Friends outside PYM can subscribe to the library.

In the next issue of PCN: Retreats as a Way of Deepening the Meeting Community written by Charlotte Fardelmann

Questions for Reflection

1. Can you remember a time when you were listened to that made a difference for you? What was it about the way you were listened to that enabled you to come to a new understanding?
2. Was there a time when you were providing pastoral care that you found yourself led just to listen? What response did you get from the person to whom you were reaching out?
3. How do you quiet your “inner clamoring” in order to be prepared to listen without distraction?
4. What is most difficult for you in listening without judging, giving advice, or injecting your own experience? How do you address those temptations when they come up?
5. Are there “types” of people that you find hard to listen to openly, e.g., people much older or much younger than yourself, people of other races or social classes? How do you prepare yourself when such a conversation is called for?
6. What cues do you look for to “hear behind the words” for the feelings and the deeper meanings?
7. Have you experienced both “clear listening” and “reflective listening”? Which is more comfortable for you as the listener? How do you choose between them?
8. Has your pastoral care committee ever offered training or practice in listening? Who within your meeting or yearly meeting might be helpful in conducting such a training?

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Concerns Group on Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members. Annette Bennert, clerk. Editorial Committee: Susan Heath, clerk, Suzanne Day, Carolyn Terrell. Patricia McBee, editor. We are located at 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Comments are welcome. **Please do not duplicate without permission.** To obtain additional copies or to subscribe, contact Steve Gulick, at 215-241-7068 or steveg@pym.org.