

THE ART OF LISTENING

“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable.” David Augsburger

A FEW GENERAL GUIDELINES

These are not “new laws” but rather “faith expressing itself in love.”

As we *share* about our lives, we do so

1. Purposefully: it is important to tell about our lives purposefully with the ultimate desire to glorify God.
2. Honestly with a willingness to examine our own hearts. We don't want to tell the cleaned up version, as the danger is we may come to believe that version. It also takes away from glorifying God in the redemption that He brings to your story. At the same time it is our choice to decide which groups are safe to share.
3. Honorably avoiding gossip, slander, and vengeance. Tell your story and not someone else's.

As we *listen* to stories, do so:

1. With integrity: with a willingness to engage and enter a story. It is both a privilege and a responsibility to be let into one another's stories. We hold each other's stories from this point forward. It is not to be treated lightly or ever used to shame them. At times we might be called on by the Lord to remind them of where they are in their story: who they are and whose they are.
2. With a serious attentiveness combined with self-control and patience. The below guidelines are helpful for in-the-moment sharing. Think present tense! There is time to follow up with the person later. Focus on where this person is right now.
3. With an honoring of the privacy of the storyteller. What we share stays in this group. We don't go home and tell our husbands or roommates, unless the speaker gives you that permission. If you're not sure, then don't share. It's someone else's story, not yours.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

Our responses should make it safe for people to tell more of their story later. Be aware that there may be deeper things that will probably be even more difficult to talk about in the future. People generally share what's easiest to share first, testing to see how those portions of their story are handled before offering more. Others in your group are also watching to see how this person is treated and whether it's safe for them to share, too. In order to make the environment most conducive to sharing and listening, both now and in the future, please consider the following.

How to “Redress” the one sharing

When you share to the level of feeling exposed before others you will know what redressing is all about, as you will feel emotionally vulnerable and naked! Another word for “redressing” is “covering.” Covering is a significant theme in Scripture. (Look for it!) The first place it is mentioned is in Genesis when the Lord covers, or dresses, Adam and Eve. This, of course, alludes to Christ covering us with His righteousness. So, we extend the Father and Christ's love when we cover others. And here's how we attempt to do that:

#1 COVERING SHAME WITH GRACE

We need to use *words* to move towards people in shame. This is the picture God gives us in relationship to Adam and Eve in the garden, Moses in Exile, and Peter who had gone fishing after the resurrection of Christ. We want to cover that shame with their true identity, who God is making them to be.

AIM FOR:

“Thank you for sharing. I know that was hard for you to do.”

“Thank you for trusting us/me.”

“I appreciate the courage it took to tell us that. I imagine that wasn’t easy.”

THINGS TO AVOID:

Formulating your response while listening

This will prevent you from listening well. Trust yourself that you if you listen well, you will be able to respond lovingly and with healing.

Saying nothing.

If you do not know what to say or are unable to respond, tell them this and that you will get back to them another time. In the very least *thank them for sharing*. There is a chance the person has experienced the silence of others and more silence only confirms what they fear, that they are covered in shame.

Saying too much.

Too many words can disguise or cloud the message. It also shifts the focus to you. **Before speaking ALWAYS ask if you can speak into what they’ve just shared.** This might sound formal but it’s honoring to them and gives them the ability to know and communicate what they can handle. Say something like, “Can I say something? You can say no.” or “Can I press in a little further on a point you made?” Let them set the pace.

Asking questions.

This takes them out of the emotional aspect of their story and into their heads. Thinking isn’t the problem here. Christ wants us to think! However, it’s the timing of thinking that can be problematic. Also any question can snowball into more questions. Wait until later to clear up questions. Or ask them if you can ask them a question. Just be aware of their body language. Remember they might feel naked in that particular moment. Just because something they share isn’t a big deal to you, doesn’t mean it’s not significant to them.

#2 VALIDATING PAIN WITH EMPATHY

As we listen, we are looking for where the emotion is: the anger, the tears, the fear, the despair, the confusion, the bitterness. Listen for feeling words: afraid, scared, sad, confused, stuck, etc. Look at them. Study them. We need to listen for door openers: “I haven’t said this before because I thought I wouldn’t be believed.” A great response is: “*I believe you.*”

Mike Mason, in Practicing the Presence of People says, “Only about 7 percent of communication is conveyed through words. The rest we read between the lines in the form of expressions, gestures, vocal inflection and the general energy people give off—in a word, their presence. To communicate well, it is more important to watch what people say, to feel what is being said, than to listen to every word. We must learn to hear with our eyes and heart.”

AIM FOR:

Share your emotions. "This makes me sad, too." Or "I can see why you're angry; that is something to be angry about!" Don't hold back or apologize for your tears if you feel them coming. "Weep with those who weep." In fact when they see your tears, they see their pain validated in your response. That is a powerful expression of love, especially if they are emotionally detached from their own story.

And validate their tears if they cry. Get them a Kleenex. Ask them if you can give them a hug or touch them. (if you feel so inclined.)

THINGS TO AVOID:**Drawing attention to yourself or your own story at this point.**

Concentrate on THEIR story. Moving to your story diminishes their story. Focus on what they have shared, and who they are.

Processing their story or asking for more.

This is not the time. Remember they are standing there emotionally naked. They need to be redressed and can process another time *if* they invite you to do so.

Telling them how you think they should feel.

There is nothing they should or should not feel.

Saying "Its okay."

It's not okay. The brokenness in life is not okay. Saying it's okay (or variations like "it is what it is") diminishes their pain. Saying it's okay sends them the message they should buck up and move on and be fine. That is stoicism, not the gospel.

Getting them to stop crying.

Tears are healing. Trying to make someone stop crying tells them that their tears are unnecessary. Please invite their tears instead of shutting them down or shoving them back in.

#3 AFFIRMING DIGNITY WITH TRUTH

You affirm what you hear and see and know to be true. Speak into what you see, hear and what they've offered you. Some people have been silenced for many years, so encourage them to find their voice, and affirm that their voice can be powerful for good.

AIM FOR:

Mirror back to them what you see:

"The pace of your voice quickened when you spoke about that. Do you know why?"

"Does that part of what you shared make you nervous?"

"You seemed to shut down when you brought up that issue. I wonder why..."

"Were you aware that you started laughing at a part of your story that was really sad?"

"I'm glad you're beginning to see that about yourself/ that relationship."

"I have some ideas. Would you like any advice or do you just want us to listen?"

Instead of getting them to try harder or resign or find a way of escape, tell them that you'll sit with them in this darkness and wait for Jesus to rescue.

THINGS TO AVOID:

Preaching

There is a time for instruction, but this is not it! Preaching can heap on more shame. Remember patience and self-control as a listener.

Quoting Verses.

Often we misuse Scripture as an easy out when we do not know what else to say. Scripture can be used hurtfully to “cheer up” another. Scripture is very powerful so be careful how and when you use it. If you do think of a verse, share it with them later or ask them before offering it.

Fixing

Listening is not about fixing. It’s about entering in with them. If you have some ideas for them, wait! And again, ask them if they want your advice! **Don’t assume, ask!**

Giving pat (trite) answers.

There are no trite or simple answers for the pain and brokenness of this world. You are not giving answers; you are giving yourself and your empathy and pointing them to Christ as you incarnate Him to them.

“People in pain want to talk. They are very forgiving of our own errors as long as we are neither pushy nor arrogant. We can bumble and learn. The reward is enormous... A radical life hears stories deeply enough to become a participant in another’s life, an actor in the new story that God is telling on behalf of us all.” From *The Healing Path Study Guide* by Dan Allender