

BRIEF THOUGHTS ON LISTENING

By Harlene Anderson, Taos Board Member

My thoughts on listening in a practice context rest on the conceptual framework of a Collaborative-Dialogic Practice. Collaborative-Dialogic refers to being engaged with the other, or others, in a collaborative relationship and generative conversation. I hyphenate collaborative and dialogic to emphasize that it is a process rather than two separate things pressed together or as one modifying the other. In other words, relationships and conversation go hand-in-hand. The kinds of relationships we have influenced the quality of conversations we can have with another and vice versa. They cannot do so.

For me, listening is never a stand-alone activity. It is interconnected with speaking, responding, and hearing—all of which are essential in any genuine endeavor to accept and understand the other. It is a process of being and engaging with the other as a unique human being. John Shotter refers to this kind of listening as responsive listening: always poised to respond with curiosity and an invitation to share more.

I speak to invite the other to speak so that I can listen. I listen in order to respond. Responding is a human, moral responsibility and the way in which we respond is critical. What appears to be “no response” is a response that the speaker may interpret in different ways. The way we respond signals the importance—or non-importance—of the other person and what they said. I want to respond to acknowledge that the other has spoken and show coherence with what was said, or what I think was said. I want to reply in a way that helps me clarify if I have truly heard what the other wanted me to hear, and to do so in a manner, tone, and attitude of respect and curiosity. Respect and curiosity show appreciation for and acknowledgment of the “humanness” of the other.

Authenticity is important. We must genuinely and sincerely show interest and be present. But no matter how we strive to be genuine we must also acknowledge that we cannot be blind to our own values, beliefs, and biases. Our ears, eyes, and body—our lenses and our feelers—are filled with cultural and historical influences that can easily call us to discount, judge, blame or categorize the other. We tend to make sense of the other, their narrative, and our experience of them through our pre-understandings and perceptions—that is, from our sense-making maps.

We cannot purposefully transcend our realities or pretend our objectivities do not exist. We can, however, be an interested and curious listener and responder who is trying to learn from the other and to learn from their sense-making map, not ours. I find that when I am engaged in this kind of learning, my responses to what I think I am hearing and understanding are more coherent with what the other wants or hopes. This does not suggest that the intention of my response is always to support, validate, or condone what was said. I simply want to make sure I understand as best I can. Thus, understanding is active and not passive, just as it is mutual and not singular.

“True” listening can occur only when we are open to the difference and the uniqueness of the other without judgment, blame, or critique. In being and doing so, we are listening ethically.

In listening ethically, we do not strive to change the other, but rather allow ourselves to be influenced by them.

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