

Awareness Cliff Notes #1

NOCC Social Justice Seekers

Concepts for Effective Listening

Listening to another person's story matters.

Listening facilitates understanding and empathy. Listening is holy work, not to be rushed or interrupted, but to be savored. To listen empathically is to hold space for another person to just be. It honors the other person, and may be the most valuable gift you can give.

Listening with the ears of our hearts facilitates receiving, accepting, respecting another. This is a great tool for relationship-building or repair, and conflict resolution. It is affective, stimulating a feeling response. It requires vulnerability and fosters empathy. It connects.

- The listener's agenda is to become acquainted.
- This can happen when we listen in order to experience and know another person.

Listening with the ears of our minds facilitates learning, cataloging, comparing, differentiating. This is a great tool for research, analysis, and debate. It informs.

- The listener's agenda is information-gathering.
- This can happen when we listen in order to identify similarities or differences.

There are ways to demonstrate you are truly listening (with either set of ears):

- Invite the other person to continue: *"Can you say more about that?"* or *"What was that like for you?"*
- Reflect (in the teller's own words) what you just heard them say, such as *"...you were scared to death."* Then pause and listen more.
- Be quiet. Listening for the purpose of experiencing and knowing the other person, we temporarily set our Selves aside to be fully present to them (heart). Listening for a way to identify with them, our Selves are engaged in gathering information (head). ***Ideally, we learn to use each set of "ears" selectively, with intentionality and awareness, at appropriate times.***

We are culturally oriented toward listening with the ears of our heads (minds)...

At school, at work, in committee meetings, planning sessions – in every setting where we measure results and identify accomplishment, we learn to excel by engaging cognitive processes (head). And they are rewarded. Much less attention is given in our culture to relational processes. **Justice work requires us to sharpen the ears of our hearts, because for us to do justice, empathy is required.** Where there is injustice, our ground work as Seekers is to seek repair. The first requisite repair is within us. To facilitate healing we must begin with humility, hearing with the ears of our hearts how we may have unwittingly done harm. On the reverse of this document we emphasize ***listening with the ears of our hearts.***

Be aware of the flow of energy between you and the teller....

As you listen to another's story, it may remind you of your own similar experience, and your impulse may be to voice understanding, support, or affirmation by inserting your own story, then accidentally ceasing to listen, becoming the teller. Notice that when you speak to tell your own story, the energy flow from the teller toward listener, reverses. Intending affirmation, the result may be negation. The original teller falls silent, thinking of how to respond, their story suspended. It may be possible to restore that flow by saying, *"I'm sorry I interrupted you like that! Please go on... you were saying, (repeat their words)."*

Be aware that you have taken command of the conversation by redirecting....

As exciting as it is to share your own version of a similar experience, it can be even more exciting when the other person discovers their own connecting point to your story when you tell it in its own space and time. When you have listened, fully present to the other, and you sense completion, a way to transition might be to ask, *"May I tell you something you just reminded me of?"* Thereby, you will have honored their story. **Be aware of the risk that you may have ended their story and redirected attention to your own story, however apropos.**

This dynamic is true in every situation, with people who are the same race as you, same economic demographic, same sexual orientation, similar education, same religion, same family construct, same gender identity. **The effects of this dynamic are amplified when you and the person who is telling you their story are not similar in those ways.**

Be aware of cultural inequities....

Know that if you are white Anglo American, you are part of the dominant culture of the United States. If you are cis-gender heterosexual white college educated, your place in the dominant culture of the US is pretty secure, even if you are female or poor.

Know that if you represent the dominant culture and you are in conversation with someone not part of the dominant culture, you likely represent to the other person a difficult, perhaps traumatic, history. That history, though unknown and invisible to you, is a **compelling reason for you to enter each conversation with respect and humility.**

If this current story-sharing encounter is the beginning of a relationship, there will be a time and place for your story to unfold and be honored in the same way. There's no hurry. Hold space for this conversation not to be rushed.

Telling your own story matters....

An offering of your own story is a true gift. Telling your story and experiencing it as being received, held, and honored, your **trust** in the listener deepens. Sharing your story is a vulnerable act, as is listening deeply to the other. Deep listening honors the vulnerability of the other, creates safety, and facilitates **empathy**. Laying down our armor, we may find one another and healing can begin. **Shared vulnerability fosters empathy.**