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Listening: The Most Important Ingredient in Healthy Dialogue

By Susan Nienaber

Everyone is talking, but who is listening? In a world of sound bites, talking points, and one-minute management, how can we practice transformative listening that is adequate to the complex conditions we face in our personal lives, our religious communities, and the larger society in which we live?

The issues and polarities that gripped our most recent presidential campaign are a testimony to this challenge. Without easy answers, some people are rediscovering, on a grassroots level, that we must "learn" our way into new realities through the use of our collective, human, and spiritual wisdom. One way in which some are learning in the midst of this cultural cacophony is through dialogue.

Methods of dialogue and deliberation are becoming more formalized and are now being taught in colleges and universities. Recently, the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation held its second, international conference, which was attended by a diverse group of participants.

The underlying assumption for those who embrace dialogic methods is that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. And, of course, the most important ingredient in good dialogue is listening. Listening—without distraction and in a way that suspends judgment and helps others feel completely understood—is a tremendous gift to offer another. And, in our global society, it might ultimately be the way to address the more serious and larger issues we face.

Dr. Juanita Brown, author of *The World Café: A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter*, suggests five ways to encourage "dynamic" listening:

- **Listen to Learn:** We need to enter into conversations with the goal of learning. We need to pay attention to our own natural tendencies, only partially to listen as we are preparing to express our own thoughts and opinions.
- **Listen for Differences:** We need to be curious and listen for things that surprise and challenge us. It is important to consider different perspectives and assumptions as gifts, even when they make us uncomfortable because they "offer rich soil for discovering unforeseen possibilities." (p.16)
- **Listen with Support:** Breakthroughs in thinking occur most often when we encourage others to take their thinking further. It helps to link and build upon another's ideas instead of going in random directions.
- **Listen for Connections:** "To arrive at deeper meaning requires the discipline of *shared listening*—everyone listening together for the new connections, collective wisdom, or insight that no individual member of the group might access alone." (p. 16)
- **Listen Reflectively:** It is helpful to have a moment of silence intentionally between people as they are sharing in order to allow time for new ideas and reflections to surface.

For more information on the World Café project and suggestions about when the process is helpful, see these two links: [Cafe' Know How](#) & [What Is a "World Cafe"?](#)