



HOW TO LEAD HOLY LISTENING

PURPOSE AND USE OF HOLY LISTENING¹ EXERCISE

This exercise brings people into contact with another person for a brief experiment in listening and being heard. It is a simple way for people who are new to each other to begin to disarm and invite their deeper selves to enter an unknown space. It can be offered as a spiritual practice, if in a spiritual/religious context, or as a deeply human practice, if in a secular space. When using this exercise in secular spaces, it may be helpful to call it wholly listening and focus on it as a practice that invites us to be more fully human together.

HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES OF HOW IT CAN BE USED.

- + This exercise is a useful tool for engaging the energy of the people in a room who may have been mostly passive listeners. After the “deep dive” this exercise provides, people often are more warmed up to engage in meaningful conversation or collaboration. This tool has been used in a plenary of 250 people, mid-way through a retreat for 100, and in the middle of a sermon preached to a congregation of 500.
- + This exercise is useful in getting people talking to one another who usually don’t enter into one-on-one dialogue, for example, intergenerational conversation. Consider finding a way to pair individuals with the largest span of years possible, or simply asking someone to turn to someone they did not come with or do not already know.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Douglas Steere, a Quaker writing in post-WWII England, talks about a kind of listening we can experience, if we are open to it:

“Have you ever sat with a friend when in the course of an easy and pleasant conversation the talk took a new turn and you both listened avidly to the other and to something that was emerging in your visit? You found yourselves saying things that astonished you and finally you stopped talking and there was an immense naturalness about the long silent pause that followed. In the silent interval you were possessed by what you had discovered together. If that has happened to you, you know that when you come up out of such an experience, there is a memory of rapture and a feeling in the heart of having touched holy ground.²”

Steere vividly captures here a memory most of us can probably remember or relate to. He goes on to say: “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.”

One or both of these quotes from Steere can be read slowly and carefully before introducing the practice you are about to engage in. It can be helpful to emphasize the context in which Steere was writing—a postwar moment where there were shortages of housing, trauma from bombings, and the loss of loved ones. This pulls into focus that beyond our most basic human needs of food and shelter, “having a good listening” ranks highly.



HOW TO LEAD HOLY LISTENING

SETTING UP THE EXERCISE (EXAMPLE SCRIPT)

Over the next few minutes, I'd like to introduce you to a spiritual practice that invites us to imagine that moments like the ones Steer describes don't just happen by accident. What if we don't have to wait for them to spontaneously arise, but that we can actually create the conditions that welcome that kind of listening?

Our time together so far has begun to create those conditions (refer to setting up the space with Covenants of Presence or another group norm-building exercise). Holy listening might spontaneously erupt anywhere in our time together, but for the next six minutes we're going to actively invite it.

SO HERE'S HOW IT WORKS.

- + *Choose a partner and decide who will go first.*
- + *Together we'll have a moment of silence to ponder a question.*
- + *Then one of you will take a deep breath and begin to speak for two minutes. You may talk about whatever arises for you in response to the question.*

Note to Listeners: *When you are listening, only listen, to your fullest capacity. Don't think about what you are going to say when it is your turn. Don't think about your grocery list. You are only a calm presence, listening avidly to what is emerging. Only listen, using body language if you are led, but trying not to speak or ask questions. Hold what you hear in confidence.*

Note to Speakers: *You may talk about whatever arises for you in response to the question. There's no need to censor yourself or try to create a neatly packaged story. Try to go where your heart leads you. Your partner will remember that your story belongs to you and will hold it in confidence.*

- + *After two minutes I will stop you by using a (chime, bell, raised hand). [The facilitator will feel like a “buzz-kill” here—usually interrupting conversations that may have just gotten started. A quick acknowledgment of that, and an invitation to continue story-sharing later is good to address here.]*
- + *And we'll trade places. Got it?*
- + *The question I invite you to answer is:*
 - *Tell a story about a time in the last year when you felt fully alive, in your flow, and doing exactly what you born to do? (This is a good question for the beginning of a gathering, to get people warmed up and embodying a sense of their own power and agency.)*
 - *Tell a story about the last day when you felt most alive? (This is a good question to pose after people have moved through a retreat, conference or experience for a little while. It will yield a sense of the room and may help leaders make mid-course corrections.)*
 - *Tell a story about a time when you were an important part of a community of people working together to achieve something? (This aims at remembering what it feels like in our bodies to operate as part of a collective—something larger than ourselves—rather than in isolation.)*



HOW TO LEAD HOLY LISTENING

SO HERE'S HOW IT WORKS (CONTINUED)

- + Trade places, letting the listener become the speaker, and vice-versa.
- + Debrief using questions that reflect your reason for using this exercise.
 - You may want to hear how it felt to different types of personalities in the room. Ask the introverts to share. Ask the extroverts to share.
 - You may want to surface what the room is thinking/sensing/feeling. If so, be sure to ask people to share their own story (not their partners).
 - You may want to ask people to quietly nominate their partner to share a story with the larger room, in answer to a specific question.

Note to facilitator:

- + Choose a question that reflects the theme of the gathering and zeros in on what you hope to accomplish. It is sometimes helpful to read a piece of prose or poetry that provides an image around which questions to ask.
- + The best questions are story prompts. In answering a request to “tell a story about a time when ...” people tend to become more engaged, stay away from abstract principles, embody their stories and become animated.
- + When time allows, it is interesting to do two rounds of Holy Listening, flipping the same story prompt to get people thinking a little more deeply. Keep the same partners, or ask them to change partners. For example:
 - Round One story prompt: Tell a story about at time when you had something important to say and you were not heard, a time when what you had to say did not matter.
 - Round Two story prompt: Tell a story about a time when someone listened to you fully, a time when what you had to say really mattered.
- + When pairing story prompts, give thought to what feelings you want to people to be holding as the exercise ends.
- + If you want them to leave hopeful and inspired, use the positive story prompt last.
- + If your goal is to disrupt a norm and leave people thinking more deeply, use the challenging story prompt last and pull the thread of that discomfort into the next phase of the group experience.

THIS RESOURCE WAS DEVELOPED BY DORI GRINENKO BAKER

¹ See *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on the Quest for Vocation* by Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Mercer (The Pilgrim Press, 2012)

² Douglas V. Steere, *Gleanings: A Random Harvest*, 83

³ fteleaders.org/CovenantsofPresence