The Gift of Listening

What is the best gift you have ever given? For me it is the opportunity I had to offer my time to help my African American District Superintendent Ben Stewart who was dying with cancer. I went to see Ben one afternoon and asked him if there was anything I could do for him. He paused and in a very weak voice he said, “You know Jody I have not been able to save up much money over my 40 some years of ministry and I am sad about leaving my dear wife with no house. After I am gone she has nowhere to live.”

I told him that I would see what I could do. So I sent a letter out to some other churches and I contacted some people in my own church in Gastonia who had resources. I simply told those who would listen that Ben had come up in ministry through some very rough times. As an African American pastor he served very small churches that provided limited income. Now he was dying and I wanted to honor his service by giving his family a gift to help them get a home after he was gone.

My goal was to raise $25,000 to help with a down payment. I later discovered that because of needing to barrow money just to get buy, getting a loan was going to be almost impossible. My bishop heard about what I was trying to do so she copied my later and sent it to all the ministers of our Conference with a note from her.

Within a month I gave Ben a check for $80,000. He knew that along with a small life insurance policy his wife could pay cash for a new townhouse. The best gift I ever received was the smile on Ben’s face.

What is the best gift you have ever received? For me it is that moment when I know that with God’s grace I have been able to help someone through a really tough time. It is when I can stand with a person who wonders just where in the world God really is because life has come unraveled. I get to stand with them and listen and help them hold on to hope.

In the words from James this morning we are told that every gift is from above. So as one commentator put it the book of James begins with the answers to two questions. The first question is, “Who is God?” The answer is that God is the great giver and the one who gave each of us the gift of life in our birth. The next question is “Who are we?” The answer is that we are the first fruits of God’s giving so our role in life is to be like God…We are to be givers.

James goes on to give guidance as to what that means. So we hear the famous words that real religion is not about words but about doing. Real religion has to do with bridling our
tongues and listening better. Real religion has more to do with doing justice like helping widows and orphans than it does with creeds and beliefs. Be doers of the Word and not hearers only. Look into a mirror and do not forget that what you see is not a self-made person but a gift from God whose purpose is to give back.

So what is a best gift from James’ point of view? It is the gift of listening. James says, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Unfortunately it seems that most of us are not good natural listeners. We need to learn to listen. Studies show that we can speak at a rate of 125 words per minute but we have the mental capacity to understand 400 words per minute.

That means that 75% of our mental capacity is free to do something else. What we often do is use that capacity to allow our minds to wonder or to be thinking of what we are going to say next. We are not good listeners so we need to reminded that one of most special gifts we can give is to listen.

Krista Tippet in her book, Speaking of Faith, writes about the discipline of listening. She writes:

“Listening is a spiritual discipline—a spiritual technology. Move toward listening does need practice, with hospitality. It needs safe spaces, because really listening implies vulnerability. It is not necessarily about changing your mind, but it will transform the way you move through the world with others.”

So it seems that most of us need to be reminded about how to listen well. I am reminded of two stories I encountered this week as I researched what it means to listen and why we do not often do it well.

We men are often accused of not listening well. We have a habit of looking at you like we are taking in what is said but we are really thinking about the what we are going to say next or wanting you to finish so we can go on with doing the next thing.

First story:

Wanda’s dishwasher quit working so she called a repairman. Since she had to go to work the next day, she told the repairman, “I’ll leave the key under the mat. Fix the dishwasher, leave the bill on the counter, and I’ll mail you a check.”
"Oh, by the way don’t worry about my bulldog Spike. He won’t bother you. But, whatever you do, d o NOT, under ANY circumstances, talk to my parrot!" "I REPEAT, DO NOT TALK TO MY PARROT!!"

When the repairman arrived at Wanda’s apartment the following day, he discovered the biggest, meanest looking bulldog he had ever seen. But, just as she had said, the dog just lay there on the carpet watching the repairman go about his work.

The parrot, however, drove him nuts the whole time with his incessant yelling, cursing and name calling. Finally the repairman couldn’t contain himself any longer and yelled, "Shut up, you stupid, ugly bird!" To which the parrot replied, "Get him, Spike!"

See - Men just don’t listen

Second story:

One day an old man was casually walking along a country lane with his dog and his mule. Suddenly a speeding pick-up truck careened around the corner, knocking the man, his mule, and his dog into the ditch.

The old man decided to sue the driver of the truck, seeking to recoup the cost of the damages. While the old man was on the stand, the counsel for the defense cross-examined the man by asking a simple question: "I want you to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following question: Did you or did you not say at the time of the accident that you were 'perfectly fine'?

And the man said, "Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road … " And the counsel for defense said, "Stop, stop, I asked you, tell me 'yes' or 'no', did you say you were 'perfectly fine' at the time of the accident?"

"Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and … " The defense attorney appealed to the judge. "Your honor," he said, "the man is not answering the question. Would you please insist that he answer the question?" The judge said, "Well, he obviously wants to tell us something. Let him speak."

So the man said, "Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and this truck came around the corner far too fast, knocked us into the ditch. The driver stopped, got out of his truck, saw my dog was badly injured, went back to his truck, got his rifle, and he
shot it. Then he saw that my mule had broken his leg so he shot it. Then he said, 'How are you?' And I said, 'I'm perfectly fine.'"

When it comes to listening many of us are not perfectly fine. James helps us remember that true listening is the beginning of being a doer of the Word and not a hearer only. Listening is not the end but it is a very important beginning.

A number of years ago I was invited to say a few words at a Martin Luther King celebration that was being held at an African American church. I was among only a handful of white folks who were present.

All the pastors present were seated on the stage area. A prominent African American pastor gave a lively sermon. As is the custom in the black worship experience the congregation was shouting and talking back as the preacher shouted out his message.

He kept repeating the same phrase at the end on his admonitions; “Are you listening?” The people responded with all kinds of shouts and even applause. When he finished he turned to sit down next to me. It took a while for the crowd to calm down.

The host pastor then got up and simply said, “We are honored today to have Dr. Seymour with us to say a few words.” I got up and walked up to the pulpit. It was dead silence. I stood there a few moments and then leaned over toward the congregation and said, “There’s a white man in the pulpit, are you listening?”

They went wild and clapped and shouted. We had a good old time for the next few minutes.

Remember the wisdom saying; “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.” The way we show that we do not hear and forget is to see what we actually do. You are listening to a sermon today. Are you really listening? Remember 75% of your brain is available to do other things.

In an article by Aletheia Luna 9 ways are listed to help us develop the art of true listening:

1. **Make Eye Contact.**

This first rule is very obvious but frequently forgotten. If you don’t look at the person while they’re speaking, you give them the impression that you don’t care what they say. In essence, it appears as though you don’t even care about them. Simple.
2. Don’t Interrupt.

Let the person speak uninterrupted. To master the art of listening you need to halt any good thoughts that come to mind and let the person say everything they need to say. Often times people simply need someone to talk to, not someone who will butt in and give their own thoughts and opinions. The goal is to shine the spotlight on them, not you.

3. Practice "Active Listening".

The art of listening isn’t simply about staying quiet 100% of the time, it’s also about asking questions. These questions are for clarification, or for further explanation so that you can fully understand what the speaker is telling you. For instance, questions like these are brilliant: "Are you saying that ______", "What I heard you say was ______", "Did you mean that ______".

4. Show You Understand.

Another great way to show that you understand what the person is telling you is to nod. You can also make noises that show you’re in tune with what the person is saying such as "yes", "yeah", "hmm", "okay". This seems trivial, but it’s important to not behave like a zombie and demonstrate some interest and comprehension.

5. Listen Without Thinking.

In other words, listen without forming responses in your mind. Be wholehearted and listen to the entire message. It’s very tempting to fill the spaces, after all, our minds think around 800 words per minute, compared to 125-150 words we speak per minute. Don’t miss valuable information by letting your mind wander!


To effectively master the art of listening it’s extremely important to withhold any negative evaluations or judgments. Make it your goal to be open minded 100% of the time. After all, who wants to open up to a narrow minded person? It also helps to be mindful of your "shut off" triggers, which are the specific words, looks, or situations that cause you to stop listening. This way, you can prevent yourself from shutting off in the future.
7. **Listen To Non-Verbal Communication.**

About 60 - 75% of our communication is non-verbal. That's a lot! In order to know whether to encourage the speaker, to open yourself more, or to be more supportive in your approach, it's essential to know what the person's body is saying. Do they display signs of discomfort? Are they untrusting of you? Does their body language align with their words? To learn more about body language, try checking out some of Sol's [Body Language articles.](http://lonewolf.com/9 Ways to Master the Art of Listeing)

8. **Create A Suitable Environment.**

It can be really difficult to listen to another person when the TV is screaming, your phone is buzzing and there are thousands of cars passing by. When you remove all of these distractions and find a quiet place to sit down and listen, it's much easier to listen empathetically with an open mind and whole heart. Also, when you indicate it would be good to "find a quiet place", you put importance in the person and what they have to say. Once again, you show care and consideration.

9. **Observe Other People.**

If you're really serious about mastering the art of listening, why not observe other people? One of the best ways to become a better listener is to observe the way people interact with each other, and all the irritating and rude things they do. Create an "annoying habit" checklist, and see if you do any. If you're brave enough, you can even ask someone you trust about what they like and dislike about the way you interact with others in conversation.

As Diogenes Laertius said: “We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less.” The art of listening is an invaluable life skill. Not only will it help you communicate better with your friends and family, but it will help you succeed in every area of your life. ([lonewolf.com](http://lonewolf.com/9 Ways to Master the Art of Listering)

As a pastor one of the things I have learned in my 43 years of doing ministry is that people have a deep need to be listened to. One of you honored me recently by giving me this framed saying. She gave it to me because of my constant message to you that the most sacred thing you have to share are not your possessions but your story.

In the bulleting you see this saying by Maryanne Radmacher; “Everyone has a story; have the patience to listen, have the wisdom to learn.”
In our church we have something called Trust Circles. These Trust Circles are small groups of people who are trained to do what Parker Palmer calls deep listening. In these circles the gift of listening is taught as a skill. There are guidelines for this deep listening. Advice cannot be given and no judgment can be expressed.

While a person is talking those who listen quiet their own minds and truly listen to what is being said. They listen so that the inner teacher that is within each of us can be voiced. As Parker Palmer puts in his book, A Hidden Wholeness...

“In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy round a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood.”

So true listening invites the soul to show up and we need that. One of the best gifts we can give and receive is listening. Practice listening this week. “Everyone has a story; have the patience to listen, have the wisdom to learn.”

….and remember these words from Proverbs 17: 27-28:

“One who spares words is knowledgeable; one who is cool in spirit has understanding. Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.”

Be slow to speak and quick to listen….it is a gift indeed.

Are you listening?