

Listening - A Divine Activity

There are many kinds of ministry: preaching, teaching, music, and evangelism. There is also the ministry of presence and this is the most difficult because there is no activity - we are not busy. Listening is a form of healing. Pastoral listening is a divine activity as well as a human one.

Before we pray with a patient, it is important to listen to him/her. The patient does not experience (feel) God's presence because he does not feel he has been heard by God through listening.

Christian/Muslim/Hindu listening is more than a human skill. When done in Christ/God/Allah – it is a divine (holy) activity based upon faith and practiced in love.

As helpers, we need to develop a “healing” relationship with the patient. We need 3 qualities to do this.

1) Empathy

This is when you know what it feels like to be this person/patient in this situation. It is the ability to get “into the skin” of another person. When you practice empathy, you do not come with your own decisions about the patient and you don't tell him what to do.

2) Agape Love

To be helpful, you must love your patient with agape love. This is the kind of love with which God loves us. God does not make us earn his love. God loves us even when we are sinful. So we need to love with God's love. We need to love our patients just the way they are. The patient does not need to act or talk in a way that will earn them our love. God does not make us do that, so we should not do that with our patients.

3) Genuineness

To be genuine is to be true to yourself when with the patient. This means that you do not pretend to be interested. But you also do not hold yourself back by showing no expression or emotion. A genuine person does not take on an artificial role with the patient.

Listening deeply promotes healing. Ask, "How do you feel about? It is important for the patient to be heard. When a patient feels alone, she can even exclude God's presence. When we listen, the patient will feel that God has heard him/her and reached out to him/her. We become the ears of God for the patient. In "pastoral" listening, we are actively involved in helping our patient tell his/her story.

What Makes a Good Pastoral Listener

Good listening is hard work. It is easy to lose interest and become restless and to talk about our own concerns. For example, it is easy to start to talk about something similar that has happened to you. There are 4 things that make a good listener.

- 1) Self-Sacrifice
Attentive listening means that we restrain ourselves and our wanting to tell OUR story. This is a sacrifice because - listening to our patients suffering can stir up memories of our own experiences which we have never shared with anyone. It is hard to put aside our own painful feelings and share in our patient's suffering. Or, if a patient is telling us about her joy, we may find envy inside of us if WE do not have joy in our life. To be a good listener we must share in our patient's pain and rejoice over their good fortune. Learning to listen is learning to love.
- 2) Respect
We need to always respect our patient. When we respect our patient our listening will be healing. Sometimes we are called upon to listen to people who repel us. We can still minister effectively IF we can respect some part of our patient's life. Finding that good part to respect, sometimes is not easy.
- 3) Unconditional Love
To listen well, we have to give up our need for the patient to behave, think, or talk according to what we expect from him/her. We must love our patient with Christ's love, a love that is free of conditions. Sometimes we are not aware that our ideals influence our feelings about our patients when they do not conform to our standards of behaviour. We must forget our demand for the patient needs to conform to our ideas or standards.

4) Serenity

Good listening needs serenity or calm. Sometimes listening deeply can make us anxious or nervous. Prayer can help to calm us down and to focus on God who gives us peace. It is helpful to say a short prayer before the session. Sometimes a silent prayer during the meeting can help to maintain serenity.

Helpful Responses

Our responses have the power to help or prevent a patient from telling her story. Good active listening can be done with a few kind responses.

1) Indications of Acceptance

Our response to the patient should show acceptance of the person and what he/she is telling us. ACCEPTANCE IS NOT THE SAME AS APPROVAL. Sometimes we are afraid to show acceptance thinking it shows approval. There are some non-verbal ways to show acceptance – head nods, facial expressions and hand gestures. Verbal ways include saying, “yes,” “I see,” or “Uh-huh.”

2) Reflective Responses (or Need to Show Understanding)

This tells the patient that we have understood what he/she has been telling us. It gives him a chance to correct anything that we did not understand. We need reflective responses to let him continue his story. We can say something like, “That must be hard for you” or “ You mean that” Saying it in a different way can help to clarify the story.

3) Focusing Responses

This can be used in two ways. First it helps the patient to stay on track with his story. This is important when they change the subject to something that has nothing to do with what they were talking about. We can say, “Let me interrupt here. You were telling me” Secondly, focusing remarks can be used to call the patient back to an important point he may have rushed over.

Sometimes we need more information that the patient gives us, or we need to clarify some information. We can use direct questions for this. But we should not use them too often. We don’t want the patient to feel like he/she is being interrogated. This can discourage him/her from telling his/her story.

An indirect approach works better. You can say, "Would you tell me more about" or "I'm not sure I understand" Sometimes a direct question is the only way to get information.

4) Facilitating Responses

Sometimes a patient says something that implies important feelings, meaning or conflict. We need to acknowledge what was heard and make a response that encourages the patient to be explicit. This will give the patient permission to talk about painful or embarrassing topics.

Helps to Good Listening

Healing conversations need structure. This means arranging a plan. Conversations should take place in a determined setting over a determined period of time for a specific purpose. Do not confuse structure with formality and rigidity. It can be informal and flexible yet structured.

1) Setting

Attentive listening demands a place that is quiet, private and protected from interruptions.

2) Time

You must have a definite time for the listening. Length of time should be clearly stated. "I will visit you next Monday at 2:00 for half an hour."

3) Expectations

Expectations of the kind of help you are willing or able to give need to be clearly defined.

4) Confidentiality

This is a SACRED OBLIGATION. The information is not to be shared with anyone. The patient needs to be made aware of this.

Obstacles to Good Listening

Anxiety or Worry

This can paralyze the effectiveness of good listeners. It comes from feeling incompetent. The best remedy is experience. Silent prayer can help to calm down the listener.

Misconceptions

These are persistent thoughts that make us deaf to what the patient is saying. “I must straighten out this patient” or “I must solve this patient’s problems.” This takes away the focus from the patient to the listener. This can cause panic and worry. We need to be aware of our own feelings.

Sometimes we feel that “I should be able to answer ALL the questions raised by the patient.” You do not need to answer all questions. We simply need to be God’s ear while the patient expresses his feelings of anger or pain. The patient needs to feel that he is being heard by God through our listening. It is all right to express anger to God. Then the patient may be ready to listen to God.

The ministry of listening, the ministry of presence is hard work. It is rewarding work. Patients entrust us with their lives. We see God working in the lives of our patients. It is a way for God to reveal himself to us, more than any other way.

Four Kinds of Wounds

Sometimes we say we have a body and soul and that the soul is more important. That is just a different way of saying “my relationship with God is the most important part of my human experience.”

Humans (people) experience pain (wounds) in 4 areas of their lives: physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational.

There are two types of remedies for all wounds. Ministers of healing need to know about all the remedies that God has given us for healing. There are two types.

Natural remedies are part of God’s general plan of creation and are available to all human beings. Because we are all God’s creatures, he gives us these natural remedies: medical treatment, psychiatric care, counseling, knowledge of nutrition and exercise, listening and instruction.

Supernatural remedies are available to us because we are more than creatures of God, we are the children of God. We share God’s divine nature – that is what supernatural is.

God as a loving Father gives us a means of healing, supernatural means that include; prayer, scripture, sacramental means.

All four human hurts can be healed by either natural or supernatural remedies or a combination of the two.

1) Physical Wounds and Healing

A physical wound is damage to any part of the physical body: skin, blood, muscles, bones, organs. It is caused by injury, infection, disease, or it can be something you are born with. Physical wounds are easy to see. Most of your patients will have physical wounds.

The following true story about Father Tony helps to understand physical healing. Father Tony and Father John belonged to a prayer group. This is a group of people that meet to pray for the needs of people asking for special prayers. Father Tony was diagnosed with cancer and asked the group to pray over him. The group prayed hard for a few weeks. Nothing happened, he still had cancer.

Father Tony, Father John and another priest decided to pray for "healing memories." They thought this might help heal Father Tony's body. Many painful memories came up and were healed - these bad memories no longer upset Father Tony. He had not spoken to his brother for many years. They had a fight over their inheritance when their father died. Father Tony was still not getting better.

Father Tony was getting worse. Father John told the prayer group that they should prepare for Father Tony's death and they should help him face death. Father Tony could not get out of bed now. Father John discussed the possibility of death with him. Father Tony felt relieved to be able to talk about death openly. It was hard to avoid those thoughts. He thought about death all the time.

It is important to talk about death, especially our fear of death. Looking at the possibility of death helped Father Tony to make several decisions. He reconciled with his older brother. He phoned him and his brother came to visit him. Father Tony was helping his widowed sister who had 3 children. The children were very close to Father Tony. He was like a father to them. So Father Tony made audio tapes for the children so they would know about him and their family history.

While preparing for his death, the prayer group continued prayers for healing. Finally Father Tony said, “Stop! Don’t pray for physical healing. I no longer believe God is going to heal me.”

Father Tony felt bitter. This is quite common among people facing death. He said, “Others received healing through my prayers, why doesn’t Jesus heal me?” “He abandoned me in my pain.” He started to cry. Father John cried with him. This was a time of spiritual struggle. Why were the healing prayers not heard? The group prayed for an answer. But they only felt silence.

The next day, Father Tony was a changed person. He had a story to tell Father John. During the night, while he was in great pain, he cried out to God with bitterness. He accused God of not caring that he hurt. “Why don’t you do something for me?”

Suddenly, Father Tony had an image of himself as a small child very, very sick with kidney disease. In the image, he was in the hospital and his father was standing by his bed. A worried doctor and nurse were also there. The father was sobbing with grief. Then, in the image, his human father was replaced by God as his Father who was also sobbing with grief, feeling helpless in face of Father Tony’s suffering. At that moment, Father Tony felt God’s compassion for him. He KNEW that God had done everything He possibly could, including His Son Jesus, to heal him.

Father John now realized that healing is not simply “You just pray with faith and God heals.” There is a divine mystery in healing.

After the experience of God’s compassion – Father Tony wanted to pray more but the pain medications clouded his mind. He asked the doctors about stopping them and they told him there would be withdrawal pain and the severe cancer pain would be unbearable.

Father Tony asked the prayer group to pray that he could do without the medication. The group prayed. He was able to do without the pain medication. There was no withdrawal and very little cancer pain. Father Tony spent most of his time in prayer. He was constantly in God’s presence. He said, “This is the best time I ever had with God.”

Health and Healing

What is health? For doctors it is the lack of disease in the human body. Healing is intervention by physical, chemical or surgical methods to overcome disease.

For religious or pastoral ministry, health is wholeness, the wholeness of God. Healing is God's activity in bringing us into that wholeness. Physical healing is only a part of God's mending of the human person. Wholeness includes mending emotional, spiritual, and relational aspects (parts) of the person (patient). Wellness enables us to travel on our spiritual journey towards God's own wholeness.

2) Emotional Wounds

Emotions include feelings such as joy, fear, anxiety, anger, grief. When emotions feel pain, this can cause a harmful reaction in our bodies. Emotional wounds can be the result of deprivation and trauma. A child without displays of love, without cuddling or touching is wounded by deprivation. As he grows up, he feels worthless and cannot love freely and openly. Trauma such as grief can cause emotional wounds. Healthy emotions help us to react to life in a helpful way. When there is danger, fear alerts us and can save our life.

3) Spiritual Wounds

Spirituality includes the mind, will, and religious responses of the human person. Our spiritual part/dimension is the result of being created in God's image. God gave us a mind (the ability to know as He knows) and a will (the ability to make choices as He does).

Our spiritual dimension can be wounded or suffer pain. This happens when the mind is given wrong or distorted information, especially about spiritual things. For example, many people are taught to see God as a harsh, tyrannical monster – someone out to get them. This (misinformation) prevents us from receiving God's love or giving our love to God. How can we love God if we believe God has done a terrible thing to us?

Spiritual depravation causes spiritual woundedness. A child who is not taught the basics of religion – how to pray, who God is – is spiritually deprived and will suffer negative consequences as an adult. He/she may never get to know God.

4) Relational Wounds

From our birth to our death we depend on others for our existence. An infant is totally dependent on relationships for survival. If it were possible to have a machine to look after a baby – keep it warm, fed and clean – but have no human contact – the baby would die. Adults also need relationships with others to become the person God intends them to be.

Our relational dimension includes relationship with the environment, other people, and God. When these become distorted or destructive, we suffer. Relationships include the spiritual realm – God, angels, and demons. Each can become distorted. For example, if we try to manipulate God to do what we want by practicing certain rituals (making promises, reciting a prayer a certain number of times). We can establish destructive relationships with the world of evil spirits by seeking power through the use of occult practices. Evil Spirits can victimize us by temptation (alcohol, sex, etc.).

Interrelatedness of Human Hurts

Because we are a single unit with no separable parts, a wound in any one dimension means the ENTIRE human person is wounded in some way.

Let us return to the story of Father Tony. Father Tony received healing in all four dimensions. Physically he had freedom from pain and medication. This was significant because it freed him to grow in all areas of his life, especially his relationship with God. It was only the pain medications that he no longer needed.

Emotionally, he was able to reconstruct many childhood experiences which freed him from the patterns of response to life situations that hindered his spiritual journey. Although “healing memories” is a painful process, it needs to be addressed.

This inner healing helped him to overcome the fear of dying. It prevented the apathy which dominates seriously ill people. He refused to be mastered by pain, fear, and discouragement. This was a victory. As our spiritual wounds are healed, our distortion of God as distant and uncaring is also healed. Father Tony came to see God as a caring, compassionate parent. It opened up the way for new choices. Father Tony chose not to become a VICTIM of cancer or death. He refused to become depersonalized by his illness. He became more of a person and came to know that he was a child of God and the meaning of life. Visitors were surprised by the energy flowing from him.

It is important for us to see the patient as a person and not as the “disease.” We are dealing with a person with a specific name – not with the cancer, or the TB or the HIV.

Father Tony experienced healing in his relationships. He resisted the temptation to become alienated from God. He did not allow feelings of despair to destroy his friendship with God. As he struggled, he became closer to God.

He refused to be hidden away with his illness. He lived in his religious community and not in the hospital. He maintained his interests, stayed involved in community affairs, family, and friends. He refused to be JUST the dying patient. He understood that God had work for him even while he was sick and he did it. He reconciled with his brother and continued his relationship with his sister’s children. He showed his friends how to triumph over death and how to travel on the road to God’s wholeness.

Even when patients are ill and dying, it is important to help them maintain as full and meaningful life as is possible. This is the sort of thing we can all pray for. We are complex creatures of God. We are marvelous creatures. But so many bad things happen to us. God wants us to be well. God has given us (through Christ) many remedies to heal our ills. Healing ministry is dear to the heart of Jesus. He commissioned (sent) us out to continue his healing presence in the world. He wants us to learn by prayer, study, and experience how to better make his healing presence to be felt by all those in any sort of need.