

**Listen/Silent - On Deep Listening**  
**Sheridan WY UU Fellowship**  
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**by Susan Clinch**

Here we are again, listening to someone talk about listening. Seems circular, or meta, or something

But let's review where we've been:

There are many different types of listening. Here are a few we've talked about :

**Informational Listening:** Where is the Doctor's office?

**Comprehensive:** tone inflection expression

**Empathetic** not just understand, which is sympathetic, but to identify with and feel the emotions of the speaker

**Active** has to do with focus and often is aided by reflecting a person's thoughts back to them.

Bill gave us a good overview in the first talk of the month and last week

Laurie talked about the value of empathetic and active listening.

Different situations call for different types of listening.

**I thought I might simply talk about all the ways we can sabotage good listening.** I heard my Dad's voice and one of his favorite sayings: Everyone can serve as an example...even if it's a bad example.

I saw myself in each of the pitfalls that Bill listed:- listening in order to respond, -judging, -interrupting, I saw the wonderful Bette Jeanne , grandmother to my children, listening intently to a lively conversation and crossing her fingers. We all knew that meant she had thought of something fun to say but was too polite to interrupt. So she crossed her fingers to hold space for that thought.

But, no, sabotage is not what I really wanted to explore. What I'd like to explore is the fact that Deep Listening, the term, means something to me that's a little different from the other forms I've listed...maybe not different...maybe it's just all-encompassing. Maybe any kind of listening can be considered Deep if it has an extra element... One that edges into a mystical realm for me.

The best written definition I have found is from Thich Nhat Hanh:

“Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of the other person. We can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty their heart. And if you remember that you are helping him or her to suffer less, then even if they say things full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give that person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For

now, you don't interrupt. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring transformation and healing.”

I would add to that: Deep Listening occurs in a space where the differences, the disconnection between souls is erased. That is a space I encountered first as a child in prayer, and later recognized in psychedelic experiences. It's not a common phenomenon ...but I'll bet most of us have had at least a small brush with this experience.

So, finally, this thought brings me to the actual subject of my talk...and that is the state that makes Deep Listening possible, the skill we can practice and hone to make our perceptions sharper. And that state, that skill is **Silence**.

On the surface, it's obvious: You can't listen unless you are silent. But if you cultivate Silence, practice it, you will find you have more capacity for deep listening. Because as your ego becomes less dominant you find room in your perception for another's experience.

Silence has a place in the spiritual practice of all religions. Think of Quaker meetings, of the Great Silence of the Episcopal Church, of the Buddhist practice of Mauna, the yoga of silence.

One thing I was surprised to learn as I read about this subject is that there is no Catholic monastic order that requires a vow of silence. The monastic day has periods of silence because, as the Franciscan website says, “Contemplation cultivates inner peace and awareness, leading individuals to act with greater compassion, understanding, and justice towards others.” They believe it contributes to a more harmonious society through practices like mindfulness, reflection, and a deep connection to the present moment. These contemplative orders believe that their practice benefits the world by holding more space open for compassion.

And I think they are right

But I also think that those who practice silence, from contemplative orders to the meditation group that meets here, also receive a personal benefit. They increase their capacity for Deep Listening.

I think I was prepared to believe that the cloistered orders had vows of silence because of a teacher I encountered in my college days.

My post-Catholic-Schooling religious exploration trip took me to many wonderful places. One of those places, that had a lasting affect on my

life, was the Meher Spiritual Center in Myrtle Beach, SC. It is dedicated to the teachings of the Sufi mystic, Meher Baba. Those teachings resonated with the 19-year-old me. On that trip I saw the ocean for the first time in my life. And, also on that trip, I encountered the vast ocean of spiritual silence...an ocean I had dipped my toe into when I prayed as a child.

I could tell you way more than you want to know about Baba. But the relevant fact is that he was (and is ) known as The Silent Master. On July 10th, 1925 he told his followers that he would observe silence. It was thought that it would be for a certain period, after which he would resume teaching. But from that day until he “dropped his body” as Baba followers like to say, on January 31st, 1969 he maintained his silence. 44 years. He continued to teach and attract new students. He used an alphabet board at first, but eventually abandoned that practice and taught via hand gestures said to be “unique in expressiveness and widely understood.”

And ever since his death many of his followers annually observe a day of silence on July 10. I was one of those followers for several years.

And then, I let that practice fall away...For decades. And then, when I came to a point in my life when I felt unmoored, my daughter

recommended an app called Headspace that teaches meditation. And with Headspace I fell headlong back into that wonderful ocean and revived my relationship with Silence. I remembered that silence can be uncomfortable but, if you let that discomfort pass, the rewards are real.

When you remember a conversation as deeply impactful you don't usually remember the words, you remember the substance. The first time I interviewed a kid I was representing as a Court Appointed Special Advocate I experienced this. I can't tell you a word that she said, but I can vividly remember feeling her pain and confusion. And I remember listening in that same way for months until I gained her trust. I remember listening to my mother in the early stages of Alzheimer's when she would spout nonsense - "Oh dear have you found the refrigerator? Where is the cake?" But what I felt was her confusion and pain. Later, when she entered what my Dad called the space "between this world and the next" Mom would notice a bird or a flower or a bug and find delight in it. And I could join her in her floating blissful experience of now. I think I was able to do this because I had stretched my capacity for compassion by practicing silence.

Another cool part of my retreat at the Meher Center was the warmth and camaraderie and stories of other Baba fans. One of their favorites was a guy they called "Peter from England" who had produced a couple of

albums dedicated to Meher Baba. I've been listening to them over the last couple of weeks. Peter from England turned out to be Pete Townsend of The Who. He wrote a song called Day of Silence which describes pretty well what that day is like. I will hear him singing in my head as I recite it.

### Day of Silence

When you're feeling low try a day of silence  
Take things very slow, maybe listen to the wireless  
Watch the world go round, sit alone, say nothing.  
It's really funny how you quickly see that something  
Wonderful and warm lies between each second.  
With every silent hour eternity will beckon.  
You and me: We are part of a single soul  
And one day we will know we're one.  
Sit and listen, the word will come.  
There is nothing beneath the sun  
That we can't realize.  
And one peaceful night we'll remember it's all alright.  
And we'll figure we owe it all to our life of silence.

As someone who loves to talk, and whose personal motto is “Nothing that goes without saying should be left unsaid,” I would recommend that, if you want to increase your capacity for Deep Listening, you take a healthy dose of Silence.