



# LISTENING ACROSS SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

—*Kay Lindahl*

## INTRODUCTION

Whenever I am asked about my background and interest in listening, the first thought that comes to mind is that it is a result of a lifetime of experiences. This observation may sound trite, but as I look back over the years I see that, from childhood on, everything I have ever done has been part of my path to this focus on listening. About twenty-five years ago, I started a daily spiritual practice of silent prayer and meditation. In that silence I learned the value of making time to be still, listening to God, listening for the wisdom in silence. It deepened my connection to Spirit and my relationship with Source.

A few months after starting these meditations I found myself involved in creating an interfaith organization, the Alliance for Spiritual Community. The members of this group included people from all religious traditions. We quickly discovered that most of us had not spent much time with people outside our own traditions; we were ignorant about each others' practices and beliefs. A natural first step was to spend time together, getting to know each other and learning about our various belief systems. We did not want these conversations to turn into debates or arguments about which faith was better than the others or thinly veiled attempts at conversion. This attitude led to the development of set of guidelines for dialogue: how to listen and speak with respect in the presence of such diverse religions and spiritual traditions.

In 1997, my spiritual mentor, who was aware of my daily practice of silence and my work with dialogue, invited me to co-lead a workshop on prayer with him. As we started planning the workshop, I realized that silent prayer was listening to God and dialogue was listening to others. It then became clear to me that there was a third element – listening to self. That is when I began to practice reflection, listening to my inner voice. These three practices became the basis for my part of our workshop, and opened up a new path for me. With my mentor's nudging I began a process to discern if these practices were telling me something about what my next steps might be. It did not take long for me to realize that I was being called to focus on teaching listening as a sacred art and a spiritual practice. I followed my passion, changed careers, and started The Listening Center. My greatest joy is teaching others about listening—it is a gift and a blessing beyond anything I could have imagined.

When we can talk to each other about our fears and dreams we open up the space for hope. When we learn how to listen to ideas that conflict with our own without becoming defensive, our hearts begin to open and we start to see each other as part of one family, the human family. We connect at a deep level. When we practice the sacred art of listening, we also learn the art of conversation. It is this type of conversation that can transform our world. (Lindahl, 2009, p. 11)

## Chapter Objectives

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1. Illuminate the critical importance of listening across spiritual and religious diversity.
2. Distinguish a context for listening as a sacred art and a spiritual practice.
3. Understand the importance of preparation and practice.
4. Provide tools for listening across religious and spiritual diversity.

## Key Terms

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- Global citizen
- Interfaith movement
- Sacred art of listening
- Listening presence
- Listening as a spiritual practice
- Contemplative listening
- Reflective listening
- Heart listening

## LISTENING AS GLOBAL CITIZENS

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### GLOBAL CITIZEN:

people who understand that we are all connected—and who realize that this leads to global interdependence

We live in a time when knowledge of world events is available instantly and constantly. We have become *global citizens*, people who understand that we are all connected—and who realize that this leads to global interdependence. What happens in one part of the world impacts all of us. We wonder if we as individuals can make a difference in the face of so many challenges. It is hard to see beyond the latest headlines and the potential flash points for further violence. One of the best ways to counteract these feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness is through conversation and collective reflection. Even though our lives are extraordinarily busy, we often feel isolated and alone. Something's missing. There is an unspoken yearning for community, for being with others, for feeling that our lives matter. We are hungry to tell our stories in authentic conversations, only we have forgotten how to begin. There are so many platforms for these conversations now: Skype, Facebook, Twitter, blogs. The opportunity for global listening has never been greater. The simple yet profound act of listening to each other opens the door to connection, understanding, and transformation across all our diversity. The concepts and practices in this chapter offer a starting point for creating this global community. Ten Tips for Powerful Listening is a simple resource to remind

us of the many ways we can prepare to listen. It incorporates all of the practices discussed above and offers additional tips for including the spiritual discipline of listening in your life.

## UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

It is challenging for me to isolate listening across spiritual and religious diversity from listening across all aspects of life. My introduction to the value and importance of listening came through my own practice of meditation and my experience in the *interfaith movement*. From my perspective, deep listening is the bedrock for every type of listening.

*The art of listening is foundational for all the other tools and techniques for effective listening. I use the words sacred, spiritual, God, Spirit, Divine, as they are what I call the mystery of life. You do not have to be religious or spiritual to access these teachings. Substitute a word or words that work for you as you are reading. The lessons are universal.*

**OBSERVE AND REFLECT:** Have you ever thought about listening in a spiritual or religious context? Would you consider yourself a spiritual and/or religious person? What is the difference between being spiritual and being religious?

An introduction to the interfaith movement is necessary for understanding the importance of listening across spiritual and religious diversity. An early part of this story occurred in Italy during the thirteenth century when St. Francis of Assisi objected to the crusades and decided to travel to Egypt where he met with Muslims for in-person dialogue, a practice the Franciscans continue to this day. Another early manifestation of the interfaith movement happened in fifteenth century Spain when Muslims, Christians, and Jews met together regularly to study each other's scriptures and work for the good of the whole community.

The next two or three centuries were a time of exploration and colonization in many parts of the world. When the early settlers arrived in what is now the United States, they had a commitment to the concept of religious freedom, which, as it turned out, also included religious diversity. In addition to many protestant Christian denominations, the colonists were Roman Catholic, Quaker, Sephardic Jew, and Dutch Reform. Many of the Africans in the slave trade were Muslim. Workers who built the transcontinental railroad and those who worked the gold rush were from China and Japan and came with their beliefs in Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Russians practiced Orthodox Christianity. The United States continued to evolve in this manner until now it may be the most religiously diverse nation on earth. One way we have learned how to listen to each other across this diversity is through the interfaith movement.

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**INTERFAITH MOVEMENT:** began in 1893 with the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago; was the first time that representatives from Eastern religions were publicly recognized

The modern interfaith movement began in 1893 with the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. It was the first time that representatives from Eastern religions were publicly recognized and given the opportunity to present and speak from the podium in the front of the room. The possibility of interfaith dialogue was introduced and it became clear that it was important to listen and speak to those from traditions other than one's own.

The movement developed slowly over the next seventy or so years, until the decade beginning in the late fifties, when several change-making events happened:

- The exile of the Dalai Lama created an interest in studying Tibetan Buddhism.
- The election of John F. Kennedy as the first Roman Catholic President of the United States opened a new conversation on the role of religion in public life.
- The engagement of religious leaders of all faiths in the Civil Rights Movement.
- The advent of the Beatles popularized the study of Hinduism and meditation.
- The passage by the U.S. Congress of the Immigration Act of 1965.

Prior to 1965, about 80% of immigrants to the United States came from Europe, and 20% from the rest of the world. This Act reversed those numbers. Many of the new immigrants were from Asia, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. When they arrived here, they brought their religious beliefs with them. So all of a sudden there were larger numbers of Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Baha'is in communities all across the continent.

In 1993 a second Parliament of the World's Religions was held again in Chicago. Over 8,000 people from all over the world and hundreds of faith traditions and spiritual practices attended. Theologian Hans Küng electrified the gathering with his statement: "There'll be no peace among nations until there's peace among religions. There'll be no peace among religions until there is dialogue among religions" (Küng, 1991, p. 138). The power of his words inspired the creation of hundreds of interfaith groups around the world. There was a hunger and a curiosity to know more about each other.

*When we look at interfaith in the twenty-first century we realize that religious diversity is a reality that is here to stay. It is a resource, not a problem.*

The interfaith movement is coming of age. The energy and interest in our work is high. We, as people of spirit and faith, must learn how to talk to each other and interfaith offers that opportunity. We must also take action together—building habitat houses; sponsoring soup kitchens; hosting shelters; dealing with problems in our communities, such as domestic violence, human trafficking, poverty, and alcohol and drug abuse—as interfaith. The story of the interfaith movement is still unfolding. We are all part of the web of interfaith in action around the globe. We have sisters and brothers all over the world. We are connected globally as we act locally (Lindahl, 2006).

**OBSERVE AND REFLECT:** What is your experience with people with different faiths or belief systems from your own? How can religious diversity be a resource rather than a threat?

## LISTENING AS A SACRED ART

Listening and speaking are the major components of communication with speaking often thought of as more important. However, once one delves deeper into the impact of communication, it becomes clear that listening has the more powerful role. The quality of your listening can make a profound difference in any conversation. As Quaker author Douglas Steere puts it: “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” (1986, p. 83).

As you open up to listening as a sacred art and a spiritual practice, you will find it transforms all of your relationships, nurtures your inner voice, and inspires your spiritual growth. Listening is a critical skill to learn if the goal is to live together in peace and harmony. You can begin to understand listening in this way by examining the concepts of listening as an art, a choice, and a gift. Understanding these distinctions provides a context for the practices of silence, reflection, and presence.

What is the *sacred art of listening*? It is the art of becoming a *listening presence*, a way of being in which stillness and attentiveness provide the space for people to speak authentically and know they are being heard. It is from this place that we can listen across diverse backgrounds, cultures, religions, and belief systems. It is about being a presence for understanding rather than for judging. When you are open, curious, and attentive to others in this way you discover a deeper, sacred connection; you are in relationship with others. When you understand the sacred aspect of listening you become aware that it is a key to communication in your global community.

What are you looking for when you want to be listened to? What is this universal yearning? Think about a time when someone was truly listening to you—not figuring out what to say next, wishing you would hurry up, or mentally reviewing a “to do” list. They were simply there, listening. What was that like? How did you feel? Words like understood, refreshed, whole, connected, healed, validated, nurtured, and cared for are common responses. It is a profound experience. Both the listener and the speaker expand their sense of connection and closeness. When two people are deeply listening to one another we sense that not only are we present to each other, we are present to something beyond our individual selves, some might call it spiritual, holy, or sacred. It’s as though time stands still and we are simply in the experience. We are being a listening presence able to offer the gift of our listening



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### SACRED ART OF

**LISTENING:** the art of becoming a listening presence, a way of being in which stillness and attentiveness provide the space for people to speak authentically and know they are being heard

### LISTENING PRES-

**ENCE:** a way of being in which stillness and attentiveness provide the space for people to speak authentically and know they are being heard



with full attention. Martin Buber, a well-known philosopher of the philosophy of dialogue, talks about it this way: “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them” (1970, p. 20). I think this is what we are longing for when we say we want others to listen to us.

**OBSERVE AND REFLECT:** Consider the author’s question: What are you looking for when you want to be listened to? What is this universal yearning? Think about a time when someone was truly listening to you—not figuring out what to say next, wishing you would hurry up, or mentally reviewing a “to do” list. They were simply there, listening. What was that like? How did you feel?

*Listening is more than hearing words, and more than an act;  
it is an art, a way of being, an at-oneness. You are at one  
with the other in these moments.*

Thinking about listening as an art changes our perception of what it means to listen. Rather than thinking of listening as an act, something you do, think of it as an art, something that you are, a way of being. You become a listening presence, holding an open, safe space for others to express themselves. Listening is also a choice. You choose whether or not to listen, often completely unaware that you are making a choice. You have probably had the experience of listening to someone and suddenly noticing that you could not remember a word the speaker had said for at least a minute or more. Your attention had wandered somewhere else. You had unconsciously chosen not to listen. Sometimes you consciously choose not to listen. Sometimes you choose not to listen because you are uncomfortable or not interested in the topic. Sometimes you choose not to listen because you know doing so might change the way you think about something and you are not yet willing or ready to do that. Sometimes you choose not to listen because your own life is so overwhelming at a given moment that you truly cannot listen to someone else. You simply are not able to handle any additional input.

Learning that you have a choice to listen or not to listen is a valuable insight. There is power connected to the realization that it is okay to make the choice, either way. It is fine to let people know when you are not able to listen to them. Most people would rather have you listen to them authentically and with your full attention than be the recipient of partial listening. Some have identified this as a syndrome of modern life called continuous partial attention (CPA). People with CPA are continuously paying partial attention to everything and not paying full attention to anything. When this happens in a listening situation, neither the listener nor the speaker feels satisfied.

Finally, listening to another with rapt attention is a gift beyond measure. Remember what it feels like when someone is fully listening to you. It is often a transformative experience. Both the listener and the speaker open their hearts to deeper connection and closeness. You may have had the experience of people thanking you for helping them at a particular point in their lives and then realized that what you did was give them the gift of listening by becoming a listening presence for

them. Once you think about listening as a gift that you are either giving or receiving, it becomes easier to slow down and savor the conversation, either by opening up to receive the gift or by extending the hospitality of giving the gift. You may find it takes time and patience to feel comfortable with this slower pace rather than rushing through conversations, but the dividends are well worth it as you learn to listen to others at a deeper level.

Listening is half of all communication. It is often the forgotten part of conversations and presentations. Understanding that listening is an art, a choice, and a gift changes our perception and allows you to value consciously the time we spend in conversation and listening to presentations. You now have a frame within which to develop your skills and begin to understand *listening as a spiritual practice*, which is especially important when you are listening across spiritual and religious diversity.

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#### LISTENING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

preparing to listen; to become a listening presence

## LISTENING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

There's a Cuban proverb that says: "Listening looks easy, but it's not simple. Every head is a world." I have come to understand this statement over these past few years as I have noticed that the focus of my work is teaching people how to prepare to listen—to become a listening presence. Most of us have learned how to prepare to give a speech or make a presentation, the steps we need to take to get ready. There are classes in public speaking available in almost every community. We know where to go to learn how to refine and develop presentation skills. You may have never thought about what it might mean to prepare to listen—to become a true listening presence.

I believe that to become a listening presence you need to prepare—not only to listen to others but also to listen to yourself and to God, Spirit, Divine Presence.

*Just as you take time to write, practice and polish a speech, you need to take time to prepare to listen. One of the keys to developing a greater capacity to listen is to practice listening deeply on a daily basis.*

Most of us know that if we want to excel at any skill we need to practice. Think of all the time musicians, dancers, and athletes spend practicing or training. Dancers refer to the outcome as muscle memory. Daily practice anchors the movements in the muscles, so that when it is time for a performance, the dancer no longer has to think about each individual move; rather, the muscles remember what to do, muscle memory, and dancer is in the moment, a dancing presence. We can develop similar memory for listening. Then, when you need to listen deeply, you will be able to receive what the other is saying with total openness, even if you hold an opposing point of view. Becoming a listening presence is critical to learning how to understand another person and a different point of view. Three practices essential to the spiritual discipline of listening are: cultivating silence, slowing down to reflect, and becoming present.

**OBSERVE AND REFLECT:** As you read about cultivating silence, slowing down to reflect, and becoming present, think about how you can practice these skills on a daily basis. How do you think practicing these skills will improve your listening skills and your relationships?

## Cultivating Silence: Contemplative Listening

**CONTEMPLATIVE LISTENING:** taking time to be quiet and simply be, to listen to the silence, and to listen beyond words

There is no listening without silence. Taking time to be quiet and simply be, to listen to the silence, and to listen beyond words are all elements of *contemplative listening*. Contemplative listening is about listening to God and exploring your relationship to Source. It takes time to slow down and listen, but the value of contemplative listening is similar to that of a section of farmland that a farmer allows to lie fallow for a year—plowing but not planting the land—to rest the soil, so by the next year it will be renewed, refreshed, and filled with more nutrients for a more successful planting. The silence and stillness nurtures your innermost being, allowing you to be more present when you listen to others. In the same way that rest renews the soil, silence renews the soul. When you are at ease with silence you have more space around you to listen to opinions that differ from your own.

What can we do to cultivate silence and listen for that wisdom? First of all, notice how much noise and external distractions are in your life. This awareness can inform you of ways to incorporate silence. It is only out of the silence that we can

truly listen to someone else. Quieting the mind is essential to good listening. Practice being still. Begin with one minute a day when you are intentionally silent. Listen. Notice what you hear. After a few days you may find that you wish to increase the amount of time you spend in silence. Becoming comfortable with silence will transform your capacity to listen to others. It also makes it possible to listen to God, Spirit, Presence. Only in silence can God's word reach the hidden corners of your heart.



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## Slowing Down to Reflect: Reflective Listening

**REFLECTIVE LISTENING:** listening to your True Self and getting to know the voice of your soul

Once you have become comfortable with silence, you can begin to practice reflective listening. *Reflective listening* is about listening to your True Self and getting to know the voice of your soul. Once you learn to know and trust this voice, you will find yourself better able to discern when you should speak and when you should listen. The Quakers have a saying: “It’s a sin to speak when you’re not moved to speak. It’s also a sin not to speak when you’re moved to speak.” There’s a Sufi saying that also relates to this aspect of reflective listening. Before speaking ask yourself these questions: “Are these words true? Are these words necessary? Are these words kind?” It is only when the answer to all three is yes that speech is as good as silence.



One way to get to know your inner voice is to practice listening for questions, which is counter to how many people listen, which is to listen for an answer to a question they have or to determine whether they agree or disagree with the speaker. We listen to the conversation in our own heads, rather than paying attention to the speaker. Another practice is to wait a few moments before responding to a situation, question, or comment. Ask yourself what wants to be said next—not, what do I want to say (from the ego) but what wants to be said (from the soul)—and what wants to be done next. Wait for your inner voice to respond to these questions. Listen for your true wisdom to reveal itself. This practice entails slowing down and being patient instead of saying the first thing that comes to mind or giving a quick answer so you can move on to the next thing. It may take a few moments to access your inner voice, and you may find yourself surprised by what you say, but it will be the perfect response for that moment.

In our culture, we have been taught to come up with instant answers. A friend of mine who is a teacher told me about a research project that measured the amount of time that lapsed between a classroom teacher asking a question and calling upon a student for a response. It was one second or less. The researchers then asked the teachers wait at least seven seconds before calling on someone. What they discovered was that the children who hardly ever raised their hands began to do so. With that extra amount of time, they found that they did have something to say. The response from the children whose hands are normally raised before the teacher has finished asking the question also changed. It was more thoughtful and on topic. With the additional six seconds, they had time to reflect, to think about what they were going to say, to probe deeper than the first thought that came to mind. We can be trained to reflect before we speak. (Lindahl, 2009, p. 31)

### Becoming Present: Heart Listening

While contemplative listening and reflective listening are practices that help in any situation, *heart listening* is a type of listening that will help you listen with spiritual and religious diversity. One way to think about this type of listening is that it occurs at the heart level. It is present when you feel most connected to another person or to a group of people. When your heart expands, your capacity to communicate with and listen to those of differing beliefs and traditions increases. Heart listening leads to the offering and creating of space where change can take place.

Being fully present with one another is one of the greatest gifts we have to give. It requires our complete attention. We need to develop a mindset of appreciation, curiosity, and wonder for each other. We can't be thinking about what we are going to say in response or assume we know a better answer. This internal distraction—the noise and chatter in our heads—keep us from being fully present. What can we do to decrease their impact? In a book called *The Zen of Listening*, author Rebecca Shafir recommends the practice of a mindful minute each day.

You practice the mindful minute while you are doing a mundane task that you do routinely without too much thought—preparing breakfast, doing the laundry, taking a shower. Instead of just letting your mind wander, you spend one minute focusing on what you are doing and being present for each second. For example, imagine that I am having my morning coffee. First I get out my mug and place it on the counter. Then I pick up the pot of coffee and begin to pour coffee into the mug. While I am doing this, I notice the dark color of the liquid and the smell as it fills the mug. As I bring it to my mouth I notice the weight of the mug in my hand. As I take the first sip I notice the sharp taste of the hot liquid, the how satisfying it feels as it slides down my throat. I stay in the present tense the whole time.



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**HEART LISTENING:**  
occurs at the heart level;  
helps you listen with  
spiritual and religious  
diversity

## Dialogue

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While listening across spiritual and religious diversity requires the three qualities of the sacred art of listening that I have already explained—silence, reflective listening, and heart listening—it also requires another practice which encompasses all those qualities: the art of dialogue. At this point it is important to understand what I mean by the word dialogue. In general terms, the word dialogue is often used to describe a conversation in which two or more people are talking, without any regard for the listening component or the quality of the interaction, but from my perspective it means so much more than that. David Bohm was a quantum physicist who became interested in the way humans learn and think, particularly collectively. He describes the distinction between dialogue and discussion in his book *On Dialogue*. Paraphrasing his work, he writes that dialogue is from the Greek: *dia* (through) and *logos* (meaning or word) (Bohm, 1996). By this understanding, When we are in a dialogue there is a flow of meaning that leads to new understanding, new ways of thinking and emerging ideas. Dialogue, then, is an exploration—wanting to know.

Distinguishing between discussion and dialogue, Bohm (1996) reminds readers that discussion is from the Latin: *dis* (apart) and *quatare* (to shake); it literally means to shake things up. In other words, a discussion is an important conversation when decisions need to be made. Analysis, results, looking for an answer are key outcomes for a discussion. Dialogue is not better than discussion—both are valid means of communicating—but effective listeners and communicators understand the difference and recognize which one is happening at a given time. If one party in a situation wants a discussion—to look for an action plan—and the other party wants a dialogue—an exploration of ideas and options—then those two parties may have a difficult time listening to each other. Most of the time, we dance back and forth between discussion and dialogue.

The distinction between discussion and dialogue is important for effective listening across religious diversity because religion and spirituality are often non-discussable—that is, non-negotiable—but engaging in the dialogue process rather than a discussion provides a safe space for people of different faiths to explore their differences and common ground without feeling like they are being asked to change their beliefs. Such a process requires guidelines, which most interfaith organizations have developed (see Appendix I). In addition, interfaith organizations have determined that dialogue is better facilitated when the parties sit in circles rather than in rows or at tables because a circular seating arrangement provides an egalitarian environment in which everyone can be seen and there are no leaders (see Appendix II).

## TEN TIPS FOR POWERFUL LISTENING

1. Stop talking. One person speaks at a time.

This seems so obvious and yet most of us find that one of the most irritating experiences in conversation is that of being interrupted. It has been said that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason; we should listen twice as much as we speak. Interrupting is a habit that has become acceptable behavior in many situations. If we want to contribute to the conversation the only way to do so is to interrupt. However, if we really want to listen, we cannot interrupt. It is not possible to talk and listen at the same time.

2. Pause before speaking. Allow time for the speaker to finish his or her thoughts.

Take a deep breath before responding, or wait 3 –5 seconds, or ask, “Is there anything else?” and wait, as a listening presence. Most people will have more to say. We are so used to be cut off that we forget what it’s like to complete our thoughts. Learn to become comfortable with more silence in your conversations. Your silence offers time and space for others to give birth to their thoughts. You are there in a way that is similar to that of a midwife—only you are midwifing another’s thinking. You are watchful, waiting and present, wondering what will be born in this conversation.

3. Listen to yourself. Be in touch with your inner voice.

Ask yourself, “What wants to be said next?” Reflect before you speak. Asking the question opens a path to your inner wisdom by reminding you to respond from a deeper level of being. As you get to know your inner voice you will be able to discern when it’s time to speak and when it’s time to listen, a valuable concept in global listening.

4. Listen for understanding.

You do not have to agree with what you hear, or believe it, to listen to understand another person. We are trained to defend, refute, to agree or disagree, to like or not like what is being said. Knowing that receiving what someone is saying does not mean that you believe it or agree with it is powerful, especially in situations that are polarized or very emotional. Try to find value in what the person is saying, imagine what they are feeling, get a sense of the importance of this topic to them. It is a key to listening across spiritual and religious diversity, to avoid any tendency to convert or proselytize others. Notice what it’s like to stay present when you disagree with what someone else is saying.

5. Ask for clarification.

If you don’t understand what someone is saying, ask. This not only shows you that you care, it also shows that you are interested in them and what they have to say. A clarifying question asks for more information or indicates that you really want to know what they are saying. Be careful about questions that begin with “Don’t you think that . . . ?” Whatever follows “that” is often the agenda of the questioner, rather than a genuine desire to get more clarity on what’s already been said. It’s like trying to put words into someone’s mouth. It’s what you think, not what they think. Notice how often this happens in daily life.

6. Let the speaker know that you have heard them.

Use body language: nodding, expression, eye contact. It’s also important to use phrases such as: “Tell me more,” “Help me to understand,” “How interesting!” “What was that like for you?” “What leads you to that belief?” “What is the heart of the matter for you?” or even a simple “Yes” “Aha” “Hmm” will do. Watch out for the tendency to say: “That reminds me of,” which shifts the focus to you; “Yes, but,” which is a subtle way to deny what the speaker has just said; “You must . . .” or “You have to,” which is giving advice not asked for. Note that eye contact is not a positive behavior in all cultures and can be a sign of disrespect. If you are not sure about the appropriate body language in their culture ask the person to tell you or show you what to do or how to be so they will know you are listening.

7. Be patient and present.

Listening well takes time and your presence. We speak at 150–200 words per minute and we can process what we hear at 300–500 words per minute. So it's not surprising that our minds wander. The daily practice of mindfulness enhances your capacity to be present and stay with the speaker's pace. There's a story about a company which has the following policy when the phones ring. At the first ring, the person stops what they are doing, detaches from it. On the second ring, the person takes a deep breath and gets centered. Then on the third ring, they pick up the phone and are fully present with the caller—simple, yet not a common practice in our culture. Notice what happens when you slow down to listen.

8. Listen with an open mind.

Be curious, appreciative, wondering. Listen for new ideas. Let go of judging and evaluating. Listen with your heart. Do not be rehearsing your response. It is so tempting to start preparing what you are going to say when the person finishes talking. If you are listening intently, there is no time to have that internal conversation. It helps to know and own your hot buttons, your emotional triggers, so they don't close your mind to listening. By acknowledging what is likely to pull you off into your own opinions and feelings you can recognize them when they appear without letting them take over your capacity to listen to different points of view.

9. Pay attention to the environment. Stop what you are doing to listen.

Turn off background noise, when possible. Stop looking at your e-mail and texts. Move to a quieter corner of the room. Clear your desk. Our surroundings really do make a difference. When I receive a phone call that requires me to listen intently, I move away from my desk. It is too distracting to sit with all the projects I am working on or tempting to scan my e-mail. Sometimes I even close my eyes to avoid visual distraction. Find a way to create a listening environment in your life.

10. Listen with empathy and compassion.

Let go of your agenda for the moment. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Remember that each person has a story to tell. Your job is to listen to it. Open your heart to be a listening presence for others. We have no idea what is going on in others' lives until we listen to them. Sometimes with people I find particularly difficult to listen to, I imagine them as a child. When I visualize this vulnerable child, it helps me to focus on what they are saying with a clearer heart. See Appendix III for a summary of these tips

## SOME DAILY PRACTICES TO ENHANCE YOUR LISTENING AS A GLOBAL CITIZEN

Notice what happens when you:

- Choose to listen and when you choose not to listen.
- Experience the art of listening—being a listening presence with another.
- Start to interrupt someone and what happens when you don't.
- Give the gift of listening to someone else and what it's like to receive it.
- Ask “Is there anything else?” when someone stops speaking.
- Let go of your agenda to be present with another.

The simplicity of these practices is deceptive. It requires commitment and desire to become a better listener. Be prepared for transformative experiences as the organic, non-linear quality of these practices—being at ease with silence, sensing of the voice of our soul, and being fully present—become a seamless dance and a conduit for harmony and love.

## SUMMARY

The importance of the interfaith movement to the question of listening across religious and spiritual diversity is clear from the opening story. The history of its growth in the United States is important to understand how religious diversity has always been a part of our daily life here. Attendance at the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions in Salt Lake City included over 10,000 people from over 75 countries and 30 major religions (Parliament, 2016). Over and over again attendees reported that the best part of this gathering was being able to meet and talk with people from traditions other than their own. Once we learn how to listen to each other from this deep level it transforms how we listen to everything; we are prepared to be global citizens.

One of the key aspects of listening is that it is an art—it is being at one with another, fully present, with open heart and open mind. In the practices of silence, reflection, and presence we absorb the qualities that become the ground for all our listening. It is through regular practice that we find it natural to become a listening presence, able to offer the gift of our listening with full attention. When we get in touch with the deep center of our own lives we find that it enhances every part of our lives—and we embody listening as a sacred art and a spiritual practice.

## QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

1. Silence is one of the fundamental qualities of listening. What is your personal response to silence? What makes you comfortable or uncomfortable with silence?
2. Reflective listening is about getting in touch with your inner voice. Describe a time when you experienced your own wisdom. What did you learn about yourself?
3. Being in the present moment is another key quality of listening. Tell us about a time when you were totally in the moment with another person. What was that like for you?
4. How do you listen to someone you disagree with in a respectful manner? What can you do to prepare yourself for these more difficult conversations?
5. What person, group of people, or situation would you like to impact with the quality of your listening? We often wonder what we can say that will make a difference to someone else. This is an opportunity to think about how we can listen that would make a difference.



## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Interfaith organizations are part of almost every community, many on college and university campuses. Contact an interfaith, interreligious, or multi-faith organization in your community. Attend one of their meetings or an event that they sponsor. What surprised you?
2. Spend time in silence each day. Journal what you notice, not only in the moment, but throughout the day.
3. Much research has been done on local, regional, national, and international interfaith organizations. Choose one or more of the following major interfaith organizations and write a summary of the highlights of their work:  
United Religions Initiative, URI, [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)  
Parliament of the World's Religions, PWR [www.parliamentofreligions.org](http://www.parliamentofreligions.org)  
North American Interfaith Network, NAIN, [www.nain.org](http://www.nain.org)  
The Pluralism Project, [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)  
Interfaith Youth Core, [www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org)  
State of Formation, [www.stateofformation.org](http://www.stateofformation.org)  
The Interfaith Observer, TIO, [www.theinterfaithobserver.org](http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org)
4. Convene a circle or host a dialogue using the guidelines in the Appendices. What insights did you have? What did you learn about the process?

## APPENDIX I

### Dialogue Guidelines and Principles

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#### ***Opening***

Arrange seating in a circle, without tables or desks. This creates an open space and promotes listening. Begin with one to five minutes of silence. This provides a transition from the busy schedule of daily living to an opening for reflection and listening. Go around the circle to check in with each other. What brought you here? What do you need to say to be present?

## ***Principles***

Begin each gathering by reading and/or talking about the principles. This serves as a way to incorporate newcomers and to remind everyone of their agreement to use these principles.

1. When you are listening, suspend assumptions. What we assume is often invisible to us. We assume that others have had the same experiences that we have so we listen thinking we already know. Learn to recognize assumptions by noticing when you get surprised, upset, or annoyed by something someone else is saying. You may be making an assumption. Let it be—suspend it—and resume listening for understanding of the other.
2. When you are speaking, express your personal response, informed by your traditions, beliefs, and practices. Speak for yourself. Use “I” language. Own what you say. Speak from your heart. Notice how often the phrases “we all,” “of course,” “everyone says,” and “you know” come into your conversation. The only person you can truly speak for is yourself.
3. Listen and speak without judgment. The purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding of the other, not to determine whether they are good, bad, right, or wrong. If you are thinking “that’s good,” “that’s bad,” “I like that,” “I don’t like that”—you are having a conversation in your own mind, not listening to the speaker. Simply notice when you do this and return to listening to the speaker.
4. Suspend status. Everyone is an equal partner in the inquiry. There is no seniority or hierarchy. All are colleagues with a mutual quest for insight and clarity. You are each an expert in your own life, and that’s what you bring to the dialogue process.
5. Honor confidentiality. Create a safe space for self-expression. Hold stories and personal experiences in confidentiality, not to be shared without permission.
6. Listen for understanding, not to agree with or believe. You do not have to agree with or believe anything that is said. Your task is to listen for understanding and new ideas and ways to think about something.
7. Ask clarifying or open-ended questions to assist your understanding and to explore assumptions. Watch out for questions with your own agenda embedded in them.
8. Honor silence and time for reflection. Notice what wants to be said rather than what you want to say. Allow time to take in what’s been said.
9. Pay attention to the flow of the conversation. One person speaks at a time. Notice what patterns emerge from the group. Be aware of each other and make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak, knowing that no one is required to speak.

## ***Closing***

Invite each participant to share one idea, insight, or learning they had from the dialogue.

<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>DIALOGUE</b>
<b>DIS</b> = <i>APART</i> , <b>QUATERE</b> = <i>SHAKE</i> A CONVERSATION TO ANALYZE, FIND AN ANSWER, LOOK FOR RESULTS	<b>DIA</b> = <i>THROUGH</i> , <b>LOGOS</b> = <i>MEANING</i> A CONVERSATION TO OPEN UP UNDERSTANDING, A FLOW OF MEANING, AN INQUIRY
ANALYSIS	INQUIRY
CONVINCE	EXPLORE
RIGHT/WRONG	DIFFERENT
FIX	UNDERSTAND
EITHER/OR	BOTH/AND
CLING TO IDEAS	NEW THOUGHTS
WIN/LOSE	WIN/WIN
COMPETITION	COLLABORATION
RESULTS	OPEN ENDED
DEBATE	LEARN

## APPENDIX II

### Circle Principles

Sitting in circles is rooted in ancient tradition. Circles have been a common form for discussing issues of importance to the community throughout the ages and we are rediscovering their value again in our time. Circles provide support, generate mutual understanding, strengthen relationships, and create spaces for healing and transformation. Circles are egalitarian—all voices are heard equally. There is no front of the room or head table. They convey a sense of connectedness—we can see each other. The center becomes a focal point—a sacred space.

### ***Setting***

Arrange seating in a circle, without tables or desks. In the center, on a small table or on the floor, you might want to create a focal point by using a beautiful scarf, a candle, or some flowers, as a reminder of the sacred nature of the center.

### ***Opening***

Mark the beginning of your time together in circle with a brief ceremony. It is a way of including everyone into the gathering, and reminds us of our interconnections. It helps us to create the safe space for our conversation. Welcome people

into the circle; follow with a ritual such as lighting a candle, a few minutes of silence, or the reading of a poem or short inspirational quote. An optional ritual is to mark the rim of the circle by walking around the outside of the circle and inviting those still seated to welcome, greet, and appreciate each person with a silent gaze.

### ***Connecting***

Each voice is important in the circle, and adds to the whole. The next step is to invite everyone to introduce themselves—briefly—just saying their name, where they live, and a short-form version (about 30–45 seconds) about why they chose to attend this circle, or something happening in their lives, or what they are feeling now. Once each voice is heard, the sense of community deepens, and you have created a space for deep listening.

### ***Circle guidelines***

To ensure that everyone is on the same page it is useful to share some guidelines for circle conversations. Review them each time you gather.

- Listen and speak with respect, compassion, curiosity.
- One person speaks at a time, without interruption or comments.
- Speak for yourself and from your own experience.
- Hold stories or personal material in confidentiality.
- Be willing to discover and explore; look for something new.

Some groups use a talking piece to help focus attention on one speaker at a time—a seashell, stick, stone, or any small object. The person holding the talking piece is the only one who can speak. It can be passed around the circle or placed in the center of the circle, and the next person who wants to speak picks it up from there.

Most groups begin with a question or a topic to focus the sharing. State the question or topic and ask who would like to begin; give the talking piece to them. People may be quiet or uncertain. There may be times of silence. This is normal though it does sometimes make people uncomfortable at first. Silence honors what's been said and creates space for deeper thinking. Inform everyone when you are five minutes from the end time and invite anyone who has not yet spoken if they would like to add something. At least one person will usually respond.

### ***Closing***

To complete the circle, invite everyone to think of one or two words which express an insight or feeling they had during the circle time. Go around the circle. It is now complete.

## APPENDIX III

### Ten Tips for Powerful Listening

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1. Stop talking. One person speaks at a time.

One of the most irritating listening habits is that of interrupting.

2. Pause before speaking. Allow time for the speaker to finish their thoughts.

Wait a few seconds before responding. Ask them if there anything else. Wait.

3. Listen to yourself. Be in touch with your inner voice.

Ask, “What wants to be said next?”

4. Listen for understanding.

You do not have to agree with or believe what you hear, in order to listen to understand it.

5. Ask for clarification.

If you do not understand what someone is saying, just ask.

6. Let the speaker know that you have heard them.

Body language: nodding, facial expressions.

7. Be patient and present.

Listening well takes time and your presence.

8. Listen with an open mind. Be curious and appreciative.

Listen for new ideas instead of judging and evaluating.

9. Pay attention to the environment. Stop what you are doing to listen.

Turn off background noise when possible; move to a quieter place.

10. Listen with empathy and compassion.

Put your agenda aside for the moment. Put yourself in their place.

### Daily Practices

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Notice what happens when you:

- Choose to listen and when you choose not to listen.
- Experience the art of listening—being a listening presence with another.
- Start to interrupt someone and what happens when you don’t.
- Give the gift of listening to someone else and what it’s like to receive it.
- Ask, “Is there anything else?” when someone stops speaking.
- Let go of your agenda to be present with another.



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