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Editorial

LISTENING FROM WITHIN THE HEART

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In a world that is mainly characterized by doing, by results and measurable accomplishments, and by doing more and more in a shorter period of time, 'Being' remains a largely foreign notion. Often we will hear people talk about "doing nothing," which may include watching television or surfing the net, according to their definition. Is that truly doing nothing and is that equal to being?

The true "doing nothing" actually denotes a rather active state of consciousness, the sense of BEING, of experiencing, of a sense of keen awareness. When we reawaken to and remember Being, we begin to enter the process of building meaningful relationships and community, and thereby allow Being to open new pathways and doors for relating to the world around us. Cultivating the Art of Being allows us as human beings to interact from a place of grace, compassion, and love with not just ourselves and our fellow human beings but with our entire surroundings on this precious planet Earth – with animals, plants, water, rocks and even our manufactured products. Practicing the Art of Being is therefore deeply rewarding.

For now, let us examine only one aspect of this complex, yet also paradoxically simple and conscious art, namely 'Deep Listening' or 'Listening from within the Heart.' Being occurs inside a sacred space that appears invisible to the physical eyes, yet is strongly felt by all who enter it, consciously or unconsciously, and is therefore clearly visible on an energetic level. Perhaps only a few individuals may identify it as a 'sacred space' but almost all identify it as safe and comfortable; a place where they feel encouraged, and sometimes even feel an inner compulsion to open up and share. I have personally encountered that many times when strangers open up to me and tell me personal stories, only to end the conversation with the statement, "I don't know why I'm telling you this since I don't even know you." If you have ever heard a similar comment, you probably created and entered this sacred space with another person at that time.

You may ask, "How can I create this sacred space consciously?" Intentionally practicing and living the Art of Being will certainly get you there. Listening Deeply or Listening from within the Heart is one of the key elements of this art. This requires complete presence, something that most of us usually are not taught to do.

Let's start by examining what listening is and return to the subject of being present later. First, did you know that we spend between 40% and 50% of our time listening, and yet most of us have absolutely no training in this field? We get taught how to read and write but not how to listen. We tell our children to listen but we never explain how to do this, and most of us do not fully understand what this

actually entails. In addition, we often accuse our friends, partners and colleagues of not listening. But do we really know what listening means?

Stephen R. Covey (2004, p. 192-96) describes the “listening continuum” which may serve as a useful concept in this discussion:

- Ignoring
- Pretend listening (patronizing)
- Selective Listening
- Attentive Listening
- Empathetic Listening

The first four categories apply when we, the listeners, remain within our own frame of reference during the listening experience. The fifth one occurs when we are able to shift out of our own frame of reference and enter into the speaker’s frame of reference. Covey chooses the term ‘empathetic listening’ because he wants us to get beyond semantics and perception, beyond cognitive interpretation of information. In my view, as we will discuss a little later, his terminology might create confusion and therefore, I prefer the terminology of ‘deep listening’ or ‘listening from within the heart.’ That, of course, requires an attitude of detachment, the setting aside of our ego-mind, or an attitude of ‘compassionate indifference’ in the language of Buddhism.

The first three categories on the listening continuum clearly speak for themselves. Many of us have probably moved along that continuum on both sides of the speaking...listening spectrum. How often do we ignore and pretend to listen? What provokes us to listen selectively? Often, we do this because we hear something and wish to respond, perhaps out of an unconscious need to help or rescue, to be heard ourselves, to appear as the expert, or to stroke our own ego about how brilliant we are.

When we speak about attentive listening, we might think, "What’s wrong with that? Isn’t paying attention a good thing?" It certainly can be if it comes from a place of alert and conscious awareness, which is often likened to the relaxed and yet focused and meditative alpha brainwave state.

Attention that is too narrowly focused excludes most of what surrounds our focus. For example, listening for the gist of the argument but not to how the argument is actually presented will not allow us to hear what the speaker wants to share. Or, when we live in our head with a tendency to analyze everything we encounter to the exclusion or at the cost of the whole picture. For example, the listener may engage in an intellectual conversation about the state of the economy as a response to the speaker’s description of financial issues, but completely misses the unspoken — that the speaker is worried about her husband’s job or her home. It is vital to remember that less than 10% of what we hear is language based, after all! What a blow to the linguists among us who love language and mind-boggling, to say the least, for the intellectuals among us who tend to lead with the head! Furthermore, attention that is focused in our ego-personality will be emotionally charged and heavily filtered through our personal experiences. In other words, we spend much of our listening time attempting to make the speaker conform to our unconsciously driven expectations. This again prevents us from truly listening and hearing. After all, we must hear the silence and space between the words, the nuances in phrasing or inflection as well. We can only do that comfortably when we find ourselves in the state that Covey calls “empathetic listening.”

In our terminology here, we refer to such listening skills as deep listening or listening from within the heart. The commonly used term, ‘empathetic listening,’ in my view, invites confusion because empathy is defined as a deep emotional understanding of someone’s feelings. Thus, individuals find themselves often drawn into the emotions of the others, which may lead them away from being fully present. They then fail to hear, sense, feel, see, or understand through knowing the speaker’s

perspective of what is being conveyed because emotions generally taint the reception process. Or, the speaker's story catches the listener so intensely that the listener is now living the speaker's story and can no longer hold the space and hear the speaker other than through the filter of the felt emotions. She has missed the opportunity to listen deeply because she cannot be present to either the verbal message or the non-verbal cues of the conversation. Especially the so-called 'empaths' tend to have a challenging time and, paradoxically, we find many of them in the healing fields.

Perhaps the same could be said about 'listening from within the heart.' However, the reasons for my preference of wording are anchored in mystical traditions and in the research of the HeartMath Institute. Unfortunately, the heart is often mistaken as the seat of all emotions, a notion that might invite confusion. Even though we now have proof that the heart, just like the gut, contains many peptide receptors that were originally thought only to exist in the brain, I'm suggesting that we need to distinguish between emotional interferences that diminish feelings of wellness and wholeness, and the sustaining emotions that support our sense of well-being and wholeness. The interference group includes emotions such as fear, anxiety, worry, anger, hurt, resentment, hate, guilt, inadequacy, all the "lack of ..." feelings, and much more. An incoherent heart as measured by HeartMath is the result of experiencing such emotions, which cause irregular heart-rhythm patterns. On the other hand, the sustaining group is characterized by love, compassion, joy, and a sense of abundance. These so-called positive emotions tend to create coherence in our heart-rhythms, resulting in smooth and balanced cardiographic patterns.

Wouldn't it make sense then to listen from within such coherence? And, by extension, wouldn't it make sense then to do our best to live our lives from a place of coherence? Listening from within the Heart reminds us not just about the process of listening but also of a key component of the art of Being – because we are not referring to a state of doing, but to a state of active and conscious Being. However, that also presupposes we know how to deal with our emotional interferences, which is an entirely different topic and the subject of many psychological and energy healing techniques.

So how do we create that sacred space in which we can listen to others (and ourselves) from within the heart? Parker Palmer (1998, p. 74-5) suggests that we need to accept the principles of paradox, a form of living in tension, through which we create the space in which deep listening is possible. This space is intended for and open to such communication and yet has safe boundaries. It is a space that welcomes both silence and speech — and that space is the heart of the listener, which holds the paradoxes together. Yet, many people feel uncomfortable being in silence. Therefore, Parker Palmer concludes, "If we want to teach and learn the power of paradox, we must re-educate our hearts." (Palmer, 1998, p. 83)

When we engage in deep listening, we realize that semantics, behavior, and emotional or mental outbursts no longer hook us. They inform us by quite literally bringing "into form" the mostly unconscious aspects of how speech impacts us, which is approximately 40% through pitch, pace, volume, enunciation, emphasis and tone on the one hand, and more than 50% through visual cues, including body language. When we can observe from a whole-being perspective and hear the message as a whole, we know we are within our hearts. This presupposes that we have done and continue to do our inner work so that we are not triggered into inappropriate responses by the words or emotions of the speaker. We are now able to move past, through, or perhaps above or below how we generally filter all we receive, perceive, understand and define. During the process of listening from within the heart, words and gestures, for instance, become understood as symbols of meaning rather than as literal expressions. We can hear the deep message of the spoken and unspoken, both of which can and does occur in speech or silence. We become attuned to metaphoric language and messages. And the challenge here, of course, is not to fill the silence or interpret the silence through the ego-mind.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of reaching the state of deep listening is the ability to direct our attention to this moment, where inner stillness is created and where we are truly in the present moment. Meister Eckhart's words remind us of the connection between time, as busy-ness, and Spirit: "Time is what keeps the light from reaching us. There is no greater obstacle to God than time." Eckhart Tolle (1997, p. 22-5) discusses this notion at length and suggests that we practice witnessing the presence of the mind, the thinker and the emotions; honor them; and then bring the attention back to the present moment. Curiously enough, psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and many other scientists and researchers do not seem able to agree on definitions of either mind or emotion. As a matter of fact, P. and A. Kleinginna (1981) compiled 92 definitions of emotion in an attempt to arrive at a consensual definition – without great success, it appears. The obsolete meaning of 'emotion' is, in fact, a disturbance, which makes sense given its etymology (Latin: *emovere* — to displace, to move out, to disturb). In my view, emotions can be understood as agitations, often caused by deep-seated unconscious beliefs or mental processes. I agree with Tolle that the body reflects these emotions and thus can be observed unlike other unconscious processes. However, such observation is challenging because an emotion generally "represents an amplified and energized thought pattern," often characterized by its "overpowering energetic charge." (Tolle, 1997, p. 23) The experience of deep inner love, joy, and peace, on the other hand, exists at a level beyond the mind and emotions in a place where the mind and the heart meet and become one. The duality that is present in emotional states dissolves and, thus, we experience the present moment. Tolle (1997, p. 24) refers to these positive emotions as inseparable from our "natural state of inner connectedness with Being." I would greatly appreciate if we could use a different linguistic term for these deeper seated emotions that create coherence and bring us to a state of peace and stillness.

We can watch, sense, see, hear, feel or simply know the energetic field of both the listener and the speaker and determine how the field changes as we move through the various stages of listening. Deep listening, arriving at that place of inner stillness, constitutes a true discipline, and therefore requires practice. It reminds me of the story about Carnegie Hall. When a passer-by was asked by tourists how to get to Carnegie Hall, the answer was, 'practice, practice, practice.'

Some of the prerequisites for attaining deep listening skills include grounding, centering, clearing and alignment of ourselves as much as possible, which in turn lays the groundwork for us to attain an attitude of compassion, a place of loving support, discernment, and detachment —particularly detachment from outcome. Such detachment enables us to provide the care we wish to offer from a sense of overflow, a sense that what we have to offer is not coming from our substance but is simply flowing through us and is enriching who we are and our own personality by adding to our substance and essence. We arrive at a knowing, an experiential awareness (and not just at an intellectual knowledge) that we are not our body, our mind, our emotions, or our relationships; that in fact we are far more than that.[1] When we focus on the body, especially as it may be deteriorating and/or changing beyond our level of comfort and sometimes even recognition, we get scared and feel helpless, frustrated and sorry for ourselves and others, which also happens when we watch somebody's mind deteriorate. When we get stuck in our head in our attempt to solve an issue, we tend to push our power of reasoning and ignore any feelings of hurt that might arise in the process. The skill lies in acknowledging both the mind and the emotions, being with them, and bringing them into the present moment by whatever means we have at our disposal rather than identifying solely through the head or the emotions that stir our body. When we derive our sense of being from our emotions and empathy, we get caught up in the moment and lose our sense of balance. When we can only see the relationships and their intricate dynamics, we tend to get lost in the past and the future and lose the sense of the present.

What can we do then, you ask, to engage in deep listening? How do we attain and maintain this space of compassion, discernment, and loving support? The answer might sound simple and complex, somewhat paradoxical at the same time. First, we need to take care of ourselves and do

our inner work, which requires in particular learning to recognize and deal with our dark side, our shadow. The concept of the personal shadow, in Jungian terms, is everything in us that is unconscious, repressed, irrational, instinctive and denied. These are aspects of ourselves we often project on another individual, or that others around us mirror for us. For instance, when we dislike a person, the very traits we dislike tend to be shadow aspects of ourselves that we have not yet consciously integrated into our own Being. And by that, I do not mean, as many individuals in the New Age tradition suggest, to bring the shadow into the light, but to embrace the shadow, the dark side, for exactly what it has to offer to us, with the same compassion that we would like to afford to others. Second, in addition and as part of the process, we need to allow for and appreciate fully all questions, especially those that appear to make no sense. And third, we need to learn to wait patiently for the time where we can bridge the distance between the head and the pure heart.

I would like to elaborate a bit more on each one of those three points. Many spiritual traditions teach us how to ground, root, align and center ourselves; in other words, we create coherent heart-rhythms and find ourselves thereby in the open and receptive heart space of love and compassion, where we have integrated all aspects of ourselves. Many health practitioners do it well when interacting with clients and when they feel they are serving others. We each might have an area in our lives where we find it easier to stay grounded and centered than in other arenas. However, we frequently stumble when transferring those skills into every minute of our days, which constitutes the essence of living consciously and in the present.

Now let's take this spirit of feeling centered into the rest of our lives. We can feel the breath being settled, calm and deep. We can feel our restless monkey mind relaxing as it settles into letting go of control. Our cow mind stops regurgitating. We are opening ourselves up to hearing and listening from a place that does not care for judgment — more precisely and importantly still, the place that does not know judgment; the place that only knows discernment, love, and compassion.

Practicing listening from within the heart allows us to venture into the second aspect necessary to create a sacred space for those about whom we care so deeply. In that space, absolutely all questions are valid, acceptable, welcome, and deserve to be heard without our feeling pressured to provide an answer. Rainer Maria Rilke (2000, p. 35), a phenomenal German poet of the early 20th century, expressed most elegantly the value of living in the question, or in other words, the essence of a life that's steeped in questions.

I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Deep listening and honoring the questions, relinquishing the need to know or to provide the answers —that is what I understand Rilke to mean by, "And the point is, to live everything." That is where we care for the soul, where we feel our connectedness with the whole, the world within as well as the world around us. How can we allow ourselves to be this vulnerable and yet feel safe at the same time?

Contemplating this question brings us to the final component that marks the sacred space where we are bridging the sometimes seemingly longest distance in the universe — the 12-14 inches between the head and the heart. When we get absorbed by the body, the mind, the emotions or our relationships, the pendulum tends to swing from one extreme to the other; we are either employing predominantly our head or we are immersed in our emotional attachment] to a belief, habit, person,

dream, fantasy, or situation. In other words, we live in the past or in the future, sometimes jumping wildly and rapidly from one to the other. Therefore, bridging the distance between the head and the coherent heart, and it is important to connect the two, brings us to a place where clear intent and true intuition, or inner knowing, can balance the outbursts of both the rational mind and our emotional bodies. Only when we reach that place, do we attain a place of inner peace and a sense of quiet enjoyment that penetrates all. Here we feel the power of compassion and loving support of what is in this moment. We have achieved what we set out to be — beings that create sacred space in which deep listening invites all of us to encounter our heart space and bridge the distance between the head and the heart. Once we integrate and incorporate 'Listening from within the Heart' into our lives, we continue to develop our sacred space and provide a conditioned space for others and ourselves where whole-being living, creative and grounded intuitive approaches to life flourish.

Perhaps the following poem will illustrate how essential a sacred space and listening from within the heart may be for individuals, particularly when facing serious challenges in their lives.

*To answer the question 'how are you?'
 seems impossible when I am not even sure I am
 To answer the question 'how is it going?'
 is impossible because I am not sure about the IT
 To answer the question 'why aren't you calling?'
 is easy because I am too exhausted to pick up the phone
 To answer the question 'why aren't you asking for help?'
 is more complex because I don't know what you can do.*

*I'm the one who's changed, not you
 and you want your life to return to normal just like me
 except I live with life that's anything but normal every second of each day and night*

*My life and I will never be normal again,
 so don't ask. Don't ask for action. Just be and accept.
 Perhaps when you sense your lack of control
 you will understand more of me
 Just be there for support
 Listen and love. Don't offer advice.
 Don't judge.
 Don't expect the old me because she has departed and won't ever return*

*Accept my grief as a token of my love
 When you want me to smile, realize
 that it's your dread that's talking*

*Don't speak to me about my lack of strength
 when I'm sad or crying
 It may be your lack of comfort with my journey through the abyss
 that wishes for me to pretend
 To ask me to pretend is asking the impossible
 The journey of grief is a journey about truth — my truth, our truth
 It is a journey where I feel stripped to the core
 unable to hide from anyone,
 least of all from me*

*If I appear rude of unsociable,
 remember that I barely have the strength to breathe
 Breathe with me to allow me to be*

*Perhaps then together with your presence
 I can become whole again [2]*

As we can hear and feel, she does not ask for much — only for the space to be, to be simply who she is as only then can she heal. She is asking us to be with her wherever she is, to breathe with her, to listen and to love her. That's all... and yet it seems so much.

In my view she is asking us to hold the space for her, a sacred space, a space that invites wholeness and healing. We might reflect further on what constitutes this sacred space and how each one of us can create it for others and for ourselves. I do not pretend to have all the answers. I do wish to encourage all of us, though, to engage more and more frequently and deeply in open and honest experiences and interactions of the reality of life, which includes transitions, loss, grieving, and death, particularly at this incredibly volatile period in the history of humanity on this planet Earth. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give ourselves and others consists of simply holding the space for each one of us to be who we are at any given moment in time, however 'imperfect' we may appear to ourselves and to others, since we are indeed 'perfect' at all times. It's just that we might not conform to whatever our preconceived idea of perfect might be.

In summary, listening from within the heart occurs in this sacred space where we accept the notion that we are whole because then we do not need to fix ourselves or the world around us. Instead, we need to turn our attention to taking responsibility for that which detracts us from feeling and living our wholeness, our beingness. Perhaps we can consider it more as a journey of remembering our beingness, remembering who we are.

If we focus on Being, then we realize that the doing arises out of the Being. We will realize and acknowledge the various roles we play in life, the beliefs we hold, share, and continuously change. We will also learn to distinguish the role our ego plays that leads us to identify ourselves through the body, mind, emotions, and relationships. Then we are asked to look deeply into our innermost selves and seek, creatively and openly, how to return to alignment. Meister Eckhart states so poignantly, "People should not consider so much what they are to *do*, as what they *are*." May we all have the courage to recognize, face, and deal with whatever arises within us so that we can be present and engage in listening from within the heart. What a healing experience we can then offer to ourselves as well as to others! This is how we create a community of heart!

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Endnotes

1. I would suggest reading Roberto Assagioli's work on *Psychosynthesis* for more information on this particular aspect.
2. This poem was written in 2003 and appears in the 2009 collection by Martina Steiger, *Invisible Connections: The Paradoxes of Loss*.

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