

Focusing-Oriented Therapy and Complex Trauma 2: Relational Resonance: Attuned Brain and Relational Heart

Jeffrey Morrison

EMBODIED LISTENING: By Russell Delman

“You never listen to me”, she said. “Your not the only one with feelings”, he said. “I can’t take it any more”, she said. “Your never satisfied”, he said.

On and on they went: Like two televisions on different channels. Is anybody listening?

Learning to LISTEN wholeheartedly is central to a blossoming life. By listening I am referring to: listening to others, to our own feelings, to our inner voices, to our bodily process and to the whole situation in which we are living at a given moment. There are many reasons why this can be challenging. Though the following ideas are relevant to all situations, in this article, I will explore the instance of listening to other people in moments of disagreement. I will also suggest a path of resolution.

Why is listening to another so challenging? To truly listen is to step beyond oneself. As Zen master Dogen reminds us: “To Study the Self is to forget the

self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.”

“Self” in the sense means more than the individual, conditioned ‘self’; it points us toward the “I” that emerges in relationship. Rather than viewing the “I” as a solid entity that moves from relationship to relationship, it is helpful to picture a “Self” or even better a “Self-ing” that reforms from situation to situation. This “self-ing” includes the “historical self” and everything connected to the particular living situation. When we are dedicated to deep listening, our dominant intention is to place our self in the background and deeply receive the other, to feel how the world is from where they are living. This dedication requires a kind of surrender.

This means that our usual obsession with our own ideas and with maintaining our position is placed to the side. To TRULY listen means that we quiet our point of view and we place the other "above" ourselves. "Above" in this sense means that we want to really take in the reality of the other without adding our opinions. This is a profoundly generous act.

I am not implying that our own wanting is irrelevant, rather that we are cultivating the maturity to postpone our own needs and longings. This postponing can feel both

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daunting and terrifying. Something in us can feel like we will die if we don't respond immediately or even beat the other to the punch! We must make our point How can we bear this intense inner pressure?

Here our embodiment can really help (for where else do we feel the pressure and the sense of danger but in our bodily experience)? Pressure always implies not enough space. When pressure builds in a balloon, the air is consuming all of the space. When it bursts, the spatial limits are exceeded. We can feel like this in challenging moments. IF the balloon could suddenly double in size, it would not feel so pressurized and would not burst. How can we "double our size" in moments like this?

Three keys to inner space: grounding, breathing and spatial awareness.

First, grounding: directly sensing our contact with the surface under us has the effect of: 1) helping us to sense the support of a 'larger body' and 2) offering an escape valve for the pressure that is building in our body. To change analogies, if an electrical system does not have a ground wire it will burn out when the charge is too much. When intensity rises, we create a counter-force by bringing attention down into the ground. Sensing the earth allows us to directly experience the literal support that is always present in every moment.

Second, breathing: in moments of intensity, most of us have a habit of either holding the breath or hyperventilating. Both of these reactions create inner pressure. Holding the breath and over-breathing are unconscious attempts to have more oxygen. Ironically, the best way to insure harmonious oxygen flow is through encouraging a full exhale. Letting go of the breath is the key to recovering a natural breathing rhythm. PAUSING and sensing the breath is very helpful. This pause is fundamental to the shift we are seeking. Stepping back for a moment and sensing THIS breath will change your world. Awareness of breath will allow this shift to occur and inner space will naturally grow. Ideally, I recommend following three breaths from beginning to end, counting each exhale. Stay present to the end of each exhale.

Third, spatial awareness: The physical body is too small to contain all that we feel. How can we expand our boundaries beyond the skin? Again the key is awareness. Bringing conscious attention to the external world: hearing sounds, seeing colors and shapes, immediately grows the living space. For many, attending to sound for a few moments,

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with the eyes closed is particularly helpful. You might feel strange, in the middle of a very demanding moment, to intentionally see a color or listen to the background sounds, yet I suggest if you try it, the results might amaze you.

Attending to the ground, the breath and the outer world require a shift of consciousness. I encourage you to experiment. More than simply reducing pressure, these shifts allow you to listen deeply and to enjoy the present moment more fully. This listening, this stepping beyond the habitual, reactive self is the key to our fulfillment and deep connectedness to life. Simply remember: Ground, Sound and Breath.

Be gentle with yourself. These shifts of attention are quite challenging in the heat of the moment. Practice in ordinary, non-demanding moments to build a reservoir of capacity. After many years of growing my capacity, there are still moments that can overtake me. In these situations I know that something inside feels very threatened and needs my care, my good listening. If I can't listen wholeheartedly to another, I know that I need to listen well to the place in me that is feeling pressured. This kind of "self-empathy" will pave the way for a more global caring.

It is important to let go of rules and idealism when in a challenging moment. Sometimes, when feeling overwhelmed, separating from the situation for a short period can break the magnetism. In moments like this, we can offer a truly magical communication: "I really want to hear you AND I am starting to feel overwhelmed. I am about to respond in a way that I don't want to. Let me take 15 minutes to reconnect with myself so that I can really listen to you". Alternatively, when a particular feeling has carried you away, it can be very healing simply to say: "I am sorry I could not listen better."

A note: for people who do not allow themselves strong feelings and habitually defer others, it can be a positive, temporary step to allow your emotion to come forward powerfully. Allowing this can sometimes bring movement to a stuck situation. We want to be mindful of creating more suffering through our words and actions. The overall direction is to be able to be wholeheartedly listening to self and other as often as possible.

As I said at the beginning, the same quality of listening to others can be applied to our own inner voices and to the entire situation in which we are living. When there is a feeling or thought that is challenging, we usually get pulled into it. When pulled into,

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there is no space, no possibility for awareness. We are like the balloon bursting with overwhelming, sensations. The antidotes discussed in this article for working with other people are completely applicable to listening to your self.

“I am in a lot of pain”, she said. “Tell me about it” he said.