

Meditative Listening - All of Us Listening , In and Between Us, Here and Now

Sometimes we listen inwardly on our own. Sometimes we listen with a companion, and other times we listen in a group. With Rob Foxcroft's sensitive companionship ten of us attending the Focusing Festival UK entered into an experience of profound listening in a group. And what is more, in this Meditative Listening in a group, there were all these ways of listening . Rob puts it this way:

*'There are four things
you may want to do in this circle.*

*You may want to sit in silence,
taking in what others say.*

*When somebody has spoken,
you may want to say what you heard.*

*When some feeling stirs in you,
you may want to turn inward.*

*You may want to say what you feel,
in your own words in your own way. '*

I describe my experience of these four things as - '**all of us listening, in and between us , here and now**'. Our listening was that simple and that profound. In my reflection afterwards I was given a powerful knowing of this whole group listening experience - a huge coming together of many ways of listening in a multitude of groups over many years being gathered together , and all the strands of experience being delicately and skilfully woven into a bright new braid. And my multitude of groups include....reconciliation, and trauma ward support groups , spiritual discernment and silent meditation groups, community-based creative processes, meditative reading and creative writing groups.

This coming together of things inspires me to reflect more on how we worked together in the Meditative Listening group to allow all four of these focusing movements to keep flowing more or less simultaneously. It did not take me long to realise that the Meditative Listening process itself intensifies some particular aspects of group communication - particularly the listening in and between us. Something distinctive about this way of doing things is that roles are not set up before listening begins. So , I wondered at the time, how do we work out as we go along who speaks and who listens, and when to do so ? Is this flexibility and fluidity a problem - or is it gift?

Here is my own language for some group interactions that we were learning to do together at the Focusing Festival. Here I am finding some phrases, some my own and some borrowed, giving my own meanings to them and sharing them tentatively . I want to say that what happens in the circle described so succinctly by Rob can be supported by learning to do six things together: :

*beginning together
coming to a pause*

changing flow of dialogue
moving from silence to speech
delaying speech
looping backwards

“Beginning together” :

We can begin listening in a group by offering something that helps us begin together from the same place - all of us, here, now, starting to listen together . There is no end to what form the beginning place might take - a piece of music, a poem, a story , a photograph, a sacred text, an icon. Or the starting point can be something participative - a healing rite, a dance, a labyrinth walk, a shared meditation. Whatever is brought helps listening begin by creating a shared experience, a shared context for listening , something everyone experiences together and equally.

The content can't be defined - other than broadly saying that it speaks to our humanity . But the way a beginning point is offered is so important. A poem or a picture is introduced as a tentative suggestion - something that may evoke an inner response or provoke some questioning. This feels very different to bringing a poem or picture to set a theme to follow or an interpretation 'to get.' The words and symbols of the poem can be left behind in the listening, and returned to at any time. A picture can dissolve away and form again with a new starting point later on. The purpose of the beginning points is to awaken us to ourselves and open up a sense of shared inner space where listening happens.

‘Coming to a pause’

The silent pauses in group listening are not time out from listening before someone starts speaking again. In the silence listening continues . We can learn to tune into the many things that happen in pauses which support and deepen listening. I describe some of the gleanings from our Meditative Listening as - following each person speaking until they pause, then holding the pause longer , and then waiting in the pause for a new group interaction to arise.

First of all we learn to develop an intuitive feel for the patterns of dialogue - and one of them is the way our interactions, like music, flow in a sequence and then come to a natural rest. And usually - it is one person who undertakes to accompany the speaker without interruption until that rest comes. The rest comes because something has been said and heard just as it is .Everyone in the group tries to be aware of and support this natural rhythm. . But it is a rhythm not a rule - and sometimes it seems just right for more than one person to take up the listener role without a feeling that this is chipping in with an interruption. Listening together can feel like jazz!

Secondly, something happens for the person who is speaking when the group learns to hold the silent pause - stretching it, showing willing to stay in the present moment of silence as if there were all the time in the world - giving them to check in that often very pregnant pause to see if something new is there. Everyone waits expectant, but not making it an expectation . In the pause people sometimes say - ‘ Yes, that’s how it is, that’s all for now’.

A third thing that can happen in a pause is that a new group interaction is initiated. Being on the alert for this moment of opportunity for a new group interaction is important simply because the speaking roles are not set up

beforehand. In a resting pause we can check inside to see if there is something stirring that feels ready and right to speak from. Then, having checked, a new person may want to say what they feel, and likewise someone who has not spoken before begins to say what they are hearing. And so the flow of speaking turns and continues in a new direction.

Changing flow of dialogue '

It is easy to say, but to start a new dialogue can feel risky - especially offering to accompany someone as a listening partner. The pause is often a vulnerable turnaround moment. This is not surprising when we think how difficult it can be to change the flow of any group process that is either working well as it is or where there is any anxiety. We seem to instinctively want to stick with structures and repeat roles and patterns in groups. But here we are listening inwardly in the a pause for the interaction that 'wants' to come right now in this present moment - and what may come first is reluctance in many forms:

A worry about intruding or breaking into something that's going on.

A wanting the experienced facilitator to take the listener role.

A not wanting to speak because being quiet in groups is our habit.

A holding back because others are more experienced listeners - and people deserve the best/most experienced listeners don't they?

A cautious feeling from painful memories of group experiences.

A restricted feeling if the group's language is not our own.

In our Meditative Listening group we learned to make a welcoming space and leisurely time for the 'vulnerable' in the active listening role. The very first person to speak up and offer to listen to Rob, allowing him to let go of his speaking/ listening role, was congratulated for her courage! We learned to ask process questions and to have conversations about how we are doing our listening - and to feel that was not an interruption to the process. These 'how are we doing this' conversations began to weave seamlessly into our listening together. We learned to invite responses from others who had not spoken- not only in words, but by our body language staying open to the whole group and letting the gaze of our eyes look around and make fresh connections. We let our bodies offer a feeling of all of us listening together.

'Nobody can tell us how to do this.' Rob constantly repeats this touchstone line in his poetic manual for Meditative listening - "The Life of empathy". These process conversations are needed because:

'Nobody can tell us how to do this.

*Each of us find our own way,
and we all find a way together.'*

' Moving from silence to speech'

As trust and empathy deepens so does silence. Silence is not only in the pauses but is the under-feeling of everything. This under-feel of silence has many strands of meaning - it has a body-feel to it, has a spacious feeling to it, a time element to it and a shared in-communion feel to it.

What seemed to be happening spontaneously in our Meditative Listening was a tuning into our personal and unique felt sense of being in deep listening silence together. We were sensing its changing energies and qualities as we went along

and speaking from this felt sense of silence. A number of rich symbols came into the group . For one it was as if our words , like musical notes, were rising up from - and falling back into silence. For another the feeling of silence was an open spaciousness where there is a huge listening ear. For another it was the place you go to for what is invaluable - a deep pool where a precious coin is found. I found myself listening inside for and attending to that 'silent part of me' that is attuned to a wider body wisdom. This silent me knows in a pre-verbal kind of way when to move me into saying something , or refrain from speaking just then.

Learning to trust this inner guidance changes my way of moving from sitting quietly within my self to saying out loud what I am experiencing - moving from silence to speech . In other words it changes what I do when I move out of quiet listening in the group to being the person focusing 'out loud'. Here my asking for a focusing interaction - 'I am wanting to say something...' - comes from first bringing attention to the underlying feeling of silent communion (all of us listening) that was already happening in us and between us and which feels like the underlying context for everything.

This feels very different from speaking or withholding speech that comes from my habitual way of being in groups - being quiet or talkative. This feels very different from sensing I ought to take my turn. And likewise different from choices that come from how I evaluate what I want to say - how sensible or relevant it is to what has been happening in the group just before. What this feels like is learning to trust an intuitive wisdom felt in a bodily way as a 'ready and wanting to say even before I know what it is! When I take this small act of faith in this readiness I , and everyone listening, enter into a free and creative imaginative space .

'Delaying speech'

It will happen every now and again in every group that I open my mouth to speak - I am ready and wanting to speak - and someone comes in before me. What then? How do I keep in touch with that and also let it go enough so I can offer my listening attention? I call what I do - delaying speech by marking a speaking place. Sometimes it seems enough to do that saying to myself what I intend to do - this is where I will come back to. In another listening group we experimented by physically marking pieces of paper and placing them quietly on the floor in front of us to show that there is something here, but doing so in an unobtrusive way. However the inner marking is done , I will wait for a pause to check there again to see what stirred before is still alive and still wanting more attention. Listening in and between us, here and now.

'Looping back in the listening process'

In a similar way I hear somebody focusing saying something I strongly want to respond to - but someone else has stepped into the role of being the listening companion with them. I delay my speaking and come back to check if it is still alive later on. But here I find something more is needed. Even if my delayed response feels alive to me - I may now be uncertain whether the person whose experience has been unfolding wonderfully still wants to hear this. To loop back and say something from what I was were hearing earlier might feel like taking a backwards step - or so I predict from past experience.

But here again in Meditative Listening we risk living in the present moment of

listening between people - and so I do a two-fold checking step. First I check in if this response is still alive in me - and then I also ask the other person to check in if her response is still alive. We work out what needs to happen together by resonating rather than relying on assumptions and predictions. We work out what needs to happen in a relationship where risk and trust are both growing. In learning to risk asking we create an opportunity to say 'no, this feels enough for now' and that be received as something helpful . Or else my earlier response may now evoke something altogether new that could only happen within the particular alchemy between us.

Meditative Listening doesn't follow chronological time in a sequential way - we move forward and loop back. In every interaction of listening between us we stay in the present moment . *We are all listening, listening in and between us , here and now.*

Focusing and group process - 'the magnification effect.'

I asked myself how is focusing in a group the same or different to focusing as I had experienced it before. In the Meditative Listening group it felt the same simply because everyone was Focusing . We were not just taking turns - it was happening simultaneously one way or another all the time. Whatever we were up to in listening inwardly had an outward expression in the group listening process .

I also asked myself what feels like the particular gift of group listening. . It seems to me to be simply this - that because there are more of us doing it the gifts and graces of empathic listening intensify. I am happy to risk speaking for others experience of the 'magnification effect' when I say that in our Meditative Listening at the Focusing Festival ..

An underlying silence, uniquely and individually experienced , felt stronger and deeper.

A sense of community, our own distinctive sense of 'us-ness' , felt magnified.

A guiding wisdom in a wider living body seemed more accessible.

The sense of space felt more spacious because there were more of us in it.

The sense of time felt 'thicker' with pasts and futures implied in the moments we shared .

The aliveness of empathy felt stirred up and quickened in our listening .

All this and more from all of us listening together, listening between us , here and now.