

The Role of Listening in Intercultural Settings: The Empathetic Act of Listening Gives Voice to Marginalized People Groups

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Abstract

The fast-paced nature of a world on the move creates a community that rarely listens to those they know well and never to those they don't know or understand. This failure to listen is especially detrimental when the listeners should be missionaries, aid workers, counselors, and/or pastors who are reaching out to those migrating into their area. This article will outline the role of listening within such encounters, highlight listening's role across cultural lines, warn of the potential downfalls of not listening, and make suggestions for improving one's listening skills in intercultural settings.

Key Words: active empathetic listening (AEL), aid worker, care, counseling, diaspora, immigration, intercultural encounters, listening, migration, pastoral care

Introduction

At the foundation of pastoral care and counseling is the art and act of *active empathetic listening*. With global digital availability that influences/distracts the lives of us all, no matter how remote one may be, active empathetic listening becomes increasingly rare with the accessibility and overstimulation of digital media/entertainment. After defining and establishing active empathetic listening as a foundational tool in the ministry of global Christianity, this article highlights the important role of active empathetic listening in intercultural settings, the benefits towards holistic outcomes (including care, counseling, relationships, and ministries), and the potentially unfortunate outcomes when listening is circumvented, assumptions are made, and cultural stereotypes are applied. Ultimately, because we are a world with cultures constantly on the move, this article offers suggestions for improving active empathetic listening in intercultural settings.

Active Empathetic Listening (AEL)

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because Christians are talking when they should be listening. He [or she] who no longer listens to his [or her] brother [or sister] will soon no longer be listening to God either. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and never really be speaking to others, albeit he [or she] be not conscious of it (Bonhoeffer 1954, 97-98).

Definitions of simple listening vary greatly among researchers; however, all definitions tend to include elements of cognitional (ability), behavioral (willingness), and relational (understanding) processes (Bletscher & Lee 2021, 162). One must be able physically and mentally to listen, be willing to take the time and make the effort, and have the capacity to understand both what is said in word and behavior. It is important to note that the activity being described here is more than just simple listening. Rather, in cases of ministering to voiceless people groups and across cultural/ethical lines, definitions of the adjectives *active* and *empathetic* must join with the above mechanical and cognitive processes of simple listening.

Active listening enhances the relational process described in simple listening, whereby the listener does more than just hear what is being said and establishes relationships with those to whom she/he would listen. Active listening considers the emotional and the relational aspects of the speaker when responding. During this process, the active listener “reflects back her or his ‘impression of the expression of the sender’ by paraphrasing or interpreting what the talker is communicating” (162). Interpersonal connections and relationships made while actively listening assist caregivers to discover commonalities, further develop interpersonal connections, and postulate potential outcomes.

Empathetic listening then becomes the “cornerstone of building strong interpersonal relationships by understanding and respecting the other(s) involved. One must not only know how to listen to others’ experiences, ideas, and thoughts, but also suspend their own judgments, prejudices, or preoccupations of themselves in the process.” When listening, “Active Empathetic Listening is an active and emotional process that involves both parties—the speaker and the listener—in the course of their interactions with sharing information” (162-163). Active empathetic listening invites speakers “to expand on their feelings or experience” without the listener pursuing their own primary interests, even though it creates “feelings too painful to trust to words” and is shown in body language, voice tones, and/or the silences between words (Clinebell & McKeever 2011, 71).

The Role of AEL

When I told my story you responded, train me well in your deep wisdom. Help me understand these things inside and out so I can ponder your miracle-wonders. My sad life’s dilapidated, a falling-down barn, build me up again by your Word. Barricade the road that goes nowhere; grace me with your clear revelation (Ps. 119:26-29, MSG).

The Old Testament presents God in a role that includes his willingness to hear the voice of his creation and the unspoken doubts and words of the heart and mind. As *El Roi* (the God who hears), he is the God who heard the story of the Fall from Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:10-13), he is the God who heard the wails of Hagar and Ishmael dying in the desert (21:16-19), and he is the God who heard the cry of the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 2:23-25). In short, Yahweh was the God who hears and cares about humanity.

Likewise, the New Testament presents Jesus as this same God who came into this fallen world hearing, caring, and restoring humanity. Jesus heard blind Bartimaeus when he cried out, “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:47). He heard the adoration of the woman when she broke the box of alabaster (Luke 7:37). He heard the cry of the accusers and the resigned whimper of the woman when he knelt to write in the dirt (John 8:11). Over the roar of the crowd, he heard Zacchaeus up in a tree (Luke 19:1-4) and he heard the heartbeat of the woman who reached out to touch the hem of His garment (Luke 23:43). This Jesus was and is *El Roi*, the God who hears and compels the emulation of this listening behavior by those who are called; “For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15), and “Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:37).

As a people called to emulate the God who hears, aid workers, missionaries, health workers, caregivers, and pastors step into that role as God’s active empathetic listener in the community in which they live. Communities around the world are evolving daily with the massive migration of human cultures due to economics, war, politics, persecution, and more. This listening role requires

one to respectfully focus on the speaker cognitively, behaviorally, and relationally while reflecting a full range of the perceived emotional and relational aspects to the other(s) involved in the event. There are three basic steps in the listening dance, be it performed as missionary, aid worker, pastor, counselor, and/or friend. First, the listener hears the story (sometimes in all its shocking details). Second, the listener ensures honesty and depth by reframing and/or asking the speaker tough clarifying questions to discover the breadth of the story. As well, while suspending judgement in the moment, the listener affirms the reality of the events, emotions, and behaviors of the story.

This process of “stepping respectfully and compassionately into another’s narrative” begins when a listener enter the speaker’s “story-making with a sense of wonder, awe, and humility, opening himself up to the mystery of life narratives” (Doehring 2015, xvi-xvii). Active empathetic listeners enter others’ pain or joy by making emotional and spiritual connections through their stories, demonstrating kindness, empathy, and compassion by being present with them emotionally, spiritually, and physically. The job of active empathetic listening occurs when one holds up a mirror so the speaker can see how his or her own story mingles with God’s story and how their combined story contains inherent beauty, power, and redemption. When one sees this beauty, a sense of homecoming—a sense of belonging—greater than this temporary life is created (O’Donohue 2005, 2). This sense of belonging is often absent in a world where millions of people and thousands of people groups are migrating to places they don’t want to go, among cultures they don’t understand, with help that doesn’t make sense to them, and among people that don’t want them in their backyard.

The Role of AEL in Intercultural Settings

Everyone tells stories—children, youth, and adults of all ages. Hidden inside those stories, like diamonds in the rough, are the deep truths of the unconscious. Story telling is a form of self-disclosure. You cannot avoid telling your story. You can only try to make it abstract, in an attempt to hide the deeper struggles you are experiencing (Savage 1997, 77).

From pastoral care and counseling to missionary work, listening lies at the heart of all that is ministry. Listening is the act of receiving and understanding “what another human person has to say. Listening, unlike other forms of silence though, requires that the listener be open and active, not asleep or dead. The true listener is quiet and yet sensitive, open, receptive and alive to the one listened to” (Lartey 2003, Loc. 916-918). The important points in intercultural settings are the same as in all listening events: the imperative of the speaker being fully understood and the opportunity for both speaker and listener to fully be their real selves.

Listening that occurs within a familiar setting, among familiar faces, a familiar culture, and a familiar language creates a potentially sacred space that can bring succor, comfort, and peace in an otherwise chaotic and strange world. However, listening that occurs within an unfamiliar setting, among unfamiliar faces, an unfamiliar culture, and/or in an unfamiliar language creates the potential for chaos, ignorance, misunderstanding, stereotyping, profiling, and outright dismissal. Often, even in the familiar, what a caregiver sees is frequently not what is, and what the care seeker says is usually not the problem. When this dynamic is compounded by the unfamiliar across cultural lines, the potential for a negative outcome is exponentially greater.

Given a chance, sharing stories across culture opens a new world of enlightenment for both the listener and the speaker. Listening explains how the unfamiliar makes sense of life in general and events specifically, it demonstrates how one digs through the minutia that bombard life through

strange media, news, radio, and television, and it clarifies how one understands an overwhelming, complex, and unexperienced world (Scheib 2016, 1-5). An active empathetic listener builds mutual trust between both parties; assists the care seeker in discovering meaning in the crucible of suffering, joy, and the upheaval of their formally ordinary life; and assists with the convolutions of theological meaning that emerges from intercultural stories that spawn from historical, biblical, and global theologies (Doehring 2015, xv).

Active empathetic listening enables “listeners to enter into the real-life, human experiences of people who struggle to recover their humanity” while migrating in a strange new world/situation. Such deep listening guards “against the overgeneralization that is a temptation of culturalists. It permits stereotypes to be challenged by the concrete experiences of living people—a crucial task in an intercultural approach” (Lartey 2003, Loc. 1343-1345). While little else can be certain in the news, the certainty of misunderstandings permeates social media, border disputes, immigration thinktanks, and government bureaucracy. This author’s prayer is that Christians would appear in the cross-cultural chaos as a people that realize “that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen.” Let it not be said that “they do not find it among Christians, because these Christians [were] talking when they should be listening...” (Loc. 922-923).

The Benefits of AEL in Intercultural Settings

With the increase in migration both global and domestic, ministries must listen as the stranger, from the other side of the world, shares their pre-migration, migration, and post-migration stories from one culture to another. When the voices of the silent are allowed to speak, opportunities arise for the still, small voice of the Spirit/Word to demonstrate, in concrete ways that are palatable and understandable, how their similar story combines with God’s grand biblical narrative of love for the world (Burfield 1995, 151). “The purpose of gaining voice [telling one’s story] is not to drown out those other voices in the community, but to enable all to be co-authors and co-creators with each other and with God” (Gorsuch 1999, 92). Nothing will draw one closer to God, to their new community, to healing, and to God’s beauty than when his/her story is received into a relationship with that same story-telling God as part of his on-going creation.

For many recent arrivals, the very act of listening by a missionary, pastor, and/or aid-worker creates a warm awareness of being heard, seen, and valued in an often strange and unwelcoming world. In this researcher’s experience (especially in this postmodern generation), many newcomers, if not most, are not necessarily looking for specific answers and/or solutions to their complex problems. Instead, they are seeking a safe place of welcome, a change from the ordinary struggles that persist every day, a place to be fully themselves, and a place to be heard/seen away from the mundane, and sometimes hopeless, existence of everyday life.

For those who are residents, listening to the pain and the joy of the *other* in their midst allows the voices of the unheard to speak and may never happen unless the caregiver intentionally make space for it. The culturally different, the mentally challenged, the disabled, the feeble, and the very old/young lose all sense of self-value until a listener takes time to be present with them in their loneliness. Often the inherent ‘myths’ and ‘stereotypes’ assumed about the traditions and culture of the *other* remain unrecognized in the silenced voices/stories of disenfranchised people whose culture and history is unknown. Finally, the ‘hopelessly’ broken can find hope in joining their voices to the story of the unfathomable mercy of God and the sacrifice of His Son on the Cross in payment for one’s sin.

If the caregiver makes no effort to listen to the stories of the *other* or to make a space for them to share the stories of the world that is changing around them, the relationship remains unfamiliar, unpalatable, ineffective, and unsustainable. To break this chain of events (cause/unheard—effect/outsider), one must “listen deeply to [the other] who has been deprived of voice or authority, believing whatever she says and allowing her to name and define the problems she experiences, creates a novelty that in itself empowers and strengthens” (Neuger 2001, 88). This ability, in part, to tell the story that names the pain, the fear, the joy, and whatever the care seeker wishes to name in effect empowers, strengthens, and makes new relationship/community real and possible (Clinebell & McKeever 2011, 100).

Quite simply, one can only begin to understand the *other* after listening to his/her story in the illuminating light and power of God’s own story. Only when we who are caregivers intentionally take the time to better understand the *other*—especially when the *other* is culturally different, speaks a different language, and previously lived in places we never heard of—through listening and reflecting on their joint stories in the light of God’s story will we create the community intended by Jesus. Mutual transparency, through *active empathetic listening*, can bridge the gulf across intercultural lines (Lartey 2013, 110-112), provide an ability to see each other clearer, and enable a fuller understanding of the issues at hand.

The Absence of AEL in Intercultural Settings

“The pastoral healer listens deeply to the sighs and groans of humans in distress. The healer listens” (Lartey 2003, Loc. 651) when communicating across cultural lines; also, one is not able to fully understand “without struggling with the cultural differences within and surrounding what is said” (Justes 2010, Loc. 117). Emma Justes, in her seminal work on listening, postulates, “The problem with listening is that it is so easy not to do” (Loc. 99). Doing the job of listening effectively will take more than education, practice, or instruction. All of these are beneficial and should be taken advantage of, but dependence upon them alone will not produce the results desired. Listeners must struggle with the arduous task of reflecting honestly: “Have I heard correctly? Am I listening well? Did I hear what was important? Will my response be clearly understandable?” (Justes 2006, 72). The more one grapples with being a good listener, the more one realizes that it will take the active role of the Holy Spirit to fully listen, fully engage, and fully welcome the global community into one’s local community.

Another troubling area, not initially pursued in my recently completed dissertation (Peyton 2022) but confirmed when a recurring theme manifested itself, was expressed specifically in nine out of eleven interviews of forcefully displaced immigrants about the absence of being listened to by pastoral caregivers. This absence of listening is troubling, especially when it is compounded by seven separate examples that also expressed a strong *desire* for someone to listen to them. Specifically poignant were these words: “This is the first time I have been interviewed [since being displaced for six years] ... this thing is really good because I get to share my experiences... this is a really good experience for me” (221) or, in other words: This is the first time someone listened to me! Another remarked that this was the first time anybody cared enough to listen to her story. These comments should remind everyone “that good listening skills can indeed be taught and learned, but not in a one-off session. It requires repetition and consistency. It also needs to be modelled by [pastoral leadership]. It needs to be embedded and integrated into training” (Bloom 2014, 23).

Further, the mass, forced migration of people groups in geographically troubled areas has contributed immensely to the problems of globalism and is apropos to this article. The 281 million people that make up today's worldwide diaspora (World Migration Report 2022), can overwhelm the abilities of caregivers and leave no time for listening or researching newcomers' cultural and ethnic norms and/or expectations. Consequently, most caregivers' approach to intercultural pastoral care reflects their own tradition, history, and contextual experiences and is "relevant [only] to those whose religious, educational, and professional context are similar to theirs" (Doehring 2015, xxvii). There remains a temptation in all caregivers to presume the needs of others, which becomes even more tempting the greater the gap is in one's understanding. Often, when caregivers do not understand others they activate their own elitist presuppositions. Such professional arrogance assumes one knows the need, the emphasis, the solution, and/or care needed.

Summaries, Lessons Learned, and Suggested Remedies

'First time... [anybody] cared... to listen,' 'This is the first time I have been interviewed [since being forced to leave my country],' '...this thing is really good because I get to share my experiences,' 'this is a really good experience for me,' and 'Thank you for coming and listening to us... it desperately helps' (Peyton 2022, 220-222).

Active empathetic listeners allow the often-silent *other* to have a voice while negotiating life among the hitherto unknown and overwhelming impulses of the dominate culture. Only by listening in relationship can one learn the contrasting cultural differences that exist across immigration lines, across gender ideologies, across economic brackets, across political positions, and across age disparities. Intentional active empathetic listening, set in a desire to know and be known, brings a space of understanding to any relationship. Hearing the stories that influence others as they assimilate in the dominant culture allows for multi-directional interpretation and collaboration with the God who created us all. The inclusion of participatory collusion between the speaker and the listener creates mutual transparency when the caregiver and the care seeker bridge the gulf across all cultural lines.

"One of the major obstacles to listening is talking" (Lartey 2003, Loc. 918). Christians must pause their talking, their singing, and even their preaching to give voice (listening) to the voiceless. "If there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories—listening to them and honoring and cherishing them, and asking them to become even more brightly beautiful than they already are" (Neuger 2001, 71). Nothing draws others closer to God, to their 'new' family, to healing, and to God's beauty than when one joins his/her story as a co-creator with that same storytelling Creator. One must enable the voices of the other to sound clearly in a setting where they are often excluded from the altar and community of God based on linguistic, financial, and logistical grounds (Brundson 2017, 112-114).

Active empathetic listening to the pain of the other "is not only difficult to do well, but it can be uncomfortable when done well" (Justes 2006, 89). Further, "...people's lives are unexamined because no one is listening to them" (Savage 1996, 33). Listening may be uncomfortable or absent because in many cases the other pours out horrendous stories of fear, anger, frustration, desperation, loneliness, violence, abuse, and so much more. However, Christians are called to emulate Christ—the *El Roi* (the God who listens)—and must pursue listening through the cycle of education, praxis, reflection, reeducation, further praxis, further reflection, and further reeducation. The more this cycle is repeated, the better the listener will become.

Without the ability to *actively listen emphatically*, even with the least of one's community, most pastoral efforts remain worthless. Consequently, the recommendation for training, practicing, and reflecting on one's listening skills provides a hallowed place that welcomes the *other*, works to bring peace, and restores the confused, displaced, and broken world. In this holy space Jesus becomes the guest when we listen, extending love and hospitality to the least of these.

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