

# Legacy Tips & Tools

The Value of Listening -- June, 2007

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## Celebrating the Blessings of Listening

Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen wrote in *Bread for the Journey*, "To listen is very hard....much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you."

Nouwen indicates that listening, spiritual hospitality, is a gift to the one listened to. Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener, professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion suggests the opposite, that listening transforms the listener. Listen to her words: "....Listening, really listening, is a truly demanding and complex activity, which offers the listener an opportunity for growth. When we truly listen to someone, when we hear not only the words, but also their importance to the speaker on an emotional level, we are transformed. By reflecting on another's words, we come face-to-face with who we are, and the assumptions and judgments we bring with us...when we listen, we find that, in the end, it is we who change. It is we who benefit from the opportunity to see anew someone whom we [may] have judged harshly in the past."

Listen to a participant in Parker Palmer's 'circle of trust': "I learned to listen openly for the soul of another, for that which is genuine and sacred....I saw that this was the way I could put love into practice—by listening selflessly with complete attention to another." in *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*

Poet Judyth Hill teaches us in "Wage Peace"

Wage peace with your listening; hearing sirens, pray loud.  
Remember your tools: flower seeds, clothespins, clean rivers.

And finally listen to a prayer to God by Elie Wiesel in *One Generation After*: "I no longer ask You for either happiness or paradise; all I ask of You is to listen and let me be aware of Your listening."

Reflecting and writing about the value of listening: Explore your listening experience. Spend no more than 15 minutes each time you write. Return as often as you choose -- adding to and deepening your understanding and appreciation of listening. Here are some suggestions to reflect and write about:

1. Begin by making a list of your favorite things to listen to? Then draw a line beneath your favorite things, and make a list of those things that you can't stand listening to.
2. Muse about Nouwen, Wiener, Palmer, Hill, and Wiesel's writing about listening. What allows you to listen most fully? What gets in the way of your listening? What do you value about listening? What do you appreciate about being listened to? If you wanted to be a better listener, what would you have to change in yourself?
3. Connect listening to legacy: How do you want to be remembered as a listener? Write a listening blessing for yourself for your life today, and a blessing for someone you love for the future. (Editing tips: Put your blessings away for a day or more before you re-read and edit them. Ask yourself whether what you wrote conveys a sincere blessing, and is neither a disguised demand or command). Then write a 15-minute letter to someone you care for, expressing your thoughts about listening and yourself as a listener; include/conclude with your listening blessing.



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