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## Open Ears, Open Mind, Open Heart: Active Listening

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## **Open Ears, Open Mind, Open Heart: Active Listening**

Active listening is the act of listening with all senses— the body, the mind, and the soul. It means empathizing with another person and finding that place within ourselves where we can listen beyond our initial judgements and personal feelings. It is listening beyond words and allowing our souls to understand, connect, and accept one another. Active listening sparks internal purity eliminating all types of judgement and allowing us to truly take in what another person has to offer. It is “an experience of language as a bodily felt process” in which we have a felt understanding rather than a cognitive understanding (Levin, 1998, p. 319). Active listening has the potential to create transformation by eliminating internal imbalance allowing us to act in ways that limit bias and create raw, genuine experiences in which we open ourselves to one another and allow people to see each other for who we are as individuals.

### **The Problem: Judgement**

As a student my knowledge is challenged. As a young adult my wisdom is assumed. As an Asian American I am stereotyped by the shape of my eyes. As a woman my abilities are questioned. As an individual, I am constantly being judged. Judgement is made as the human mind works to categorize what we see, but “when human beings try to assign a pattern rather than train themselves to receive what is there, they risk restricting the choice of details, and end up dismissing ‘the infinitude of the universe as relevant’” (Whitehead, 1938, p. 57). Judgement is part of human nature but whether it is positive or negative, towards others or ourselves, it is important to be wary of how we react and respond to what we see on the surface because often times it is not what it seems to be. Misunderstandings happen when we fail to listen and make assumptions. Failing to listen results in pain, suffering, sadness, trauma, and self-doubt but when we listen we create a sense of belongingness, warmth, community, and reassurance. In a variety of instances from the workplace to school settings to correctional facilities active listening has proven to encourage personal growth as well as community and societal growth. It has the potential to impact people from any and all backgrounds— children, the elderly, those with mental illnesses, those who have experienced trauma, immigrants. Everyone has their own experiences and opinions when they enter a conversation or situation with another person. It is when we allow these biases to interfere and alter what we hear or how we understand what a person is

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saying, that we fail to experience people and what they have to offer as individuals. Our inability to truly listen is where we have failed each other. Why not avoid all of this by opening our ears and listening to those who can open our hearts and minds?

### **A Case Study on Listening**

Not only have I experienced the effectiveness of active listening in my own life but I have also seen the impact it can have on specifically a group of Vietnamese seniors working to adapt to the American culture following war traumas. When we actively listen we are opening our hearts and minds to a world that we once blinded ourselves to with our own biases. Active listening allows us to see and hear beyond our internal biases and genuinely acknowledge the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. Through my work with the Asian American Alliance of Marin I have been able to see how active listening in the Vietnamese community can truly benefit not only people as individuals, but specifically seniors with childhood war traumas who are now learning to adapt to the American culture. This community supports Vietnamese seniors with their mental health, preparation for the citizenship test, connection with those of the same cultural background, and adaptation to life in America. Leadership within the group also consists of those who belong to the Vietnamese community allowing them to understand the culture and better support the seniors. Each week I come to group, the environment is welcoming, kind, loving, and happy. One of the seniors cooks each week and we eat, talk, and play games led by the doctor. The doctor and leadership team participate in the activities alongside the seniors and speak to them with such respect despite their education level. I have noticed that the competitive games we play make up some of the most inspiring moments at the facility. It is within these moments when I feel, and see the seniors become most engaged and filled with energy. Typically, the doctor runs the game while the volunteers and other staff members participate with the seniors. Each game we play that includes a competitive factor always creates an environment that is fun, full of laughter and excitement. The seniors become so competitive and engaged that they often win the games. It is the one time that the barriers (citizenship status, language, education level, etc.) society has placed on them are removed. It is the one time they are equals to others in the society they live in.

The leadership portrayed in this group is what makes it a truly unique and vital to the community. The staff are willing to listen to the seniors' stories and make sure that the seniors listen to each other. This is what inspires me each week to come back—leaders who are willing to listen, respect others, and treat them as equals despite the differences they may have. The doctor and her team are leaders who act dialogically, who liberate and are liberated (Freire, 1968). This type of leadership creates a domino affect. When they choose to treat the seniors as equals, they are leading by example and encouraging the seniors to treat others with the same amount of

respect and equality despite their differences. While the seniors still pass judgement on one another and will sometimes speak over each other, the presence and mediation of the doctor and her team, helps to maintain an environment for learning. We find joy and appreciation in each other because we have learned to listen actively. Through each of the senior's individual ability to better listen, they together, have created an environment that is peaceful and safe to express thoughts and feelings.

Although the doctor has set up a safe environment in which the seniors are able to openly talk about themselves and share their stories, many choose not to go into detail about their private lives. Some are simply more private people who choose not to disclose their personal lives while others aren't completely comfortable talking in group settings and prefer to share their stories with the doctor alone. One of the seniors, Beanie, was a soldier for the South in the Vietnam war and had shared with the doctor that his job was to pick up the bodies and send them back home to their families but he had never fought in the front lines. Despite openly telling the doctor this story, he chose not to share it when he was interviewed for the Oral History Project— a project in which Vietnamese seniors are interviewed and recorded about their past to preserve their stories. The doctor believes he didn't completely share his story because he doesn't believe it's worth sharing. In comparison to other soldiers, he doesn't believe his role is as interesting and because of this it's not worth listening to. It seems as if a lot of the seniors feel this way. Whether it be believing that it is simply irrelevant, wanting to protect their families from their traumas, or being ashamed of where they come from, many of the seniors shy away from telling their stories. They fail to realize how important their history is and how important it is to share and preserve it for future generations.

We have created a society where those who are different feel ashamed and unimportant; a society where they hide their differences and find ways to conform abandoning their heritage and culture. In doing so, we have created a society that is blind to the uniqueness and the beauty “we possess the essence of” (Angha p. 21). If we want to create a community that is inviting of all differences and open ourselves to the beauty of each individual, we must ask ourselves how this happens and why this happens. Why do we choose to close our eyes and plug our ears to what people's differences can reveal to us, teach us? Only when we choose to actively listen and allow our biases to flow through us will we be able to create change and welcome differences. We must be “ready to face these doors as they open” rather than cowering behind our fears of what differences may bring (King, 1967). When we actively listen we invite others to share freely. We create the kind of environment that the doctor creates for the seniors.

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## **Barriers to Listening**

Entering any situation, judgement is passed the minute we look at a person; but when we follow these initial judgments with open minds and active listening, these barriers can be torn down opening the doors to genuine awareness, compassion, and empathy for those around us. In the memoir *True Notebooks*, Mark Salzman visits the Los Angeles Central Juvenile Hall to teach a writing course to young men. Through his time there, Salzman reevaluates his own stereotypes along with the stereotypes given to the criminal community as well as insight into the minds of boys within the system. As Salzman learns more about the boys as individuals and listens to them and their stories, his initial judgements slowly fade allowing him to better understand the boys and community that he works with. Salzman's journey begins with him making a list as to whether or not he should visit a class at juvenile hall simply because he can't find a way to say no to the people who asked him to come visit and sit in on a session with the boys. His list consists of a lot of assumptions about a group of people he had never truly interacted with as individuals:

- students all gangbangers; feel unqualified to evaluate poems about AK-47s
- still angry about getting mugged in 1978
- still angry about having my apartment robbed in 1986
- still angry about my wife's car being stolen in 1992
- wish we could tilt L.A. County and shake it until everybody with a shaved head and tattoos falls into the ocean (Salzman, 2003, p. 9)

Although these might be the thoughts and assumptions that Salzman begins with, as he starts to run his own writing class, Salzman quickly finds that these boys are not at all what he thought they would be. They are children who "never had a chance, never got the guidance and attention they needed from adults" and because of this, they turned to gangs who "[make] them feel part of something, it provides structure, and it gives them opportunities to prove themselves (Salzman, 2003, p. 26)." He comes to realize that these boys, despite the conditions they may be under, are extremely talented and thoughtful writers with incredible stories. Salzman learns to listen to the boys— something no one else ever did. He laughs with them, empathizes with them, but also understands that he cannot change their situations. He becomes inspired by them, so much so that "they made [him] decide to have children of [his] own" (Salzman, 2003, p.330). These boys become individuals to Salzman because he listened beyond his initial judgements.

Similarly to Salzman, I found myself experiencing my own judgement in the community that I work with. Although I approached the Vietnamese group I work with mostly with an open heart, I did have some initial judgements that I had carried over from my experiences in the Vietnamese community and from what my parents had told me about the community growing

up. Despite my initial judgements, like Salzman, my perception of the Vietnamese community changed through my service at the Asian American Alliance of Marin (AAAM) where I work with predominately Vietnamese seniors. Growing up I had gotten the impression that people who belong to the Vietnamese community and those who grow up in the traditional culture are people who are deceptive, loud, and selfish. As I spent more and more time with the seniors in the group, I found that this was not at all the characteristics that they embody. The seniors in this community are kind, helpful, loving, and warm-hearted people despite the trauma and inhumane circumstances they have faced in their lifetime. I listened to them and the more I listened, the more I understand and the more I saw them as individuals. I stopped patterning the community because I listened to them open heartedly and with internal purity. I removed my own prejudices, personal emotions, and personal experiences by truly listening to each member of the group as an individual understanding that we cannot categorize people because everyone is different.

As I listened to the seniors, I learned about the harsh conditions that some of the people in this community live under in both their own communities and since coming to the United States because of the societal barriers they face. Listening to their stories and getting to know them as individuals allowed me to overcome my own initial judgements and biases:

- loud and obnoxious people
- they're all manipulative and money driven
- self-motivated with weird superstitions
- tan people with pointy hats carrying bags of trash hanging off a stick
- all nerdy kids with glasses who only care about school
- all doctors and lawyers or trying to be at least

Although I had reshaped my thoughts and opinions about the Vietnamese community allowing myself to openly listen to them, I realized that our society has placed barriers on this community because of our own dismissive assumptions and blind prejudices as I once did. For example, one of the seniors, B, has been working towards passing her citizenship test but because her medical waiver has been denied each time, she has now taken the test five times. She has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Prior to joining the county program, and because of her struggle to become of a citizen, an intern had decided to take on her case so that the county could provide her mental and healthcare services while support her through the struggles she faces as someone who is still adapting to life in America. Since the intern has left, the county has agreed to continue to support her until she passes her citizenship test. Each time she goes in to take her test, the proctor requires her doctor to complete detailed paperwork but it never seems to be up to the proctor's standards. Because of this, the proctor has her take the entire exam. The exam is completely oral

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and she must struggle through the whole exam despite the fact that she will clearly fail without some type of accommodation. This has become a traumatizing process for her so much so that she has begun hiding the fact that she hasn't passed or telling people that she has passed out of shame and embarrassment. She has seen the inside of that office countless times whether it be to take a citizenship test or in attempts to receive accommodations. She has begun to worry about how much it will cost if she continues to fail the test and the effects it will have on her daughter to have to take time off work to take her. Our unwillingness to listen to each other as a society has created turmoil within ourselves as individuals, within our families, and within our communities. Disagreements and opposing opinions are inevitable, but we must begin to listen to those around us if we want to create a society in which we will not self-destruct.

### **Healing Through Active Listening**

Not only does active listening have the potential to create societal change, but internal change as well. When an individual learns to listen to him or herself, that individual touches his or her soul and breaks free of the aestheticization that society has placed us in. We learn to hear what our conscious mind (thoughts, memories, feelings, and wishes of which we are aware of at any given moment) as well as what our subconscious mind (a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of our conscious awareness) is trying to tell us aside from the influences and opinions of our peers, family, and society (Cherry & Gans, 2017). From there we are able to transform ourselves as individuals allowing us to better understand ourselves and as a result, better understand those around us.

I have seen the internal transformation active listening has had specifically through an interview I had conducted with a member from my community partner. T was ten years old when he was given an ID bracelet from his parents and told to carry a bag of rice as he watched the planes fly overhead and the bombs explode around his home. He grew up during the the Vietnam war and experienced extreme hunger following the fall of Saigon when North Vietnam had officially won the war. Because him and his family were South Vietnamese, they were punished and had limited food. His dad was sent to reeducation camp where he was forced to conform to the communist regime. T and his family suffered greatly from the conditions and treatment that the North placed on the South. "We lost everything" he said. T has not since returned to Vietnam because he feels "his country never loved him." T and his family left Vietnam as soon as they could but "[they] will never forget the trauma they experienced." Because of T's traumatic experiences, he has a great appreciation for the United States and the opportunities this country

has given him but continues to face issues related to his trauma. T struggles with over buying food at the supermarket because of how hungry he was as a child and fears reaching this level of hunger again. He also struggles with speaking up because he fears retaliation and being rejected. When asked how he copes with these issues he says “he will never get out of it, but he can get better” and learn to cope. He says that “when [he] sees the negative come in, [he] has to remind [himself] to respond in a way that doesn’t get [him] personally because [he] knows that different people will come to [him] with different discriminations but [he] has to find a way to handle the situation better.” He works towards being a better person, the bigger person and responding in the right way rather than lashing out. For those who experience the same traumas as him he encourages them to keep talking about it and to enjoy their moments because we all die one day. He encourages them to think of themselves and to do the things they want to do because they have been given the wonderful gift of freedom (T. Nguyen, personal interview, April 18, 2017).

Like many, growing up I feared judgement and did everything I could to meet societal expectations for a young woman. This eventually drove me to an eating disorder that only through listening to myself did I truly learn what the path to recovery would look like for me. I began to ignore what my body, mind, and heart were telling me. At a point in my life I had a lot of anger towards the person in the mirror. I hated everything there was to hate about a person and I thought I deserved to be punished for everything I wasn’t and couldn’t be. This eventually drove me to Anorexia– an eating disorder with the highest mortality rate of any mental disorder. I felt unheard by others so I eventually stopped speaking and lost the confidence to listen to myself and my body. I had lost the truth that “beauty is born with us [and] we have been created in the figure and form of beauty;” the truth that I didn’t need to be perfect (Angha, p. 21). It wasn’t until three or four years after my diagnosis that I started listening to my body again and slowly regained my confidence to voice my opinions and beliefs, but even now I still live in fear of negative judgement and being unheard.

Despite constantly feeling the judgement of others and the pressures of society, I learned to listen to myself again. During a group therapy session a young girl shared how she felt that being hospitalized again had been a major setback for her. She reminded me so much of myself: driven, resilient, ambitious, but so broken. I shared with her my belief that hospitalizations aren’t setbacks but rather, it’s giving your body time to heal and catch up with your mind. In this moment I realized that I was not only speaking to her, but to myself as well. I learned to listen to myself again by speaking aloud and allowing myself to feel what I needed to feel. I stopped denying myself of my feelings, of what my body was telling me I needed, and of my ability to truly listen to myself. I had always thought that recovery was a journey to learning to eat again and rewriting the manual to my body, but that was never the case. Recovery was never learning



to cope or manage. Recovery is a journey towards looking at the world differently, looking at myself differently, and learning to listen to the me that is pure of heart and intentions. It is learning to listen to dig deeper within myself below the noise. If we want our world to go through reform, to go through its own recovery, we must begin the process of first healing ourselves. We must change the relationship we have with ourselves by listening to our internal purity.

## **Conclusion**

I have found that along with service, listening is my practice. It is “[my] vow, [my] commitment, to engage fully and honestly in practice to wake up the benefit of all sentient beings” (Ranciere, 1991, p. 9). We need to wake up to the idea that active listening will create change in our world. It has the potential to create societies, communities, and a world where people no longer live in fear of themselves (the color of their skin, the shape of their eyes, their income level, their educational degree) and how who they are will affect the way they are perceived and treated by others. We need to make it our practice to create a positive change for future generations so that they don’t live with this fear. Most people will hear what others say, but they won’t listen allowing noise and voices to go in one ear and out the other rather than genuinely processing what someone has to say and taking the time to understand what it means. We all experience thoughts, feelings, and biases when listening to someone talk. We are constantly thinking of what to say next and how to respond to what we are processing but we need to learn to listen while allowing our thoughts, feelings, past experiences, and biases flow through us to experience what people are saying and feeling, their reality. We then can work together to have a conversation and come to a common understanding, a bodily felt understanding of what is being said. Through my personal experiences and in my observations, I have learned that there are many different ways of disregarding people. It can be the way someone looks at another person, what someone says, or even what someone doesn’t say but when we listen, so much is explained and much more is understood about the situation and the person giving the message. If we want a kinder, more empathetic, and humane society, we must learn to listen to one another and not limit ourselves to patterns. With the ability to listen and quiet our judgement towards others, our society would be able to not only open our eyes to diversity and better understand those in our community but serve each other in a kinder more empathetic way.

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