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LISTENING: AN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE FOR SERVANT-LEADERS

by

Kae Reynolds

LISTENING: AN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE FOR SERVANT-LEADERS

Kae Reynolds

The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen [heard] or even touched; they must be felt with the heart. —H. A. Keller (2003, p. 98)

Hearing people are, as matter of circumstance, constantly bombarded with auditory input: the car radio, street noise, MP3 players, a neighbor's conversation—even the wind in their ears. Similarly, the seeing have little choice but to tolerate continual visual stimulation that surrounds them. Somehow, people learn to evaluate and filter sensory input and remain oriented in the world. Leaders, as decision-makers, visionaries, and role models must be attuned to the needs of people and organizations (Greenleaf, 2002) and have a heightened ability to filter out the proverbial noise and discern between the senses and the spirit. The purpose of this paper is to present a discussion and literature review of listening in the contexts of servant-leadership, otherness, and ethics. The review draws on literature particularly from servant-leadership (Spears, 2003; Greenleaf, 2002), deaf epistemology (Hauser et al., 2010; Holcomb, 2010; Schriempf, 2009), and listening studies (Lipari, 2009; Schotter, 2009). Listening, it is argued, must be conceptualized less as the processing of sound and more as an ethical imperative, i.e. opening the heart to otherness. Suggestions for listening activities as an application of the ideas presented are offered in the appendices.

The question that drove this literature review about listening in servant-leadership originally emerged out of a personal experience. While attending a course in feminist epistemology a fellow student made a comment that caused me to think twice about the concept of voice. Feminist epistemology, as presented by Belenky et al. (1986/1997), concerns itself in

part with voice as a metaphor for access to participation in defining what counts in society. The authors' process of receiving women's otherness and discovering women's ways of knowing involved intentionally offering women the opportunity to communicate how they come to know their world and listening to women's stories. Belenky et al. contrasted the dominant metaphor of positivism, sight and seeing with the metaphor often associated with epistemological paradigms of constructivism and interpretivism: voice (p. 18). Feminist perspectives in research often invoke this metaphor as do critical research perspectives in discussing struggles against oppression. As it turned out, my fellow student was a member of the deaf/hearing impaired community. He expressed a concern that this metaphor of voice was not adequate for addressing and embracing otherness and, in fact, excluded people lacking access to verbal communication. When applied in broader terms of otherness, as in the example of the deaf, hearing and speech impaired, this metaphor does not achieve an adequate level of abstraction. His statement compelled me to consider listening in leadership from a perspective of otherness by using deafness as a lens to analyze how deaf ways of knowing can inform the skill of listening.

Listening

Listening can be understood as one element of the communication process. Definitions of communication vary according to the frame of reference. One definition emphasizes the means to convey a message: "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of *symbols, signs, signifiers, or behavior*" (Communication, Merriam-Webster, 2012b). Another presents a results-oriented focus: "a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding in which participants exchange information, *create, and share meaning*" (Communication, BusinessDictionary, 2012a). The communication process can also be

understood as a social process: the moment-to-moment process of negotiating meaning and *managing the tension between creativity* [identity, the individual] *and constraint* [society, the organization] (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2009, p. 32). Hoppe (2011) called listening a state of mind that involves suspending one's own frame of reference, judgment, and internal mental activities. The International Listening Association provided this definition of listening: "Listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or non-verbal messages" (International Listening Association, n.d.). Noise, is understood as anything that gets in the way of a message being conveyed properly (DeVito, 1986). Listening, therefore, entails much more than the words that go in one ear... In fact, listening is more about the social negotiation of identity. With this understanding, listening becomes an ethical activity: a call to conscience that questions our listening behavior: To what do we listen? When do we listen? Are we really listening? How are our values reflected in our listening choices? How do we listen?

Greenleaf on Listening

Among the ten characteristics that Spears (2003) identified, listening is particularly pervasive throughout Greenleaf's (2002) conceptualization of servant-leadership. Greenleaf stated: "Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*" (p. 31). In his discussion of listening and understanding he described the extents to which a person may need to go in order to learn to truly listen, suggesting that leaders should withdraw from superfluous input (p. 30). Taking time for retreat and regeneration, resisting information bombardments and sensory stimuli, and simply being present with communication partners are markers of servant-leader practices (Greenleaf). Listening is central to the notion of serving.

Greenleaf argued further that a person, who by nature is not accustomed to the practice of serving, could acquire the skills of serving through “a long arduous discipline of learning to listen” (p. 31).

Several other characteristics of servant-leaders that Spears (2003) described and Greenleaf (2002) wrote about result from the engagement of listening: awareness, perception, acceptance, and empathy. Servant-leaders expend great efforts to attend to the needs of others. Greenleaf added that “nothing is meaningful until it is related to the hearer’s own experience” (p. 32). A needs-focused attitude requires the capacity of engrossment (Noddings, 2003): acknowledgement and receiving the other through motivational displacement, intent, and attentiveness—activities that entail much more than just processing sound. Listening and hearing also require a sense of humility—a sense of openness to receive rather than to give. Greenleaf (2002) noted that giving (i.e. speaking, directing, exercising authority) bears the risk of arrogance and a manner of imposing. Receiving another person—another’s otherness—in contrast “requires a genuine humility that may be uncomfortable and difficult to achieve” (p. 325). Acknowledging, accepting, and empathizing also requires openness—a capacity and willingness to think beyond one’s own boundaries. Goulston (2010) referred to this process as rewiring oneself to see people as they really are.

True listening engages more of the senses than mere auditory processing. It engages our skills for reading facial expression and body language, deciphering contextual cues, our cultural knowledge, and identity. Listening in a broader sense means “opening wide the doors of perception so as to enable one to get more of what is available of sensory experience and other signals from the environment than people usually take in (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 40). Greenleaf

described listening as a relational attitude of accepting others as persons and promoting growth: “True listening builds strength in other people” (p. 31). The importance of a servant-leader’s attitude of openness is further emphasized in this passage:

Listening...is not just keeping still, or even remembering what is said. Listening is an attitude, an attitude toward other people and what they are trying to express. It begins with a genuine interest that is manifest in close attention, and it goes on to understanding in depth...It is openness to communication—openness within the widest frame of reference—openness to hear the prophetic voices that are trying to speak to us all of the time. (p. 313)

Leaders need to listen in order to serve. They must be able to accept and tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty in order to remain open for others and for possibilities. Greenleaf’s (2002) extensive attention to listening and suggestion that people can become better servants by listening better begs the question: How can we learn to listen better? Greenleaf called on leaders to withdraw from noise. Keller called on people to feel with the heart. By developing ideas about learning to listen based on an understanding of how the deaf listen, leaders may gain a fresh perspective of true listening and servanthood.

Deaf Epistemology

It is possible for a hearing person to imagine some of the limitations encountered by the deaf, the hearing or speech impaired concerning the terms listening and voice. The hearing take such terms for granted as does servant-leadership literature. The discrimination and exclusion of the deaf based on a hegemonic ideology of auditory communication is called audism and is grounded in a specific theory of what counts as human (Hauser, et al., 2010). Deaf epistemology

describes and problematizes the way the deaf develop knowledge and experience their subjectivity in a predominantly auditory learning environment (Hauser et al.). In developing deaf epistemology and an understanding the nature of knowledge, Hauser et al. described the deaf as visual learners and knowers. As such, the deaf allocate greater attention to visual peripheries and visual/physical (movement and tactile) cues. Holcomb (2010) argued that only members of disenfranchised groups, such as the deaf, can acquire knowledge of truth about members' way of knowing that may serve to end their oppression. In other words, only the deaf can express "deaf ways of being in the world, of conceiving that world and their own place within it" (Ladd cited in Holcomb, 2010, p. 472).

Deaf being and knowing (i.e. deaf ontology and epistemology) are problematic by the sheer limitation of access to modes of expression and receipt by communication partners. Schriempf (2009), a member of the signing deaf community, developed a concept of communicability to describe this accessibility issue. She noted that communication is primarily defined as speech—sound speech. She also asserted that subjectness (identity or what counts as human) is defined by articulateness—the ability to produce sound speech in a manner that can be received and understood (Schriempf): "Articulateness is the voice of the normalized and idealized white male" (p. 280). The deaf community, however, in contrast to the hearing, is disassociated from speech (Holcomb, 2010). Members of society who have disabled voices cannot access articulateness as do the voice enabled. In the case of deaf developing a voice i.e. a mode and vehicle for expressing their knowledge the issue shifts to accessibility, i.e. gaining access to being received (Holcomb). As such, listeners (voice recipients) are challenged to hear (to acknowledge and embrace) disabled voices (otherness).

Deaf epistemology as discussed by Hauser et al. (2010) and Holcomb (2010) deals to a large extent with (a) the reality that deafness defines the ontology and epistemology as a struggle for access to communication, mobilization of expression, facilitating and enabling the receipt of communication, and (b) a struggle to end discrimination and oppression of audism. As servant-leaders we are challenged to acknowledge and embrace the voices of knowledge and subjectivity *as* they are expressed and not solely based on criteria of epistemological hegemony. Receiving the *other* entails listening beyond the boundaries of sound speech and representational language. Thus, the lesson that deaf epistemology teaches the servant-leader is to acknowledge multiple ways of being and knowing and embrace otherness.

Listening as an Ethical Imperative

While the emphasis in communication is often placed on speaking, Lipari (2009) argued that ethical response and ethical engagement in human interaction is grounded in the act of receiving otherness. In Lipari's analysis, listening is to intentionally engage in *unknowing*, that is in being open and receptive to something or someone that is other, to be awakened and attuned to difference. She stated: "ethics arises from a process of listening that is committed to receiving otherness [or]...*listening otherwise*" (p. 45). Lipari also stressed through listening otherwise and being attuned to difference communication is embedded in empathy, compassion, and understanding. These human capacities to receive and allow ourselves to be vulnerable to reception tease out ethical response. By engaging in the reception of otherness we experience our intersubjectivity that is the self as self-in-relation (Lipari). As we (truly) listen (i.e. receive) we respond and become *responsible*.

Schotter (2009) also wrote about listening as an ethical imperative in relation to otherness. He based his discussion on the social construction of identity—that one's being and knowing is dependent on others' responses. Schotter argued that ethical values precede knowledge of others and otherness. Schotter integrated physical embodiment of being into communication and claimed that how we move and exist physically in the world is inseparable from our expression and knowing. With this claim he placed importance on the locatedness in time and space of those expressing themselves and those receiving. As living beings we are intricately intertwined with and inseparable from our environment. Therefore, communication as an ethical act centers on the wholeness of living beings, their impact on their environment, and vice versa. In other words, Schotter argued, we are “continually concerned with how to ‘be’ in the world (p. 27). He suggested that what one expresses is directly impacted by one's assessment of how one *is* within environmental otherness and how one can be *known* within otherness.

Listening as accepting and acknowledging others is an active, responsive attitude (Schotter, 2009). Our identity is intricately and inseparably intertwined with shared reality sustained by sense of the collective *we*. The sense of being received provides a sense of safety (Goulston, 2010). The ethical issue at hand based on Schotter (2009) is that when the collective *we* collapses, the unheard or unknown other's identity collapses and disrupts one's orientation in the world. Schotter implied further that continual detachment, distancing, and exclusion from the collective *we* leads not only to loss of identity but also loss of a sense of interconnectedness, interdependence, and intersubjectivity. The result, Schotter suggested, is an inability to commit oneself to purposeful action in the spirit of collective values. Schotter noted that a recipient can arouse within the one expressing oneself a “distinctive and recognizable ‘feeling of being

heard” (p. 21). Goulston (2010) referred to this engrossment of the listener in the communication partner as letting that person “feel felt” (p. 50). In summary, Lipari’s (2009) and Shotter’s (2009) arguments challenge us as servant-leaders to attach ethical responsibility to how we experience, acknowledge, and accept otherness and how we convey the activity of feeling with the heart to communication partners.

Conclusion

Greenleaf (2002) wrote, “someday we will learn what a great handicap language is” (p. 32). This review of literature presented arguments to support Greenleaf’s prediction by conceptualizing listening as accessibility to being received and ethical intersubjectivity regardless of verbal or linguistic representation. Through the understanding that knowing another person, knowing their needs, or knowing about a problem entails a process of acknowledging and embracing the subjectivity of others through communicability (Schriempf, 2009), we can better understand how a servant-leader must receive others and otherness. As servant-leaders we must view listening and giving voice as an ethical imperative. We must strive to improve our acknowledgement of others’ self-expression and commit ourselves to the growth of others’ own skill development for perception, attention, and acceptance. As we move beyond the paradigms of positivism and constructivism and their corresponding metaphors of seeing and listening, a metaphor for the emergent paradigm might be sensing and feeling.

Helen Keller once stated: “The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but no vision” (Keller, cited in Williams, 2002, Paradox 1: A visionary leader sees what is not there). Perhaps the most pathetic leader in the world is someone who can hear but doesn’t listen. Insights from deaf epistemology and the ethics of listening demonstrate that listening is

much more than processing verbiage. As servant-leaders we are challenged to take a leap of imagination and open our minds to otherness; we need to learn not only to process sound and language but to tune our awareness and perception to be acutely attentive to and willing to receive a variety of cues: cues of context, cues of body language, cues of identity, subjectivity and location, visual cues, and instinctual cues. We must accept the ethical imperative to receive otherness. We must learn to listen otherwise in order to serve.

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APPENDIX A: EXAMPLES

Leaders Otherwise

Discussion prompt 1

Once I knew only darkness and stillness... my life was without past or future... but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness and my heart leaped to the rapture of living. –H. A. Keller (1903, p.13)

Find examples of some famous leaders and artists who represent otherness and challenge the dominant culture's perception of their otherness. Present some of their names without any further information and ask the group what the people named have in common. Show some clips or other media to illustrate. Relate the splendor of these leaders' and artists' accomplishments to the above quote from Helen Keller to generate discussion about what we miss out on when we are not curious about and do not embrace otherness.

For example, here are three names of reknowned deaf or hearing impaired leaders and their accomplishments:

- Vinton Cerf: award-winning scholar and one of the founders of the Internet
- Juliette Low: founder of the Girl Scouts of the USA
- Helen Keller: author, activist, and founder of Helen Keller International

Discussion prompt 2

These are video clips available on the Internet. In connection with the theme deaf ways of knowing, the clips showcase deaf performers, especially deaf musicians: a culture and community that may at first be quite unimaginable for the hearing.

- ABC News feature clip about Signmark, a deaf rap musician and performer:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLrH3AMV1zA&feature=fvsr>
- Music video trailer the documentary film “See What I’m Saying” about deaf entertainers:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fx9XJ9jml1g>
- Music video trailer of the documentary film “Touch the Sound” featuring the deaf Scottish percussionist, Evelyn Glennie:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Edkx6ovQ9YM>.
- The TED Talk “Evelyn Glennie shows how to listen” illustrates how “[Glennie’s] hearing loss brought her a deeper understanding of and connection to the music she loves” (TED, n.d., para. 3):
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen.html

APPENDIX B: ACTIVITIES

Listening to Silence

Activity 1

First Phase: Close your eyes and sit in silence for 30 seconds. Questions for reflection and discussion: How did that feel? What did you notice? Repeat if desired and lengthen time in increments of 30 seconds as desired and time allows. Participants may jot down observations at the end of longer sessions.

Second Phase: Now sit in silence with your eyes open for 30 seconds. Questions for reflection and discussion: How did that feel? What did you notice? What was different from sitting with your eyes closed? Repeat if desired and lengthen time in increments of 30 seconds as desired and time allows. Participants may jot down observations at the end of longer sessions.

Being Silent With a Partner

Activity 2

Third Phase adapted from “Belly-Talk” (TG Magazine, 1997, para. 7): Find a partner and stand facing each other. Stand in silence facing each other for 30 seconds. Questions for reflection and discussion: How did that feel? What did you notice? What sense of your partner did you get? Repeat if desired and lengthen time in increments of 30 seconds or more as desired and time allows. The original exercise suggests five minutes. Participants may jot down observations at the end of longer sessions.

Poetry Pantomime

Activity 3

This activity can be used to stimulate discussion about how we interpret nonverbal communication and listen without processing sound or language. Have several participants volunteer to divide up into two groups of two-four people. Each group is assigned a poem. The poems here are just suggestions; use any short poem you like or have participants bring one of their own. The groups are given 10-15 minutes to create and rehearse a silent performance of the poem, using only facial expression and body movement and spacing to express the messages of the poems. The groups perform for the rest of the participants. The audience is then asked to discuss what they saw and experienced. The performers also discuss with the group their experience.

Middlemarch by George Eliot

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. (Eliot, cited in Belenky et al, 1986/1997, p. 3)

APPENDIX C: REFLECTION

Servant-Listener Reflection

Reflection 1

What are some of your experiences with “otherness”?

How did they help you grow as a person?

Reflection 2

Good Listeners, adapted from “Active Listening” (Towards 2060, n.d.): Write the names of three people you consider good listeners. Questions for reflection and discussion: Can you think of three people? Has anyone written down the name of a person whom they don't like?

Leader/Mentor Communication, adapted from “Active Listening within the Mentoring Relationship” (The University of Adelaide, 2009): Think back to those friends, mentors, counselors, or family members who have had the biggest impact on you. Questions for reflection and discussion: How would you characterize the communication between you? What can you say about how they listened to you and let you feel felt?

Reflection 3

Questions for Further Reflection

Are you willing to be a servant-listener?

Are you willing to

- learn the skills of Active Listening?
- let others feel felt both in individual and in group situations?
- risk the joy and pain associated with opening up to otherness?

The following is an adaptation of selected questions for reflection on listening for servant-leadership from Frick (2011):

How does a servant-leader listen?

- Are we using strategies of Active Listening?
- Are we prepared to ask good questions and wait in silence for a response?
- Are we prepared to be present and grounded in order to receive our communication partner (CP)?
- Can we be quiet long enough to understand our CP?
- Are we thinking about our own ideas, our agreement or disagreement, what we plan to say next or focusing on our CP?
- What ritual can we use to let our CP know we are present and available?