

## Listening Atmosphere

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A listening atmosphere, as students of the art of listening know, isn't simply the décor of our office. The listening atmosphere we create is a representation of who we are (or who we are trying to be). If we are trying to be something other than who we are, that quality of trying becomes part of the atmosphere. And like an atmosphere, we breathe it. As students of listening we embrace the bias that authenticity is an essential element in listening. We believe, and have experienced, that when one is listening from a place of authenticity, or lack thereof, there is a corresponding effect on the speaker. We know that people recognize when they are really being listened to. And people know when someone isn't quite there. We particularly know this because of the times when we have been listened to. These times tend to be memorable because we share a common longing to be heard. But it doesn't occur all that frequently. We know that the most wonderful moments of being heard occur when the listener is present and authentic, yet it can still be a struggle for us to be authentic, genuine, real, sincere and unadulterated when we are the listeners. And perhaps unadulterated is the best word to spring-board us into our discussion. Unadulterated: pure, undiluted, nothing added. How do we give ourselves permission to be as we find ourselves when we are being asked to listen, to help, to be empathic, professional?

I remember when I first started my practice, when I was a psychotherapist, I was seeing another therapist who up until then had been quite lovely (read; compliant and non-challenging). One fine day she suddenly started yelling at me. And I mean yelling with great amplitude. I do not remember the content but I do recall how, just as suddenly, she stopped and said, "You're frozen, aren't you? You have no idea what to say." I responded, "I am thinking", which of course was avoidance. I was frozen, tongue-tied, freaked out, mute, anxious and

while we're being honest, stupefied. I thought I was covering it up pretty well until she nailed me to the wall. She came in one more time, told me to stop bullshitting around and quit. So much for pretending.

This week a new person came to see me saying, "I heard that you are amazingly intuitive and that you jump into issues and I know that you can help me." (I liked her right away). She wanted to know why she keeps choosing men that are not good for her. I listened with all my intuitive gusto and by the end of the session, when she asked me what I thought, I told her I had no idea yet as to what was going on. She looked at me blankly. "I guess that isn't what you were hoping for..." More silence. "Well, at least you know I won't cover up the unknown with cleverness." More silence. "Would you like to come in again?"

I know, right now you are thinking I was doing better with the whole frozen, not saying a word strategy. But what I didn't mention, for dramatic purposes, is that when I said those things I said them with authority. (Of course I look much better when I say pithy things with authority but hey...I had nothing). Authoritative confusion may be an oxymoron but at least it isn't moronic. It's strange but true. She could see that I wasn't overwhelmed. I could sit in the confusion she had been in for over a decade without the need to act the role of the know-it-all healer.

How can we listen without all the pressures (read additives) we assume especially as "professional" listeners? Is it possible to be authentically empathic 100% of the time and not assume a role, or space out or be distracted by life's vicissitudes? I have the authoritative answer to this question.

It is no. Well, it is sort of no with a qualified yes. Except, of course, when the answer is more akin to yes. Apart from when it is conjoined with a qualified no. In which case the answer is indubitably sometimes yes and all other times no. Meaning, as we all know, that this is the

wrong question and I'll thank the reader not to ask it again.

It is the type of question that engenders fear because it presumes that to be a good listener one must conform to some ideal. The right question may be a more empathically generated inquiry like: with all the inherent pressure of being a counselor who may believe that their listening is as never quite enough, how difficult is it to simply sit and listen? The answer may not be simple but at least it isn't based on some mythical notion as to what makes for a positive listening environment.

So it becomes clear that even our *wanting* to be authentic can become a role one plays. And that wanting can become part of the listening atmosphere we create.

Freud thought the most productive atmosphere was one of a surgeon's neutrality. Kohut believed that an empathic environment was best suited for listening, Rogers believed in unconditional positive regard, and Reik listened with the "third ear". Some folks decorate their offices like a womb, some like a medical office, some like an academic study, and others like a living room. And they are all doing it just right. They are creating a listening atmosphere that represents who they are. Or at least who they fancy themselves to be.

On a more subtle level the atmosphere we invite people into is a statement about what we believe about the world, about spirituality and about reality. And at essence, how we love.

I create an atmosphere that invites vulnerability because I value it. I value an environment that is accepting of what most people hope to avoid. Greed, aggression, self-hate, longing, dependency are all allowed and celebrated in this atmosphere. Neediness, confusion, isolation, rawness are all friends of mine. So the individuals who do pastoral counseling with me tend to go into those realms. I cannot help but to create a field within which my values are expressed. I am

irreverent and playful and my humor is frequently self-deprecating. I laugh with the people I work with (sometimes even about our own vulnerabilities) because I appreciate a humorous perspective which, when possible, takes life, and one's self, lightly.

When I consult with counselors I do not encourage them to re-create my environment. I support them to produce an atmosphere which reflects who they are and what they have to offer. If we try to be something to others which does not echo who we are then we are creating an atmosphere based on an ego ideal. We are creating a false atmosphere for individuals who come to us looking for the truth. And the speaker will pick it up. They may not say it, but they will feel it. I remember my friend Leah speaking to interns. She sat down, looked at the students and said. "I am so anxious right now", everyone laughed, she visibly settled down and had a great talk. If she had covered up her anxiety and pretended to have it all together the listening atmosphere would not have been as open and receptive as the one she created.

I include two vignettes to bring our discussion down to a more immediate level.

The first vignette speaks to a confusion which can occur when one is thinking the trajectory of the work is going one way and the speaker makes an unexpected left turn off the map. In other words how the atmosphere can suddenly go from breathable oxygen to hydrogen. The second vignette speaks to a mistake I made. The atmosphere I inadvertently created, the damage it did and a new atmosphere I attempted to create.

Ed was a 61 year-old physicist of renown. He came to me because his wife, whom I had worked with years earlier, "made" him. Her complaint was that he was unavailable, emotionally shut down, was uninvolved with the children and did nothing but work at the lab. Turns out she was right. Ed knew it, felt badly about it, but saw no way to change. He felt guilty but didn't miss his kids nor did he particularly want more time

with his wife. He was able to identify anger, particularly at his subordinates at the lab who, too frequently, distracted him from his many projects. But affects such as hurt, sadness or loneliness were alien to him except that he knew they were a sign of weakness. He knew himself to be superior to others as he had demonstrated throughout his schooling, his many scientific achievements and his success at weight lifting. He avoided social contact as he never knew what to say.

Our work was pretty heady stuff as that was the only way to converse with Ed. We discussed thoughts about feelings and why they might have shut down. He began to recall how distant and critical his father was and how punitive and humiliating his mother was. He recalled with great clarity the “sulking depressions” of his mother. She was able to communicate with particular intensity that he had disappointed her and that she would then collapse as a result. One particularly disturbing meeting was when Ed recalled how his mother would demand that he poop in the toilet and when he could not she would push a piece of soap in and out of his anus to “get things going”. He recalled the tearing pain and how immune his mother was to his pleas for her to stop. Ed started to feel anger toward his mother and this disturbed him as there was nothing to do about it because she was now just “an old blind woman 3,000 miles away” with whom he had “no contact anyway”. We were making progress and although it was slow, Ed had integrity and an increased desire to understand what had made him an emotionally vacant man. And I felt committed to him and the work we were doing.

One day I received a phone message from Ed telling me he had decided to stop working with me, thanks for everything and if he owed me any money to send a bill. I was stunned. Was I completely mistaken as to the atmosphere Ed and I had mutually created? After I got over the voices in my mind saying, “how could he be so cavalier and disrespectful after all the hard work I had done and hadn’t he himself said that he thought the work was so valuable and wasn’t it with me that he shed his first tear since childhood” and blah blah self righteous “I am too of value”,

self-pitying how dare he treat me this way, “Hey Mr. Scientist, my practice is full and I have eight people on a waiting list” kind of self-talk, I had to consider how I should proceed.

(If you have read any of my articles you know that at some point I devolve into a hyperbolic diatribe about some unattractive aspect about myself, usually articulating the spinning of my mind. I hope to make the point that we do not need to cover up those aspects of ourselves. When I write like this I am not putting myself down. I am putting my “self” in perspective. If I turn up the volume on how the mind can run itself into a loop of criticism or isolation or doubt or disappointment or hurt or contempt or..., you get the point, then I can see with increased clarity the journey my mind has just taken. And then it is humorous, silly in fact in the context of what is really in front of me. In this case, Ed’s quitting and being unable to communicate it directly. And then I become, to my “self”, the kind of listener I am to others. For example, I tell myself that it is OK to have that kind of internal dialogue. There is a reason for it and it will probably teach me something. I do not have to take it so seriously that I call it pathology or stupid. Rather I recognize it is simply the mind at play. I can then find the humor in it and, most importantly for me, not identify with it.)

I had been trained to call him back and get him talking and explore why at this junction he was resistant. He was clearly avoiding something and was reacting with his familiar, well-trodden technique of shutting down and going away. I was certain this was true and equally knew that if I called him he would agree to come back for at least one session. And if he would come back for one he most likely would come in for two. I decided not to call. Was it because now, like his mother, I wanted to punish him for bad behavior? Was I too self-righteously injured to ask him to discuss what was going on? Had I done something wrong? Perhaps I had engaged in some subtle communication that had triggered him? Or was I perhaps unconsciously relieved that he was gone as I knew the difficult, façade-collapsing work was waiting around the

corner? All of these possibilities were worth considering. And the truth was they may have all been playing a role in my decision. And although I could (and did) argue with myself about my responsibility to my client, not calling him felt like the right thing to do. Against my training I didn't call Ed back. Nor did he call me.

Four years later Ed left a message, "Could we begin to work together again, I had a rage attack and punched a wall. Then I sobbed about what she did to me. Everything you said was true. I was just too afraid to feel all those feelings but they are here now and I need your help". Ed did come back to do the hard work and the superiority façade did collapse. Several weeks into our second chapter Ed was a different man. Crying at art shows because he was so "moved by the emotion" of a piece, crying out of empathy for victims of natural disasters and feeling an "aliveness" which he couldn't help laugh about each time he mentioned it.

One day I asked Ed if he knew why he had stopped seeing me and why he had communicated it over the phone machine rather than come in to tell me. "That's easy", he said., "I could sense that the next phase would be too hard and I was afraid, too afraid. So I avoided it. I did not tell you directly because I was sure that you would be hurt after all you had done for me and I couldn't stand that either. I could see what you would do to your face and body (he sunk into his chair and his face fell into his chest exactly as he had done in the past imitating his mother) and I just didn't want to see that. I realize now that my mother is everywhere. I constantly read what others expect of me and I feel so frightened that I will fail them." There was so much that I could have said about this, volumes really. I simply asked; "Is it possible to hurt me and for us to remain in contact?" He looked stunned and stared at me for about 30 seconds. "Wow. That's an alien idea. Could we talk about that next time?" This led to many discussions of how Ed controls people in the hope of not disappointing them and how he abandons himself by constricting all feeling and self expression. All in the hopes of avoiding failing in what he thinks others want of him. And, of course, the best

way to do this was not to speak to people at all. “Something very strange is occurring,” he once said, “when I leave here I want to talk to people and I do. And I enjoy it”.

The literature is replete with clinical vignettes with happy endings. Rarely does one read a story about someone’s mistake and its ongoing impact. What we like to believe, and what we are taught is that if we maintain clear (read rigid) boundaries those mistakes will not happen. And if they do, well... then it is not our responsibility but the client’s because we played within the rules.

DO NOT receive gifts is a well-known axiom among trained therapists. Investigate the meaning of the gift but do not gratify the client. Seek for the unconscious, latent, communication. That is a greater goal.

Dolores was beautiful, and brilliant. She had a long history of frustrated and unfulfilling relationships. She was presently in a relationship which was sexually stale and she wasn’t attracted to her partner. She spoke about her attraction to me and confided that she had sexual fantasies about me and thought about me when she was having sex with her partner. About a year into our work she brought me a gift, a book which was quite important to her. This, as all my training had taught me, was a no-brainer. DO NOT accept this gift and possibly inflame the erotic transference. It will only lead to other, more erotically charged, gifts whose acceptance will be seen by her as indicators that whatever phantasy she was elaborating was indeed a real possibility. I remember with great clarity my fear at the time. This was the proverbial no-win situation. As gently as I could I told her that I couldn’t accept the gift although I recognized how meaningful it was and how touched I was that she thought about me and that I was committed to talking with her about it and together understand what it meant to her. The book was quickly put back into her bag and out of sight. She said it was stupid of her to bring it. Any suggestions I made that we talk about it were met with “there is nothing to talk about” and that she respected my integrity



and my professional ethics.

Periodically Dolores would angrily point out that my “caring” about her (which she communicated with an unmistakable contempt) was mechanical and a result of top notch training but hardly real because we were not in a real relationship. In this she was completely wrong. I liked her very much, looked forward to seeing her and frequently thought fondly of her. This issue of my mechanical caring stayed with us for the next three years.

One day as I sat in my office I began to think about Dolores and how much I enjoyed working with her, what terrific work we had done, how grateful she was regarding how she had changed, and how she loved herself as never before. I began to cry, softly at first and then with more force. I didn't know why. I stayed open as I trusted that if I didn't close down, the wisdom within the tears would be revealed. Guilt and shame began to arise. Out of fear and behind the cloak of professional boundaries I had rejected her. If I wasn't willing to discuss my fear why should she believe my caring was authentic? I knew why. To expose my fear meant to compromise the authority of my position as the counselor (then a psychotherapist). Without that position I was vulnerable. Neutrality affords us great protection. And anyone who thought that counselors didn't need protection hadn't ever been a counselor and knew little about the shadow elements of humanity. And yet here were these tears. I had hurt her out of my own fear and that would never be acceptable. And just because three years had passed since we “didn't” talk about it (and I had rarely, perhaps for self-protective reasons, even thought about it) didn't mean it wasn't with us every day.

The next time she came into the office I asked if I could bring something up. “Remember the book you wished to give me three years ago?” “Yes” she responded a bit hesitantly. “I was wrong to not accept it. I was afraid of how you would interpret it and instead of trusting you and discussing my concern I tightened up. You deserved better than that. I see now how

much I hurt you and I understand that I hurt you out of my own fear". A long silence ensued as we looked at each other. She began to cry. "Is that it?" she asked. "Yes". Another long pause. "You do not want to tell me how inappropriate it was and how we should discuss it"? "Nope". Another long silence. "Will you talk to me about your fear?" "Yes". And I did. All of which she had already guessed and felt guilty about. "I hated putting you in that position". This led into a very productive exploration of how she felt with her mother who couldn't receive Dolores' love and demanded things of Dolores without those things ever leading to an increased closeness between them. An intersubjectivist would say we were engaged in a reenactment; the heart of the work. That may be so. But another truth is that I hurt Dolores because of my own limitations. Separate from a reenactment, I injured her. My anxiety got the best of me and we both suffered as a result.

I had created a listening atmosphere within which I (and Dolores) couldn't breathe. And for three years we suffered because of it. This is what fear can do. I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't tried to maintain a role and rather had told Dolores that the gift made me nervous and why. One thing is sure; the topic would not have remained silenced for three years.