

Give us ears. Amen.

Recognizing the privilege of listening to others

HELEN H. CEPERO

During my morning lap swim, as I followed the rhythm of lift, breathe, and kick, the words came to me with utter clarity, “Be quiet, just shut up.” A few more laps, and the words returned, “Be quiet.”

I had begun my swim that day remembering that I had a morning appointment with a student who very likely did not want to meet with me at all. Samantha sat in the back corner of the classroom at North Park Theological Seminary where I taught spiritual direction. Often arriving late, she sat with her arms crossed, her manner radiating sincere hostility. Today she would meet with me for our first spiritual direction time together, not because she chose to, but because it was required of her to pass the class. Recalling this meeting with some dread I again heard the words, “Be quiet.”

An hour later I was sitting across from Samantha and decided to follow what seemed to be a clear instruction to say nothing. I simply admitted, “I really know nothing about you, Samantha. What is your story?”

That’s almost all I said for the next hour. In the time that followed my opening question Samantha told me about living in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. She talked about the kids on the street corners and her efforts to befriend them. She told me about raising her family in the neighborhood and some of the pitfalls and threats that faced her own children. Then after a moment of more silence she told me about her own growing up years and her abusive stepfather and her stormy relationship with a mother who did

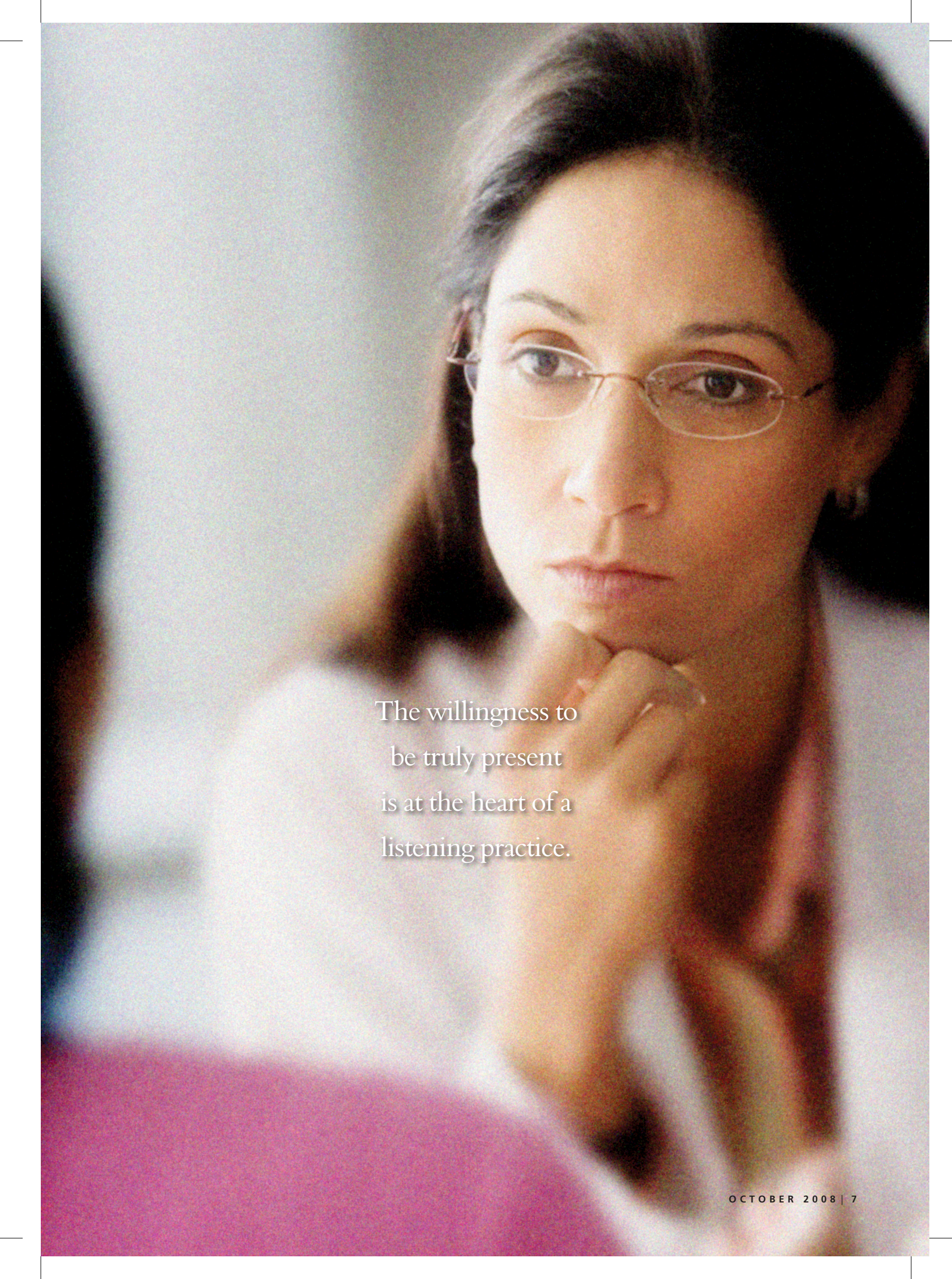
not protect Samantha from her husband’s sexual advances. At one point, I just sighed out the words, “Wow—that sounds so hard.” She simply nodded.

Then Samantha told me about her husband whom she loved deeply and the marriage ministry they shared together with couples whose marriages were struggling. I heard too about the gift of her faith and how her relationship with Jesus sustained her through all that had happened to her in the past and what she was experiencing right now in her life. I smiled as this story of hope unfolded out of such difficult circumstances.

When I told her our time together was nearly over, Samantha asked if she could pray. After praying, she looked up at me and said, “Well, that was not nearly as bad as I expected!” I asked if I could give her a hug, knowing that a barrier had broken down between us. I wondered how long it had been since she had told her story to someone else. I knew that I felt honored and privileged to be her listener that morning.

Though Samantha began our time together with a considerable distrust for me, her teacher, I think it was my willingness to simply listen, without claiming any other agenda or judgment, that disarmed her and allowed her to speak honestly. Listening to Samantha and connecting to her did not begin with my own active listening skills; it began by listening to the voice that said, “Be quiet, just shut up.” It began with my si-

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lent obedience, an obedience that is not always easy for someone as extroverted and full of suggestions as I am.

The word *obedience* actually comes from the Latin word *audire*; the root meaning is “to listen.” Though we may not think of it as a spiritual practice, listening—to God, to people around us, to creation, and to our own mind and heart—is a primary way we pay attention and understand. The willingness to be truly present is at the heart of a listening practice. Listening in this way seems simple, but attentive listening does not happen automatically. Like all spiritual practices, it is a choice that we make, and not necessarily an easy one.

Even though we spend about 45 percent of our time listening, we are often distracted and preoccupied. As soon as someone finishes speaking to us, we remember about half of what was said. Within a few hours we can recall only 20 percent of what was said. The average adult attention span is twenty-two seconds, according to marketing studies, and we live in a culture dominated by sight—television, Internet, video games, text messages, and email conversations all depend on sight and move more quickly than speech, writes Kay Lindahl in *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening*.

Furthermore, people speak at a much slower rate than we are able to think. It is not surprising that our minds race ahead of the words we hear, forming our own conclusion and judgments without really hearing others or truly understanding their experience.

Listening to God can be even more difficult. Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes this prayer in *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth*: “Our lives are occupied territory...occupied by a cacophony of voices, and the din undoes us. In the daytime we have no time to listen, beset as we are by anxiety and goals...and in the night the voices of

our mothers and fathers and our best friends and our pet projects because they all sound so much like you... We are listeners, but we do not listen well...Speak in ways that we can hear out beyond ourselves. It is your speech that carries us where we have never been, and it is your speech to us that is our only hope. So give us ears. Amen.”

The longing of those who seek to engage the spiritual practice of listening is in this prayer—“give us ears,” ears that are able to hear God, one another, and ourselves. One of the ears that helps us listen is what Mark Brady and Jennifer Austin Leigh call a “beginner’s ear” in their book, *A Little Book of Listening Skills*. The “beginner’s ear” is open and curious. It is available to learn new things and still be surprised. Those who listen with a beginner’s ear learn to suspend their own judgments and agendas long enough to hear the other person out. It begins with the intent to talk less and listen more. The beginner’s ear is more interested in hearing the other’s story than in matching that story with one of our own.

If we hear with our beginner’s ear we will listen for the concrete discriminating details and notice new meanings that are hidden in the words. Without this beginner’s ear we will hear only what we expect to hear, not what the person may be actually saying. Cultivating the beginner’s ear will lead us to ask questions that seek real understanding or a more profound connection.

In the gospel stories Jesus’s own questions often reveal a startling open-ended quality that invite the speaker into a listening dialogue: Who do you say that I am? What do you want? Who touched me? Where is your faith? Which is easier to say: your sins are forgiven, or stand up and walk? Do you want to get well?

Jesus seemed to know intuitively that listening often meant framing a

question that allowed the answer to arise from the speaker. In contrast, many of the questions we tend to ask are more instructional than open-ended: “Do you think that if you had just waited longer, things would have been better?” Or they are not-so-subtle attempts to give advice in the form of a question: “Have you thought of trying the South Beach diet?”

Parker Palmer suggests that true listening discernment rests on the ability to form honest, open questions. An honest question is one that is asked without the questioner knowing how the person will respond, such as: What gives you joy? Did you ever feel like this before? Do you have a picture for this time in your life? How did it feel to come home? What makes you cry (or laugh)?

Open-ended questions help storytellers go deeper into their own stories, encouraging them to see what is below the surface of events and reactions to find the deeper truth. Such searching questions may clarify the need for action or confession, gratitude, or compassion.

Ultimately, however, listening is less about asking the right questions than it is about becoming compassionate, caring, and respectful people. We all know from personal experience that when we are with someone who truly listens to us we feel alive, both interesting and interested in our own story. David Isay, founder of Storycorps, the largest oral history project in U.S. history, writes that “listening is an act of love.” He says the stories that he has collected “are a reminder that if we spent a little less time listening to the racket of divisive radio and TV talk shows and a little more time listening to each other, we would be a better, more thoughtful, and more compassionate nation.”

Perhaps this is true for our families, friendships, and church communities as well. □