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LISTENING FROM A TYPE PERSPECTIVE

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“The first duty of love is to listen.” — Paul Tillich

Intrapersonal listening is about listening to ourselves. When we learn to listen to ourselves from a non-judgmental, compassionate, empathic stance, we begin to see more clearly the habits of thinking and feeling that influence our behavior. As we listen carefully to our thoughts, feelings and our body sensations, we begin to see where our attention goes, and the passion and fixation from which our focus of attention stems. We become more and more aware of the pervasive influences of our passion and fixation, and how subtle those influences can be. I believe that the Inner Observer or Witness “resides” within us, where we can observe and listen to ourselves from a willing, spacious, open Presence.

What about listening to others? Interpersonal listening involves an interaction between two or more people, and Type comes into play at both ends. Our Type influences both how we want to be heard and how we listen to others. In this article, I would like to explore the possibility of Type as a predictor of “how we want to be heard” and “how we listen.” Though the focus of this article and many of the examples are in the parent-child relationship, I believe that similar dynamics may occur with people of all ages, because I am writing about Type similarities and differences—not about age, developmental, or gender influences (though those are important, too).

First, I would like to give you a sense of how I began to think about this many years ago.

When I took Thomas Gordon’s Parent Effectiveness Training in 1987, I thought I had struck gold. What a difference it made to actually give my full attention to my then 11-year-old daughter, the oldest of three children, and “actively listen” to get a sense of what was going on for her, to mirror back her intense feelings and, in the process, show her that I truly “got it.” It seemed as if our relationship changed overnight for the better. My middle daughter was so easily upset when she couldn’t “get it right,” and active listening worked well with her too, diffusing her frustration.

But with my youngest daughter, these otherwise effective listening techniques did not work as well. When I actively listened, she stopped sharing; it was as though she became lost because I had taken her feeling away from her by saying it out loud. So I decided to experiment and see what would happen if I simply sat with her, didn’t make too much eye contact, and passively listened without verbally reflecting back. Thankfully, it worked...she kept talking, and these moments

seemed to end with us feeling closer, and she seemed to feel more solid within herself.

I found I-statements useful too, because they gave me a way of saying what I needed or valued without judgments or evaluations of others. Sometimes, when I would say to my kids, “Hey girls, I feel really worried that I’m not going to be ready to teach my class tonight because the kitchen is so messy that I can’t get dinner started right away,” they actually came in and cleaned up their mess. And I liked the idea that homework was “not my problem”—that is, that I could become their consultant and problem-solve homework with them, but that I didn’t need to own the problem. What a relief this “problem ownership” concept was for my children and me. The skills worked, if not “textbook perfectly.” I was convinced, and within a year I became a Parent Effectiveness Training instructor. That was 21 years ago.

One of the biggest challenges I faced in my work was with what appeared to be Type-specific differences in how we like to be heard, and how we listen. After certifying as an Enneagram Teacher in the Narrative Tradition nearly ten years ago, I began to help parents type themselves. What I had been seeing clinically in my parenting workshops began to make sense to me—that is, the correlation between Type and listening style.

Good, effective listening has essentially three components: encoding the feelings of the person who is being listened to, putting it together with the content, then feeding this impression back - that is, what is the person feeling, and what is the subject?

Not all Types want their feelings fed back to them, at least not initially, or in the same way. Being in touch with one’s feelings is important, but so is being able to think clearly and take appropriate action. A Four may really need her feelings mirrored back, while a Five may feel her privacy is being invaded. She may respond better to having her thoughts, rather than her feelings, mirrored back initially. Sometimes a Seven needs to describe bodily sensations before getting a sense of what he might be feeling. A Nine might respond better to non-verbal passive listening—that is, listening without the “active, reflective, mirroring” feedback.

It is important that we adapt our listening to the person to whom we are listening. Eights have reported “hating” to be actively listened to, as they experience it as too passive, not constructive, condescending and patronizing. They seem to want a little more action in “active listening.” It helps if we know the Type of the person to whom we are listening, though paying close attention will also inform us about whether we are effectively listening.

How does our Type play into our ability to listen well? Will particular Types be inclined to have predictable difficulties in listening and a tendency to use certain roadblocks? I think so. Here are my observations and thoughts, drawing from my experience in working with parents. Perhaps it doesn’t come as a

surprise that I have found these same tendencies when working with adults in my private practice.

Type One parents, with their attention going to error to be corrected, often moralize, preach, or advise in their desire to get their child to do the “right thing”. Frequently they have a great deal of difficulty listening to a point of view that is, in their opinion, “wrong.” I know a One mother who couldn’t listen to her teenage daughter’s explanation of why getting B’s was acceptable to her. The teenager understood it would limit her college options, but she believed that there would be a college for her. She thought there was more to life than just getting good grades, and she liked having time to participate in drama and sports, and to socialize. She didn’t agree with her mother that the most important aspect of her life was grades. Once the mother learned to listen from an unbiased stance, the daughter responded by talking more freely about many aspects of her life with her mother. The power struggle over grades diminished, and daughter and mother felt closer. None of this could have happened if this One mother hadn’t been willing to see how her belief in her “right” point of view was influencing and limiting her ability to truly listen to her daughter.

Type Two parents, with their attention going to others’ needs and their pride in believing they know what’s best for others, frequently give advice to fix their child’s problem. They also sometimes report that they take over doing things for their children—that is, if the child is upset about getting a project done on time, mom or dad might take the child off the hook and do it for him. These parents often get one of two responses from their children (perhaps reflecting their Type)—the child welcomes the “help” and becomes overly dependent, or the child rebels, refusing to accept parental help, guidance, or anything reeking of the parent’s over-involvement.

Threes, with an orientation toward action, can be impatient with the listening process, and in those cases they short-change the feedback of feelings to their children, and rush to solve the problem. I know a Three dad (social subtype) who was disheartened when his son didn’t enjoy being engaged in life in the same way his father did. He was extremely frustrated that his son wasn’t more like him. He balked at the idea of listening to his son’s issues without *doing* anything. After much frustration, he decided to give listening a try. In the car on a long drive with his son, something began to shift. This Three father began to get past his own preference for action, and took in what his son was telling him. By then, the dad also had a sense that his son might be a Five, and he was working to accept this. It’s been slow going, but the dad is beginning to “hear” his son, perhaps for the first time.

Fours seem able to listen to the feelings their children express, but they can get stuck in helping them to move forward. Often Four parents report a bias toward feelings, and they “push” their children to express feelings, even when their children are not inclined in that way. Sometimes, they overuse the phrase, “Yes, and how did that make you feel?” Also, Four parents can add feelings or

exaggerate feelings because of their self-referencing back to their own sense of how they might feel, rather than having the reflective distance necessary to listen well to their children.

Five parents, with their attention going to avoidance of intrusions, and possibly due to being a Head Type, can find it very difficult to feed back feelings that are expressed to them, or even to keep up the energy that is necessary to listen to an emotive child. They can feel overwhelmed. However, Fives often report feeling confident in their ability to help the child logically work through the issue.

Sixes, with their attention going to worst-case scenarios, can project onto their child or the situation and lose their objectivity, analyzing the situation and their child's feeling from their biased perspective and therefore can entirely miss the point. Unlike Sixes, Sevens, with their attention going to positive options, often "make light" or joke about the situation being shared. It is not unusual for them to report having difficulty in settling down to listen, feeling overwhelmed by their child's "negative" feelings, and diverting into more upbeat and positive conversations or actions, and also missing the point.

Eights, with their attention going to power, tend towards an authoritarian parenting style. They can be impatient with the whole listening process. They just want to tell their child what to do—and, as protectors, they often will want to take power into their own hands and bring justice to a situation in which they perceive their child has been wronged.

Type Nine parents, with their attention going to external pulls, frequently express a sense of empathizing so much with their child's feelings that they lose sense of their own needs, becoming permissive parents with their kids running the show. I remember a Nine mother sharing that she had been at the park with her three little boys. She gave them a five-minute warning that they needed to leave soon, as she was expecting the plumber at home. The boys balked at leaving the park; she got so involved in negotiating with them to avoid any conflict, that she lost track of time. They arrived home to a notice from the plumber, reading "Sorry I missed you." Needless to say, she was angry with her boys, but mostly at herself for not holding her ground.

I think it is a mistake to think about this too narrowly. It is not just Ones that get preachy, or Twos that advise, or Eights that order, or Nines that reassure, or Sevens that divert, etc. Parents of all Types give advice to their children, usually with the parent's type-bias embedded in the advice. The problem with advice as a roadblock to communication is that it has these risks: (1) what works for one doesn't necessarily work for another. Therefore, our advice to our child might not work for him or her; (2) we often give advice to what we think is the problem (the presenting problem), but by not listening, we often never hear the real issue; and (3) we don't help our children become independent problem solvers, in touch with their own deepest values and needs, because we "own the problem" by giving advice.

When we come from a fixated state, we can fall into the trap of “roadblocking” communication. Almost by definition, when we are fixated in our Type, we will have a difficult time listening well, and our bias will come into play. We can see this in the roadblocks. If good listening requires, as the humanistic psychologists suggest, the characteristics of acceptance, empathy, and genuineness, then we really need to be listening more from a dispassionate, neutral, non-judgmental stance, and less from our Type’s bias.

Tom Gordon says it well in this quote:

To understand accurately how another person thinks or feels from his point of view, to put yourself momentarily into his shoes, to see the world as he is seeing it—you as a listener run the risk of having your own opinions and attitudes changed. In other words, people actually become changed by what they really understand. To be open to the experience of another invites the possibility of having to reinterpret your own experiences. (*Parent Effectiveness Training*, p. 70)

In my following article, I focus on “Seeing Our Children.” I believe that, initially, the Enneagram is about seeing others and ourselves clearly. When I think about why panels are such an effective way to teach the Enneagram, it comes to mind that the audience is asked to *listen* to the panelists from a non-judgmental, accepting, empathic place. It is this listening from our Essence, and being listened to, that we begin to heal, both others and ourselves.