

## EXPERIENTIAL LISTENING



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### Summary

Experiential listening is listening to the not yet fully articulated felt sense from which a speaker is talking. It comes out of a combination of Eugene Gendlin's philosophical work and Carl Rogers's reflection of feeling response. It is a precise specification of what person-centered listeners (and many other therapists) ought to be listening for. This article explores first the historical development of experiential listening and then goes very specifically into how the author listens in an experiential way. The article ends with a paean to experiential listening.

**Keywords:** *listening; experiential; experiencing; reflecting; therapist activities*

Vasudeva listened with great attention. It was one of the ferryman's greatest virtues that, like few people, he knew how to listen . . . the speaker felt that Vasudeva took in every word, quietly, expectantly, that he missed nothing. . . . He did not await anything with impatience and gave neither praise nor blame—he only listened. . . . Siddhartha felt

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*Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 45 No. 2, Spring 2005 217-238

DOI: 10.1177/0022167804274355

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how wonderful it was to have such a listener who could be absorbed in another's life.

—Herman Hesse

Therapists listen. Many of us listen well. Some of us do not listen as well as we think we do. There is a special form of listening—experiential listening—that can help us all be more effective listeners.

Experiential listening is an empathic, supportive, noninterfering way of saying back to a person the felt essence of his or her message and checking with the person to make sure it has been said back correctly. Experiential listening helps people clarify and articulate their inner processes, explore issues, get past stuck places, and carry their experiencing forward. It is useful both for nonprofessional help and professional therapy. Listening helps people focus.

Put simply: The person being listened to says something. The listener takes the person's whole expression inside, listens to its resonance, and then says back words that point toward the felt sense that has been communicated. Then the listener checks with the listenee; did I get that right? If yes, the listenee goes on to whatever he or she has next to say. If not, the listenee corrects the listener, who then tries again to say it just right.

The entire process—saying back and checking in—is experiential listening.

To illustrate: Consider the following listening I did with a very practiced 45-year-old male client. In parentheses I point out the felt sense and felt shift as they occur.

Client (C): (Matter-of-factly) Let me state the problem as I see it. I have a raging need for autonomy, coming from my mother's having been too close to me. And I have difficulty asserting that need with women . . . for fear of displeasing them.

Therapist (T): Let me see if I get that.

C: OK.

T: (More slowly than C has been speaking) You sense in yourself a need for autonomy, a need that is like a fire, raging out of control.

C: (Interrupting) Yes, but not out of control.

T: (Correcting himself) The need for autonomy is not out of control.

C: Right.

T: (Continuing, slowly) And you sense that that need—stemming from Mother having been too close to you—is blocked by an equal or stronger need—coming from the same source—to please or at least not displease women.

- C: (Quickly) Yes, exactly. (Pause) When I hear that back, I feel sad and slumped inside. (This is the felt sense.)
- T: Sad and slumped come from hearing it back.
- C: (More slowly now) Yes . . . it feels heavy . . . a heavy burden to carry around.
- T: The whole issue feels heavy to you.
- C: Right.
- T: As if, like some heavy weight you carry inside?
- C: (After some consideration) On me . . . on my chest.
- T: You feel as if it sits on you, on your chest.
- C: No. Sitting in me, not on me. . . . Pushing down from inside.
- T: It feels like a heavy weight inside your chest depressing you.
- C: (Quickly) Yes. The image is of a black square.
- T: A black square sits in your chest pressing down deep.
- C: I sense anger there.
- T: The square has anger?
- C: No. Underneath it.
- T: Oh, beneath the sad and slumped, anger lives.
- C: (Voice picks up speed and expression from here on) Yes, exactly. When you said that . . . it moved! I feel it now in my jaw. I'm pissed. Pissed! (This is the felt shift.)
- T: The rage beneath the slumped has risen.
- C: It's spreading through my body. Wow. Through my arms, legs. My head wants to shake from side to side. I hear the words, "Let me be." "Leave me alone." "Let me be." (felt shift)
- T: (With expression rising to match C's) Your whole being is angry!
- C: No—enraged.
- T: Enraged!
- C: Yes.
- T: And just wants to be left alone, let be.
- C: The words come in a torrent now.
- T: Something has been heard and released in you.
- C: (Tears flow) Yes. (Another felt shift)
- T: Like the rivers raging after a thaw.
- C: Yes (Cries), thank you.

As the example shows, experiential listening is a close and careful being with whatever is "inside" a person ("Beneath the sad and slumped, anger lives"), letting oneself be corrected ("No. Sitting in me, not on me"), and thus allowing the inside to shift ("The words come in a torrent now"). Listening is a way of helping a person contact a felt sense, a way of keeping a felt sense company, and a way of saying it back in such a way that one's words have an experiential effect; they permit a felt shift to happen (Gendlin, 1981).

Listening is useful both in therapy and in nonprofessional helping (e.g., between friends, spouses, parents and children). Receiving good listening is a powerful, effective, and, for most people,

unusual experience. People seldom get to hear back what it is they are groping to express. It is a rare treat to be listened to by someone such as Siddhartha's ferryman who wants you to have the experience of really feeling understood. Everyone deserves the experience of really being listened to. If you have not had it, you do not know what you are missing!

## HISTORY

Experiential listening is an offspring of the union between Carl Rogers's "reflection of feeling" therapeutic response and Eugene Gendlin's "experiential method." It can be called "an experiential reformulation of active listening." It deserves to be recognized as one of the latest steps in the evolution of client-centered therapy into the person-centered approach (Levant & Shlein, 1984).

"Saying back" is the quintessential helping response in the client-centered tradition of therapy. It has been called variously "reflection of feelings," "clarification of feelings" (Snyder, 1947), "active listening" (Gordon, 1975), and simply, "listening" (Gendlin, 1981).

Carl Rogers described its origin:

Very early in my work as a therapist I discovered that simply listening to my client very attentively [and saying nothing] was an important way of being helpful. So when I was in doubt as to what I should do, in some active way, I listened. It seemed surprising to me that such a passive kind of interaction could be so useful.

A little later a social worker, who had a background of Rankian training, helped me to learn that the most effective approach was to listen for the feelings, the emotions whose patterns could be discerned through the client's words. I believe she was the one who suggested that the best response was to "reflect" these feelings back to the client. (Rogers, 1980, p. 137)

Rogers was a remarkable listener. An excellent sample of his listening style is this excerpt from his work with "Mrs. Oak." In her 31st therapy session, Mrs. Oak is trying to describe a feeling as it wells up in her:

C: I have the feeling it isn't guilt (Pause. She weeps.) Of course, I mean, I can't verbalize it yet. (Then with a rush of emotion) It's just being terribly hurt!

Rogers: M-hm. It isn't guilt except in the sense of being very much wounded somehow.

C: (Weeping) It's—you know, often I've been guilty of it myself but in later years when I've heard parents say to their children "stop crying," I've had a feeling, a hurt as though, well, why should they tell them to stop crying? They feel sorry for themselves. I thought that they could let him cry. And—feel sorry for him too, maybe. Well, that's something of the kind of thing I've been experiencing. I mean, now—just right now.

Rogers: That catches a little more the flavor of the feeling that it's almost as if you're really weeping for yourself.

C: Yeah. And again you see there's conflict. Our culture is such that one doesn't indulge in self-pity. But this isn't—I mean, I feel it doesn't quite have that connotation.

Rogers: Sort of think that there is a cultural objection to feeling sorry for yourself. And yet you feel that the feeling you're experiencing isn't quite what the culture objected to either.

C: And then of course, I've come to—to see and to feel that over this—see, I've covered it up. (Weeps) But I've covered it up with so much bitterness, which in turn I had to cover up. (Weeping) That's what I want to get rid of! I almost don't care if I hurt.

Rogers: (Softly, and with an empathic tenderness toward the hurt she is experiencing) You feel that here at the basis of it as you experience it is a feeling of real tears for yourself. But that you can't show, mustn't show, so that's been covered by bitterness that you don't like, that you'd like to be rid of. You almost feel you'd rather absorb the hurt than to—than to feel the bitterness. (Pause) And what you seem to be saying quite strongly is, I do hurt, and I've tried to cover it up.

C: I didn't know it.

Rogers: M-hm. Like a new discovery really.

C: (Speaking at the same time) I never really did know. But it's—you know, it's almost as though I were looking within myself at all kinds of—nerve endings and bits of things that have been sort of mashed. (Weeping)

Rogers: As though some of the most delicate aspects of you physically almost have been crushed or hurt.

C: Yes. And you know, I do get the feeling, "Oh, you poor thing." (Pause)

Rogers: Just can't help but feel deeply sorry for the person that is you.

(Rogers, 1961, p. 93)

It would be difficult to overstate Rogers's role in the history of psychotherapy. His client-centered listening and the philosophy of relationship in which it is embedded changed the course of counseling and therapy. There is a "before Rogers" and an "after Rogers" psychotherapy.

But Rogers's listening is better than his theory of listening. He did it better than he described it. There has always been a gap in

his theoretical writings about listening. It has been mostly unclear just exactly what a “reflection” is supposed to reflect.

This is where Gendlin and his theory of experiencing come in. Gendlin said,

I came to Rogers’s group in Chicago in 1952 from my work in philosophy and my interest in the question, “How does raw experience become symbolized?” I thought that this happens in psychotherapy. A person struggles with and finds words and expressions for unclear—but lived—experience.

I found that Rogers and his group were not very clear in their own minds just what in the client they were responding to. It was the client’s “message” or “feelings.” (E. T. Gendlin, personal communication, January 7, 1976)

Gendlin’s point is that the words *message* and *feelings* are but an imprecise and sometimes misleading shorthand. What they stand for is “unclear but sensed experience.” This is the true referent of the reflection of feelings response.

The concept of experiencing and the experiential method specify the referent of the reflection of feelings response more exactly. Gendlin (1962, 1981) said that there is an ongoing flow of experiencing in the human being. He referred to this as a bodily felt but conceptually vague flow of felt meanings (Gendlin, 1962, 1981). The listening response is an attempt to make contact with and carry forward this experiential flow. It is not enough for the therapist to just say back the client’s words. Words are not feelings. The listener is trying to point his or her words at the concrete experiential flow for which the listenee is making symbols (words). The listenee checks the listener’s words against this ongoing flow. When the listening response is just right, it has an experiential effect—the flow of experiencing is carried forward.

In his last writing on empathy, Rogers (1980) acknowledged his debt to Gendlin and made Gendlin’s sometimes abstruse philosophical writing more accessible via clinical example:

An example may clarify both the concept [experiencing] and its relation to empathy. A man in an encounter group has been making vaguely negative statements about his father. The facilitator says, “It sounds as though you might be angry at your father.” The man replies, “No, I don’t think so.” “Possibly dissatisfied with him?” “Well, yes, perhaps” (said rather doubtfully). “Maybe you’re disappointed in him.” Quickly the man responds, “That’s it! I am disappointed that

he's not a strong person. I think I've always been disappointed in him ever since I was a boy."

Against what is the man checking these terms for their correctness? Gendlin's view, with which I concur, is that he is checking them against the ongoing psychophysiological flow within himself to see if they fit. This flow is a very real thing, and people are able to use it as a referent. In this case, "angry" doesn't match the felt meaning at all; "dissatisfied" comes closer, but is not really correct; "disappointed" matches it exactly, and encourages a further flow of the experiencing, as often happens. (p. 141)

In other words, listening responses are offered in such a way that they point the listenee in the direction of checking the response (anger? dissatisfaction? disappointment!) in a focusing way against his or her experiential flow.

In sum, client-centered listening was a method developed by Rogers in response to clinical exigencies. It has produced an abundance of practice and research. It has lacked a grounding in a philosophy of experiencing. Gendlin provided that philosophy. The listener points his or her response at the felt sense of the listenee. The listenee checks that response against his ongoing experiential flow. If it is accurate, the flow moves forward to a next step. If it is not, the listenee corrects the listener, who then tries again.

This is experiential listening.

## HOW I DO IT

Using the imprecise language of "feelings," Rogers (1980) warned that "feelings and 'reflecting' them is a vastly complex process" (p. 138). To this, I can only add, "Amen."

What follows is my attempt to describe how I do listening. I was at first tempted to call this section "How to Listen" but discarded that title for the less grandiose "How I Listen." It is, as far as I can tell, a specification of what I do when I am listening. Others' descriptions exist (Cornell, 1993; Gendlin, 1981; McGuire, 1981). The reader is invited to compare and contrast.

I begin by quieting my mind and turning my full attention toward the person to whom I am listening.

There are two steps: quieting the mind, and intending toward the speaker.

First, I note whether my mind needs quieting. I do this usually by practicing the first step of focusing. Before my client arrives, I

close my eyes. I sit comfortably, breathe, and ask myself, "How am I from the inside right now?" I let my attention come down into my body and, in a friendly way, roam or scan around and see what is there. I ask if there is a word, phrase, or image that matches the feeling inside. About 75% of the time nowadays, I get a word like "clear," "calm," "meditative," "open," or "ready." I sit with that feeling for a moment and then go to the waiting room to get my client.

The other 25% of the time, I need to do the "clearing a space" step of focusing. I usually put out on the imaginary bench an inventory of what is in the way for me, what is between me and feeling ready to listen. Most often, there will be one or more recent disturbances and perhaps a chronic nagging place in the way. For example, right now I have a pain in my back, left-over anger from this morning, and some weariness inside.

By identifying the trouble spots, giving them a moment's quiet attention, and then promising them I will come back and work on them if need be, they agree to mostly clear. I only listen when I am mostly clear.

Notice that "mostly." Do not make these guidelines into absolutes. I have done good listening while a background upset was not completely resolved. I have done good listening while images from basketball and soccer games danced in the back of my head. There can be background noise in the receiver while one is listening: There cannot be foreground noise.

When we begin to develop the habit of consciously clearing a space, we start to recognize how unclear we tend to be. Many of us much of the time and all of us some of the time are distracted, scattered, not truly attentive, formulating our next point while the other is speaking, drifting off, preoccupied, anxious, angry, defensive, rebutting, interpreting, judging, and so forth. We are not truly present. We have internal chatter going on. We are not one-pointed (Schuster, 1979). The receiver is partly jammed. There is static. We have anxiety, fear, guilt, worry, anger, and self-protection interfering with good contact.

When any of these are happening for you, get listened to yourself. Get listened to about your own barriers and obstacles to good contact with people in general and with each particular person (client) in your life.

Know what it feels like inside when you are clear. Know what it feels like when you are unclear. Know the difference and ways to get from one state to the other.



A quiet mind helps one listen. Keep working on quieting your mind.

Getting mostly clear is only the first step. From that same space of clarity, I can write articles, make decisions in my life, make love, and so forth. Step 2 is to bend myself toward the speaker lovingly.

I have emptied my mind. I have become receptive—an open channel. Now I turn toward the speaker. I let my whole body express this turning toward. I make eye contact. I turn my posture in the direction of the person I am to listen to. I lean a little forward. I look inviting and nonintrusive. My body expresses, “I am here to listen to you.”

I take in the whole of the person to whom I am listening.

This is a global or holistic “grokking” of the person. I let my presence hear his or her presence. My whole being is listening to his or her whole being.

She comes in. I see her very clearly. Somehow, as she sits down, I “hear” inside me the word “fear.” She starts talking rather vaguely about her job, her week, her relationship. Her posture is a little laid back; her gaze a little glassy; her words a little vague. The whole effect is very subtle. It is more a vibration I am getting from her than her words. I say back, “So there is something there about your job, your relationship, and your week, and am I getting that that something is fear?” She is startled for a moment. She hasn’t mentioned fear. Tears overtake her and they begin to flow. “Yes,” she says, “I didn’t know. That is exactly what I am feeling. I’m scared . . . of it all.”

Gendlin states:

The therapist must attend not only to the client’s words, but to how they are said, and to how the client is living right in this moment, in saying this. This means observing the person’s face, body, voice, gestures, and taking the person in much more broadly than verbally. (Gendlin, 1973, p. 338)

Narrowness of listening is avoided by this step. When I fail to attend to this step, I may miss the larger message being lived by the person at this moment.

Sometimes, I just do this step naturally. Some days, I am very tuned in to this level with people. When I am not, it is good to silently remind myself by asking inside, “What is this person’s being expressing right now? What is the background feeling from which he or she is speaking? What is the general feeling I have inside as he or she walks in?”

It is worthwhile to remember that people always speak from within feeling states. There is an implicit richness behind every

statement one makes. Not everything is or can be made explicit. Often, the person is unaware of this background state.

So I step back, figuratively speaking, and take in a “mural sense” of the person, attending to the whole feel of his being. I do this even if I do not make explicit use of the information right away. It is part of tuning into the person being listened to:

I am doing a therapy demonstration for a class. She volunteers. She sits down across from me. I observe her eyes: large, open, clear. I take in her erect posture, her bearing, a certain grace in her manner. I hear inside myself the words, “She is very open and vulnerable, undefended. Just listen to her words very exactly.” I do. She quickly opens up, goes deep, cries, resolves a problem, and feels better.

I reflect back to the person, the whole felt essence of what I hear him or her saying.

I would not say all of this, of course, but the experience inside me might be,

Sitting here and emptying myself, I turn my full loving attention toward you. I take in your posture—sitting on the edge of the chair, “bug-eyed,” a tic in your cheek, a haltingness in your speech. I hear you say you have a final exam tomorrow and feel unprepared. I say back, “So is there some fear or worry or concern in you about the final you don’t feel prepared for?”

Let me elaborate on this “saying back” step.

For every unit of meaning, I make words that reflect back to the person my best understanding of what he or she is experiencing.

People need to hear you speak. They need to hear that you got each step. Make a sentence or two for every main point they make, for each thing they are trying to get across. . . . Don’t just “let them talk,” but relate to each thing that they feel. . . . Try to get the crux of it exactly the way they mean it and feel it.

Say back bit by bit what the person tells you. Don’t let the person say more than you can take in and say back. Interrupt, say back, and then let the person go on. (Gendlin, 1981, pp. 119-120)

Reflection ought to be fairly frequent. There is no absolute rule. In learning listening, it is best to do reflections more frequently; as your listening becomes more naturally a part of you, you may want to do it less frequently.

It is important to take in only as much as you can hold before reflecting. This amount will vary with your experience level, memory span, and the way your listenee speaks: Scattered speech is harder to hold than connected speech.

My reflections point toward the felt sense.

There are three different possibilities concerning the relationship between words and felt sense. Sometimes the listenee's words exactly reflect the felt sense. When this happens, the listener says these words back almost exactly:

C: I feel hurt, wounded, pained inside.

T: Hurt . . . wounded . . . pained.

C: Yes. Those words are exactly right. When I said them, they felt right inside, and when you repeated them I felt them more strongly and clearly . . . and now I feel a bit stronger.

T: A bit stronger inside now.

C: Yes . . . it was really fear.

T: The feeling was really fear.

Notice that this is not how people usually talk. More often, the listenee's words only hint at, suggest, partially express, or approximate the felt sense. They are around or near it.

The listener augments these words by making use of whatever else he is picking up from the listenee's nonverbal expressions and whatever else he or she may guess about.

It is not enough [in this case] to simply say back the content being said. It is also essential to reflect back any unsaid feelings from the person's tone of voice . . . her body posture, facial expressions, and gestures . . . and your own guesses at what a person in her situation might be feeling. . . .

Reflections of unsaid feelings are . . . offered . . . as guesses—the person then can check your guess against her inside feelings and come up with a more accurate word. . . . Guesses needn't be right—the important thing is that they lead the person to look at . . . her feelings, to ask herself, "Well, if it's not that, what am I feeling about this?" (McGuire, 1981, p. 56)

In the following example, notice how the therapist makes use of nonverbal cues and her own imagining of the situation described and thus helps the client into the felt sense:

C: (Her voice is shaky, quivery, with long pauses) My mother died when I was 7 . . . My sisters were 4 and 2 . . . I had to take over then. . . . I

did the washing . . . the cleaning . . . got them dressed and all. . . . Then I walked off to school by myself . . . and a neighbor lady took care of them.

T: (Softly, slowly, with care) I'm imagining you felt very lonely . . . and sad that you didn't have her anymore . . . and burdened that you had your sisters to care for.

C: (Tears start to form in her eyes; her words come faster now) Yes, all of that, and now I see that the worst was how guilty I felt about leaving them (cries). I didn't do a good enough job.

T: Oh. . . . Like you had loved your mother very much (C: Yes) and what really hurt was your feeling guilty . . . like, you'd let her down.

C: Yes. Exactly. She'd left them to me.

Finally, sometimes the listenee's words ignore or obscure the felt sense. Words and felt sense may be like two trains traveling on parallel and nonintersecting tracks. The listenee may know nothing about words coming from felt senses.

The listener then imagines the felt sense that might be there and points at it. More use is made of the nonverbal and the holistic "grokking" than of the verbal productions:

C: (Sprawls into chair, arms akimbo, like a marionette whose strings are being tugged in several directions at once) Well . . . there's so much to tell you. My week was . . . I really have to pay my rent . . . and there was the thing with Charles, oh Lord (a herky-jerky motion; suddenly he sits bolt upright). What was I saying? Oh yes, work was so. . . . Did I tell you about Dorothy? (maniacal giggle)

T: So . . . does it feel all jumbled inside? Like confused . . . and maybe all rushing past like an express train?

C: Next stop Greenwich Village! . . . Yeah (smile) something like that. . . . How did you know? (Friedman, 1982, p. 103)

It is important for the listener to recognize where on this continuum a person's verbalization is coming from. Is this particular word or phrase coming from a felt sense? The listener needs to develop the kind of sensitivity that can answer that question.

Remember that what the listener is attempting to do is make contact with the experiential flow in the client. When words are coming from this flow, saying them back fairly exactly and with intonation, rhythm, and so forth that reflect the client's will help make contact with that flow. Words that do not come from this flow are not treated in the same way as words that do come from this flow. Words and the way they are said are clues to the person's felt process. Some clues are better than others. The good listener comes to know which words best point to the felt sense.

Noting where an expression comes from helps guide one as to whether to say something back exactly or paraphrase it—one of the important decisions to be made in listening. A good rule of thumb is to say back almost exactly those words that either match or come from very close to the felt sense and paraphrase the rest.

Clients often say many words that tell the story of external events and few words that describe the felt sense of these events. This is especially so in the early part of therapy. It is the therapist's task to briefly summarize the story of the external events and then highlight the felt sense words. For example, see the following:

- C: My father had some medical tests done yesterday. We drove him to Beth Israel and waited there. They gave him the upper and lower GI series. He had to fast all morning and only had some milk all day. We made arrangements for his room and then hung out watching TV. The tests were all negative. Was I ever relieved!
- T: The tests were all negative, and you felt relieved.

Similarly, a long account of an unhappy vacation was paraphrased, “The trip was unpleasant, and you were disappointed.” A detailed description of an argument between two brothers became, “You two fought, and it makes you sad and angry.”

The same principle applies when the felt sense is not so clearly articulated. The therapist pays special attention here. By pointing his or her reflection at the unclear felt sense, the therapist helps the client grapple with it and become more clear.

- C: We went to see the *Purple Rose of Cairo*. I felt something funny between us during the show. I couldn't really identify it. Afterwards, we had a bit to eat. When I took her home, I kissed her goodnight. It was sort of a nice evening, I think.
- T: You think you had a nice evening, (more slowly) and there was that something funny you felt during the show . . . something you felt there.
- C: It was like we were and weren't together. I can't explain it. . . . I felt confused by her . . . and twisted by the confusion. . . . I guess it wasn't so great an evening!
- T: The main thing there was—twisted by the confusion.

Notice that the storyline is downplayed and the client's emphasized feeling word (“twisted”) is reflected exactly. As Gendlin (1984) wrote,

Therapists can paraphrase most of what a client says, but are wise to keep crucially charged words the same. We might paraphrase a long story. . . . But if the client uses the word “apprehensive,” we would not change it to “scared” or “worried” because then the client might lose hold of the connotation that word right now holds. Such a word can be a “handle” that helps us hold onto a whole suitcase. (p. 86)

I vary the way I say things back. Good listening has variety to it. It is creative. It holds the listenee’s attention. A steady diet of “It sounds like you are saying” becomes repetitious, tinny, parrotlike, and artificial. It may put the listenee off.

Therefore, I sometimes affirm my reflection declaratively. Sometimes I offer it as a question tentatively. Sometimes I “become the other” as in psychodramatic doubling and say my reflection as though I were he. Sometimes I do use a “sounds like you are saying” lead-in. Sometimes I embellish a reflection by saying the feeling words that had not been said. Sometimes I pare down and sum up an overstuffed statement. Sometimes I rearrange the words in a reflection so as to highlight the felt sense. Sometimes I add emphasis to sharpen up the feeling tone of a statement.

In the following excerpt, I identify in parentheses the several different ways I say things back:

- C: I’ve had enough of going along with other people’s cock-eyed opinions!
- T: I’m sick and tired of other people’s crap! (becoming the other; adding emphasis)
- C: Damn right. . . . I’ve lost myself too often. It makes me so mad!
- T: You’re pissed about having lost yourself so often. (Paraphrasing and sharpening the language in the feeling words.)
- C: More than that—what I’ve missed in life by being so damn good.
- T: Worse than the anger is the missing. (words rearranged)
- C: Yeah. . . . I put my own needs on the shelf.
- T: You aren’t at your center. (Paraphrase; rearranged)
- C: It feels awful! I’m wasting my life. I can only live as a hermit. I can’t form a relationship. I can only take care of me if there is no one else around. I can’t be “twoed.”
- T: Sounds like you are saying that the problem doesn’t happen when you’re all alone (uh-huh) . . . but it does keep you from having a relationship (yup) . . . and since you are really wanting to be “twoed” (yesiree). . . . you really feel the need to get this fixed up. (“sounds like” formulation)
- C: You got it! Life is with people. I need to learn how to be with people and take care of myself.
- T: You are determined to be able to do both. (paraphrase)
- C: Yes.

A listening response aims to be evocative. It wants to be vivid. Connotative language (imagery, metaphor, analogy) helps spark the felt sense; it resonates with the ongoing experiencing process. Therefore, I use imagery, metaphor, and analogy in my listening responses.

Consider the following examples, starting with two from Rogers:

C: Well, now I wonder if I've been going around doing that, getting smatterings of things, and not getting hold, not really getting down to things. . . .

T: Maybe you've been getting just *spoonfuls* here and there rather than really *digging in* somewhere rather deeply. (Rogers in Snyder, 1947, p. 171)

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C: I'm gonna take off. . . I just want to run away and die.

T: I guess as I let that soak in. . . I guess the image that comes to my mind is sort of a—a wounded animal that wants to crawl away and die. (Rogers in Corsini, 1979, p. 158)

Imagery should be tailored to the vocabulary and interests of the client. Metaphors are personal worlds. Seldom would I quote baseball to a ballerina. The image is fit to the person, not vice versa.

For example, in working with an ardent Zionist, I did the following reflection:

C: I want the job at the university. It's special to me. I'm tired of volunteering . . . and I don't want to teach at the high school level or the state college. I want the university to be my home!

T: "I want Israel. Don't try to sell me Madagascar!" (Whereas with a baseball enthusiast I might have said, "I'm ready for the Big Leagues. Don't send me back to the minors!")

It helps considerably when therapist and client share a metaphorical realm in which they can communicate vividly and as if in shorthand.

An example: A client is a sports nut. So am I. Early on in therapy, I get in the habit of sprinkling football, baseball, and basketball images into my reflections: "Sounds like it's the fourth quarter, the score is tied, and you're feeling like the wind is against you," or

“You’re finally in the batter’s box—and there’s their ace reliever on the mound.” In his focusing, sports images come frequently. One day, for the first time, an ice hockey image appears: “Hey, I just got the winning goal in a Stanley Cup seventh game!” We note both the winning and the new sport in the image. The next week, he reports significant breakthrough activity—in a new realm of life.

Metaphors and analogies related to the client’s spheres of interest (sometimes not yet mentioned in therapy) will come spontaneously to the therapist when he or she is especially well tuned in to the client:

- C: What’s the use? Why bother? Life is a drag and a half.  
 T: You really feel like giving up!  
 C: Yeah—really!  
 T: Sounds like you’re at your lowest depths—the underground man.  
 C: More Dostoevski than Gorki.  
 T: Raskalnikov?  
 C: Yes! Exactly! (He brightens up) Murder, not suicide!  
 T: War or peace?  
 C: War! No question about it! Too much peace at any price.

After I offer a reflection, I watch and listen to the listenee’s reaction, and I am guided by it. I am explicitly or implicitly asking the listenee to check my reflection against his or her felt sense.

I will discuss three possibilities here: (a) The client does not check the reflection against the felt sense; (b) the client checks it, and it is correct; and (c) the client checks it, and it is incorrect.

My invitation to the client to check my reflection may be either verbal or nonverbal. If I do not sense that the listenee is doing such checking, I explicitly ask that he or she do so. I sense “not checking” from, for example, the client continuing to talk rapidly or a lack of change of expression on his or her face or a sense in me that I have not been taken inside or that I have been ignored. When this happens, I want to slow down the interaction and explicitly invite him or her to check my reflection against his or her felt sense.

- C: (Talking rapidly) I’m depressed, down, hassled.  
 T: You’re feeling depressed, down, hassled.  
 C: (Going on over my last word) I don’t know what to do.  
 T: Wait . . . I’m not sure that you are feeling all that. Would you check?  
 C: (Confused) What do you mean—check?  
 T: (Explaining and teaching focusing) Does “depressed, down, hassled” match what you are feeling in your body?



When I sense that my client is checking my reflection inside, I watch and listen for tell-tale signs of whether he or she feels understood. I watch his or her face and breathing. Being accurately heard leads to a relaxation. I look to see whether there are signs of that relaxation. Being accurately heard leads to something new, a sense of further exploration. I listen to whether the next thing said indicates a going further.

Conversely, being inaccurately heard leads to signs of annoyance: a grimace, a squeezing up of the face, a raised eyebrow. Being inaccurately heard leads to the person saying the same thing over again or changing the subject abruptly and staying at a superficial level.

When my client does not feel understood, I drop my previous reflection, let myself be corrected, and try again. For example, read the following:

C: I don't feel understood by Mr. X. He doesn't really see me.  
 T: You are angry that Mr. X doesn't understand you.  
 C: No. Not angry. I just don't feel understood.  
 T: It's not anger. It's being *not understood*.  
 C: Right. He does what you just did—putting his own interpretation on me. But at least I can correct you!  
 T: I do it wrong like he does, but at least I can learn.  
 C: No! At least *I* can correct you!  
 T: There . . . I did it again. (Both laugh) The important thing is that *you* can correct me.  
 C: Right.

Checking in is as crucial to experiential listening as is reflecting. Without checking in, therapy can go off track. For example,

She is consulting to the Board of a Corporation. The members can't get along with each other. She intuits a sentence for each to say. It is supposed to sum up each's position. She puts them in dyads and has them say the sentences back and forth to each other. She never has them check the accuracy of her intuition. If she is wrong, there is no correction. They interact around *her* sentence, not *their* own experiencing. Some members leave feeling frustrated, annoyed, not understood. Had she known listening, her intuitive hunches could have been powerfully used; without listening, they tend to be wasted or harmful.

Checking in allows even wrong reflections to be useful and helpful rather than destructive. The therapist's "off-ness" is quickly

and easily corrected. The therapist does not lead the client into blind alleys—often, the therapist’s blind alleys.

There are two guidelines here: Intend to be accurate, and be correctable.

Checking in takes a burden off the therapist. It is not necessary that your listening always be right. It is necessary that you try to make it right and sometimes succeed and that you are not ego attached to your reflections.

Sometimes I demonstrate this last point by saying a reflection in such a way that it requires correction:

There is a lot of feeling in her voice, although few feeling words come through. She is talking about her mother’s drug addiction. With long pauses and a sense of heaviness in her throat, she says, “There wasn’t . . . much . . . I . . . could do.” Then, she is silent, as she often is. I say, “I probably won’t get all this right, and so you’ll have to correct me . . . but is it like you’re hurt, and disappointed, and, maybe, real mad, or possibly even guilty, that you just couldn’t do much for her?” The form of my reflection shows that it is simply designed to stimulate her to say it the way it was. She responds, “more guilty . . . less angry . . . my responsibility.”

I am happy to be corrected. My ego is not hung up on being right. I readily drop my reflection and follow the correction.

Being listened to drives this home to me over and over again. A wrong reflection can help me clarify what it was I was trying to say. It can help my self-exploration process. Feeling its wrongness leads me to find words that would be more right. It will only get in my way if you insist on it. If you are willing—nay, eager—to drop it, then I can move on.

I find this one of the most difficult things to teach about listening, especially to therapists. Many therapists feel that they have to get it right. And many feel that they are always right. I remember telling a therapist that at age 4, I was cutting a string on my teddy bear, and the knife went into my eye, leading to a traumatic hospitalization and operation. He said, “That was masochism.” I stared at him. He was shaking his head affirmatively, agreeing with himself. I said, “How can you be so sure?” He said, dismissively, “I’m sure.” His own certainty meant more to him than my hint at doubt. After a few examples of such kinds of intervention on his part, I went elsewhere.

It helps to remember: Listening shows the therapist’s intent is to understand. Unconditional positive regard is carried by that

intent. The energy exchange goes something like this: The client sees the therapist leaning toward him. The client feels hopeful: “Oh, boy. It may happen here; I may be understood.” When the therapist is wrong, the client starts to fade, withdraw, and be deflated. Hope may be dashed. But then the therapist notices the withdrawal. He or she asks, “Did I get that wrong?” “May I try again?” The client feels hope returning. He or she may have been too shy or too used to being misunderstood to initiate the correction. But now he responds to the therapist’s recognition that he has misunderstood. The client tries again. He tries harder to be understandable in response to the therapist’s well-intentioned effort to understand and his willingness to be corrected. Hope returns—so long as listening is successful part of the time and the therapist/listener improves after being corrected.

Hence, the crucial guideline: Do not be attached to your reflection.

In sum, here are my basic guidelines for listening:

I begin by quieting my own mind and turning my full loving attention toward the person to whom I am listening.

I take in the whole of the person to whom I am listening.

I reflect back to the person the whole felt essence of what I hear him saying.

For every unit of meaning, I make words that reflect back to the person my best understanding of what he or she is experiencing.

My reflections point toward the felt sense.

I vary the way I say things back.

I use imagery, metaphor, and analogy in my listening responses.

After I give a reflection, I watch and listen to the listenee’s reaction, and I am guided by it.

I implicitly ask the listenee to check my reflection against his felt sense.

I am correctable. When my client does not feel understood, I drop my previous reflection and try again.

Thus far in this article, I have endeavored to be specific, precise, and analytical about where listening comes from and how I do it.

Now I want to go deeper.

Having engaged your head, I ultimately want to speak about the heart.

That is where listening is most appreciated.

Listening helps open the heart.

Let me share with you the occasion for this realization:

Listen, listen, listen  
To my heart's song.  
Listen, listen, listen  
To my heart's song.  
I will never forget you.  
I will never forsake you.  
I will never forget you.  
I will never forsake you.  
Listen, listen, listen  
To my heart's song.

The Opening the Heart Workshop (Friedman, 1996) begins with the group singing these words. I have heard them hundreds of times now. But one day, I heard them a little differently. I was working on this article, and I was stuck for a conclusion. I kept hearing the words, "Listen, listen, listen/To my heart's song" over and over. Then my conclusion came to me.

Someplace inside, someplace deep inside, we all want someone to listen to our heart's song.

We want to sing an aria of our pain; a ballad of our love; a medley of our anger, hurt, sadness, joy.

We want to give voice to what is inside each and every one of us: the particular ways we have been blessed and hurt by life.

We all long to be heard.

But mostly our songs stay inside, shut up.

We move our lips, but we don't sing our songs.

We peek out each from our own cubby hole.

We have walls, masks, moats, gates, fogs, secret chambers, secret police to protect our innermost places.

Why?

Because we have all been hurt by life.

They weren't there. They didn't listen. They were wrapped up in themselves. They told us not to be so sensitive. They told us to act appropriately. They "fixed" things. They yelled at us. They abused us.

Listening is the antidote.

Listening is an invitation to me to sing my song.

Being heard helps undo the hurt.

When I feel listened to, I feel better. I feel heard, seen, kept company, understood.

I feel less alone.  
 I feel supported.  
 I feel like I have an ally.  
 I feel the way a team feels when it has a good cheerleading section. I feel more clear.  
 I feel calm, peaceful, meditative, energized.  
 My battery has been charged.  
 The problem may be no different—for now.  
 But I am different.  
 My heart is more open.  
 So remember this about experiential listening: It is a way for one person to really get with and be with another person. The particular specifics of technique are not as important as is this overall effect.  
 How do I know whether I'm doing it right? I know it by your having the experience of really feeling understood.

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