



Listening As An Expression of Ritual

On a few occasions, I have had the privilege of playing music before a public presentation by the African teacher, Malidoma Patrice Some. Malidoma is a gifted medicine man from the Dagara tribe, a group indigenous to Burkina Faso in West Africa. In his teachings, Malidoma emphasizes that many Westerners struggle with a confusing notion of ritual, one associated with dark, pagan, or archaic ceremonies that have no relevance to a postmodern society. For the Dagara people, however, ritual processes are meant to provide rejuvenation and even transformation for all participants.

I find it valuable to frame the act of listening as a powerful ritual that can raise a transformative energy. Like any traditional or formal practice, sometimes there can be an air of formality and even solemnity when we listen. We all know it takes a high degree of motivation and dedication to still the tongue, stir up a compassionate ear, or sit with a troublesome encounter, especially with a person who irritates us. The ritual of listening, therefore, can evoke a high level of intention when needed. Relative to listening, there is even a noticeable posture of receptivity that can convey, through body language, a sense that “I am present for you”.

In each of remaining chapters, I have incorporated some accessible listening rituals or exercises that you can try out either privately or with a small group. They are meant to prime the pump and lead to a deeper familiarity with attentive or imaginative listening. It is my understanding that our modern and secular society sorely needs meaningful rituals, especially observances that support major transitions in our individual or cultural story. I have benefited from ritual practices for decades. I especially revere the listening potential innate in circle gatherings. In various places on the planet, I have hosted men's groups, sound circles, peer-to-peer councils, and corporate leadership workshops that transpire in the circle's embrace. In the egalitarian roundness of a listening space, we become more like our ancestors and uncover non-intellectual but wise ways to learn, grieve, celebrate, remember, connect, honour, or memorialize.

Today, in our contemporary culture, rituals continue to be braided into religious traditions or societal customs. We listen to anthems, prayers, or minutes of silence on remembrance occasions. Beyond these conventions, we all engage in short or longer exchanges with others that could be envisioned as an improvised ritual of communication, an act that entails focused listening and conscientious speech. Just as musical improvisers shape rhythm, melody, or timbre in the instant, so also could communicators approach conversation as an improvisational and spontaneous ritual transpiring on the dynamic (sometimes dramatic) stage of the moment.

Unrehearsed conversation can perform as a type of ritualized act that invites a specialized type of listening. For one thing, in conversation we sometimes have to give less regard to rational, sequential components. Sidebar stories are pulled in. Speakers jump around in time. In exploratory conversations, we sometimes have to become less attached to logical forms of sharing thoughts and more open to circuitous ways of understanding. I have sat in many a council or circle where the participants were inventively playing with fresh perspectives and perceptions rather than trotting out frozen ideas. In settings of group conversation, I find it necessary to accommodate wild imagination, crazy wisdom, collective intelligence, emotional outbursts, spontaneous invention, and unpredictable inspiration. During conversations with an old friend, we may need to smudge our definition of ritual as always somber

or momentous. The ritual of sharing doesn't have to get stuck in the mud of seriousness or earnestness. Play has its place.

The play and sport of conversational engagement teaches two important lessons. First: no one can ultimately control the random associations and reactions that might arise in a listener-speaker duet. Secondly, if we really let conversations have a life of their own, we might be pleasantly delighted by how unbridled exchanges can lead to delicious, forbidden content. When a speaker knows we won't turn off simply because unthinkable or unmentionable material is being voiced, the process of verbal exploration and experimentation can go where angels fear to tread. Communicators can enter taboo areas where we relate to thoughts and beliefs as nothing more than primal substance, raw material to be shaped into meaning, crafted into inventive possibilities, or suspended as mystery.

Edgy comics, stand-up comedians who riff off listeners, share a kind of illicit relationship with their audiences. In darkened clubs, audience and comedian can bite down on sexual, racial, or political issues that hang as forbidden fruit in the garden of human experience. Liberated (and frequently lubricated), performers and listeners can play together with issues that, through verbal play, are to be taken seriously. This type of verbal exploration is all about listening for surprises as we toss together elements that normally do not co-exist. Such disturbing play can be anarchistic as the audience gives attention to structures that have become too rigid and therefore need to be broken down. Such exciting play can be riotous as we confront restrictions of perception that have become too arbitrary in us. Comedic play, for a listening audience, can foster a quickness of response and a flexibility of adaptation as quirky perspectives are tossed about. We get to hear Shiva destroying convention so as to rebuild new creations.

As I say, we will play throughout this guidebook in untamed ways via personal or small group explorations. You might approach these experimental and experiential suggestions as rowdy rituals. I encourage you as to fool around with them as leap off points, experimentations that might conjure up non-ordinary ways of perceiving or novel ways of communicating. Sometimes my aim is to help you apprehend new possibilities within music or help you widen your reception and appreciation of an everyday phenomenon, such as the sonic symphony of

a city. Sometimes my intent has little to do with an obvious objective and is more about feeding your soul life by linking you to imaginal, intellectual, or instinctual resources.

Finally, I want to share this thought. From my work in post-conflict communities, with youth-at-risk, or with artists concerned about ecological issues, it is my belief that the ritual of deep communication can inspire social change or social action. In truth, this is what excites me. I imagine individuals fearlessly bringing intentional communication skills into town hall meetings, into challenging attempts at community building, and into the central conversations that impact neighborhood green spaces or world ecology. I imagine us bringing the ritual of listening into our fleeting exchange with a homeless man; into the way we interact with a misunderstood student; into the moment when a lover or adversary gives us painful feedback.

While local developers plan another condo, let's hear how the playgrounds and parks ask us to stand as an advocate for the voiceless. May we practice listening rituals to resolve disagreements, renew tired interactions, or restore cooperation where an old story of conflict endures. May we practice listening rituals as an embodiment of 'social intelligence', the notion that it is more innate to foster interconnected networks of cooperation than to perpetrate states of divisiveness. May we ultimately embody what the Persian poet Rumi may have meant when he wrote:

*"Out beyond ideas of right doing or wrong doing, there is a field.
I will meet you there."*

(translated by Coleman Barks)