

Guidelines for Listening

LISTENING FOR GOD THROUGH THE STORIES OF LIFE

“Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”

MATTHEW 18:20 NIV

AS YOU JOURNEY THROUGH THE MAPS in *Listen to My Life*, we hope you’ll choose to have some companions walk this path with you, so you can listen for God together through the stories of your lives. We wouldn’t want you to miss out on the joy that so many of our participants have had as the truth of Jesus’ words have profoundly been anchored in their souls. Jesus promised, “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”

As people tell their stories to one another in the *Listen to My Life* experience, many gain clarity, trace unhealthy patterns to their source, sense receiving guidance from God, come out of hiding, sense God’s love, are ambushed by grace, or experience healing. God is faithful to show up and do just what is needed in each person’s heart. So, why is this deeper experience different from what happens elsewhere? How can it be that we miss sensing his presence among us so easily in the normal course of conversation, and in our everyday lives?

We’ve come to believe that the way we *listen to one another, and with one another* is what makes the difference. The normal course of conversation in our lives does not leave much room to pay attention to God, let alone space to hear ourselves express the deeper stirrings of our souls. The simple *Guidelines for Listening*¹ help us to invite the Holy Spirit to move among us, and keep the listeners out of the way of whatever work he intends to do. The guidelines are set up to provide the kind of safety that allows the soul to come out of hiding. So, the listener’s role is to actively create an environment of safety – and most of the time that means doing less rather than more. In whatever setting you experience *Listen to My Life*, we’d like you to use these guidelines too.

Participation is invited, not demanded. Allowing everyone to be in control of their own story creates safety as people can choose how to tell their story or how much of their story to tell.

Invite the Holy Spirit to interact with you as you listen to one another. Declare in prayer that you are open to whatever he wants to do in you and among you. The primary objective of the story telling and listening that is done in the *Listen to My Life* experience is for you to be open to what the Holy Spirit wants to do, and be willing to respond. As the other person is speaking, you may choose to silently pray that they might be guided toward whatever God wants them to notice.

Confidentiality simply means that we don’t tell one another’s stories without permission. When sharing is completed, discontinue discussion of what was shared, trusting each others’ stories to God. Commit yourself to pray for one another as God leads you.

Focused attention is a gift that allows the speaker to stay in their own story, knowing that the listener is not too busy or distracted to be there with them. Too many people have never had the kind of focused attention that allows them to explore their own feelings without worrying that the listener is bored or more interested in other things. A lack of focused attention pushes the person toward a kind of self-consciousness that is dependent on the approval of another person. We’re intentionally creating environments for people to become self-aware, not self-conscious, through these listening sessions.

Unconditional acceptance is offered as a form of giving grace. There is nothing that another person can say that God does not already know. Please leave critical spirits at the door. Turn to wonder instead of judgment if your speaker’s story prompts you toward becoming judgmental. Ask yourself, ‘I wonder what it would have felt like to be in this person’s shoes?’ or ‘I wonder what led them to make that decision?’

We highly recommend that you also read the 3-Way Listening article included in this Introduction Booklet.

No fixing, advising or rescuing allowed. This is the hardest part of the listening guidelines for people to keep. Unfortunately, all too many small group bible studies have fallen into the trap of thinking that offering advice is a helpful form of fellowship. Attempts to fix a person or a situation pushes the soul into hiding and leaves a person feeling less capable of handling life than the others in the group. Most of the time people just want to be heard - not fixed. Please withhold the urge to offer advice, even advice cloaked in a bible verse, unless it is specifically asked for. Listening to one another in the context of the *Listen to My Life* experience is intended to offer space for a person to hear their own thoughts and emotions, not a time for counsel to be offered.

Although it might seem considerate, rescuing people from their emotions is not helpful in this setting. When a person feels sadness, pain or frustration, let them feel it. Often, in the normal course of sharing stories, when a person begins to get a bit emotional or goes silent, a listener might feel the need to rush in to offer a tissue, or put a reassuring hand on their shoulder. To a speaker, these seemingly kind gestures are a signal that their emotion is too much for the other person to handle. So, if you, as a speaker, need a tissue, you'll need to get one for yourself. We're asking that when listening, you withhold those urges to rescue someone from their emotions, and offer your focused attention and a silent prayer for God to meet them in that moment instead.

Listen to the silence instead of jumping in with questions or comments. This is such a strong reflex for most of us! This one listening guideline will be the most difficult for most listeners to abide by. Silence allows the person speaking time to listen to themselves, make decisions about what to say next, and allows the Holy Spirit space to do whatever he has in mind to accomplish. Silence is very often a gateway to a deeper level of honesty and openness to learning. Even though it can feel uncomfortable, stay with it and let the speaker know you are listening with your eyes.

As the speaker, ask for what you need from those who have listened to you. For example, you would like prayer, or you would like reflections, words or phrases on what the listeners heard, or you would be willing to answer some questions.

As the listener, your questions are only to help the speaker more fully explore their own story, but please refrain from asking questions for your own clarification or connection to the events of their story.

Affirm the gift of the stories you hear by thanking the speaker for the honor of hearing their story. As you'll soon find out, it really is a great privilege to hear a person's story. Let them know that you heard them by telling them how you empathetically felt their emotion as they told a particular part of their story. Pray for the speaker, actively placing them into the hands of God, right where they belong. Use scripture to encourage them within the prayer, if a verse comes to mind.

YOU MAY REALIZE THAT THESE GUIDELINES leave little for the listener to do but listen. That is the point. Early on, while listening to another, you may find the guidelines very hard to follow. Most people soon find that they can relax, not worrying about what to say next, or how to fix, rescue or advise the other person. It ends up being a relief and a joy once a person gets adjusted to listening this way, because they can let go of being responsible for someone else and their situation or their story.

Listening this way is an act of submission as we consciously put the needs of another above our own for a time. We do not listen for our own benefit, entertainment or understanding.

In following these guidelines, we consciously exchange being a good conversationalist for being a good listener. And when we do, we have an opportunity to sometimes witness the beauty of a soul being honest and open in a way which invites the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The 'My Life Now Map' and 'My Life Story Map' that start the *Listen to My Life* experience provide great opportunities to practice listening to one another. You may listen to one another in pairs, trios or even an entire small group following these guidelines. We highly recommend that you also read the *3-Way Listening* article included in this Introduction Booklet.

The 'Peak Experiences Map' is best to be shared in an interview format in pairs or trios, using the questions on the map to guide the speaker through the experiences they identify. Often, the gift of a focused listener, using the *Guidelines for Listening*, and a few good questions can help to reveal the threads and patterns that run through the speaker's peak experiences.

Listening sessions around the remainder of the maps can follow the listening guidelines, just like the 'My Life Now Map' and 'My Life Story Map'. Remind one another of the guidelines before each listening session, so you don't revert back to a normal course of conversation. Talking

¹These listening guidelines are a modification of those offered by Juanita Brown in her descriptions of *The World Café* found at www.theworldcafe.com

about what you are learning in your listening experiences after using the *Guidelines for Listening* is of great benefit for everyone involved. This gives each person a way to solidify the learning they are gaining from actively listening in a way that is most likely not a part of their normal pattern of conversation.

We've heard many stories about how this way of listening in a *Listen to My Life* group affects an individual's way of listening to the people in their everyday lives in surprisingly wonderful ways. We've also heard our share of stories of how *Listen to My Life* participants get frustrated with how poorly they are listened to by their family, coworkers and friends who have not had the same experience. Just take it as a challenge of being gracious and loving, offering a listening ear in ways that allow people to feel God's love through you. Also, be aware of when you need to be listened to in the future, and ask for what you need from a good listening partner.

Enjoy the process of learning to listen and being listened to in new ways. As David Augsburger wrote, "Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people don't know the difference."²

Additional Resources

For resources related to listening go to www.onelifemaps.com/resources

- 🔊 Listen to the oneLife Maps Podcast for great conversations around topics of life story and spiritual formation at www.onelifemaps.com/podcast

² Augsburger, David W. *Caring Enough to Hear and be Heard: How to Hear and be Heard in Equal Communication*. Regal Books 1982.