

Contemplative Listening

"Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of the other person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her empty his heart." Thich Nhat Hanh (from internet conversation with Oprah Winfrey)

Individuals often have difficulty communicating in groups. Typically, ideas ricochet around as people react to information and formulate their responses. Contemplative listening offers a different model for communicating in a group setting. When committed to this alternative process, individuals stay present and listen deeply to each other. When each person agrees to be present in a different way and listen deeply to one another, deep and helpful communication becomes possible.

This particular practice was used in the ECCSR Contemplative Renewal Immersion experience. This process was informed by models from: the Living School of the Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque, NM, The Center for Courage and Renewal process for Circles of Trust, and Nonviolent Communication teachings and practices.

Key to the success of these experiences is the foundational understanding that a trusting group can create a rich space for helping individuals express their deepest truths. These groups honor the wisdom present within each person, and help us listen to the insights that come from our experiences.

Whenever practicing something new and unfamiliar it is helpful to recognize the vulnerability that naturally comes into play. We hope that each group will commit to avoiding slipping into habits of gossip, criticism, or unwanted advice. Similarly, the process is helped by allowing times of silence in the group and resisting the impulse to rush or fill the time with talking. If at any point, as a listener or speaker, you find yourself getting caught up in your own thoughts, take a deep breath and come back to being present to what the speaker is sharing.

CIRCLE PROCESS

Leader Guidelines:

Start by centering the group by reading the following instructions:

- “Please gently close your eyes.
- Center yourself in your heart as you feel your feet on the floor, the chair beneath you, and breathe deeply into your belly.
- Notice thoughts, feelings, and sensations arising within you.
- With childlike sincerity open your heart fully to this experience.
- We will now sit together in silence for 2 minutes and find a sense of stillness in our circle.”

Introduce the process to the group:

“I will start by offering a prompt*. One by one, when you feel ready to speak, take the stone (*or whatever object you identify for the group – if using a zoom/online gathering, identify a symbol the speaker can use to signify readiness to speak.*) At the end of each answer, we as a group will respond, ‘Thank you.’ We will pause between speakers and hold the stillness for about 10 seconds. This gives space to listen from the heart center, stay attentive and present, until the next person feels moved to share.

** each group will begin with a prompt – either a passage, brief devotional quotation, a poem, or a question such as “what is present in your spirit for you today?”*

Group Guidelines:

The leader reads the following, after which all group members are asked to express agreement:

- Speak and listen deeply, from your heart center
- Let go of any need to interrupt, fix, judge or rehearse what you are going to say
- When it is your turn to speak, let go of any need to comment on what another speaker has shared
- When you feel it is your turn, speak from your heart center as concisely as possible – when able, be lean of expression, to allow time for others to share.
- Hold confidentiality. What is offered here is not to be discussed outside the circle, unless the person who raised the issue asks for the opportunity.