Listening to the SONG of Life
Listening to the SONG of Life

Listening to Self

Listening to Others

Listening to Nature

Listening to Goddess-God-the Divine

E. James Baesler, PhD
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This labor of love is dedicated to Mary Elizabeth

– my one true love.

And to Ben and Danny

– the fruit of our love.

Your presence and love enriches, inspires,

and sustains me every day.
Credits and Disclaimer

Credits

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Disclaimer

There are many activities designed to improve one’s listening knowledge and skills throughout this book. The activities are based on research, wisdom traditions, and the author’s personal experience in teaching the Listening the the SONG of Life course at the college level. All the activities are intended to promote the reader’s health of mind, body, and spirit. However, the author is a Professor of Communication, and not a doctor, psychiatrist, nutritionist, physical therapist, or other health care professional. Nor am I an academic expert in fields outside of Communication such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, religious studies, and the like. Accordingly, if you are dubious about engaging in any of the activities, refrain from doing so. And, if you experience any emotional, mental, physical, or spiritual discomfort when engaging in any
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quences of engaging in these activities. Finally, any errors in reasoning,
claims, evidence, and citations are solely my responsibility.
Reviews

Listening to the SONG of Life by E. James Baesler offers a comprehensive exploration of the profound art of listening through multiple dimensions—self, others, nature, and the divine. This long-awaited, insightful book integrates communication theories, pedagogical methods, and experiential practices, guiding readers to enhance their listening skills and deepen their connection with the world. Each chapter delves into practical applications and reflective exercises, making it a valuable resource for anyone seeking to enrich their personal and spiritual growth through the power of attentive listening.

Marva Shand-McIntosh, Speech Pathologist, author of Today I Will Listen, and founder of I Love To Listen Day

E. James Baesler’s book, LISTENING to the SONG of LIFE, is a must read for anyone remotely interested in listening...and we should all be! I’ve been a listening scholar for over 20 years, and I consider myself fairly knowledgeable with different perspectives of listening. And then I read LISTENING to the SONG of LIFE and it expands my horizon in ways that I didn’t think possible! This book is for all types of people: practitioners of listening, teachers, and researchers. Don’t let the length of this book scare you. It doesn’t need to be read cover to cover before you can use it. You can pick it up and find something valuable by simply reading a few pages. And, for those who are teaching a listening course or listening as a section in other courses, there are outstanding ideas for activities and exercises throughout the book. I highly recommend LISTENING to the SONG of LIFE.
Laura Janusik, Professor Emeritus, Rockhurst University, Past President of the International Listening Association

Dr. Baesler’s exquisitely woven four strands of the SONG will provide the phenomenologist with innumerable avenues to further investigate listening; present hermeneutic theorists and narrative arts researchers with greater depths of discernment in listening to stories; equip the humanist, humanitarian, and social activist with mastery of sound collaborative listening practices; afford the naturalist deeper appreciation for all living beings and the ecosystems’ relationships that are sustained through listening; and cast light on soul-searchers’ many paths, which lead ultimately to the integration of Divine Spiritual Insight.

Jerry Catt, founder of Listen4AChange and retired Instructor of Communication

Baesler’s new listening book is unique in its comprehensive and original presentation. The author elaborates on what is typically thought of as the range of the field of listening. The author writes for various audiences but is always listening to the reader and considering the reader’s need to understand the importance of listening as it is reflected in methods from the poetic, to the academic, the spiritual and therapeutic.

Michael Purdy, Professor and Coordinator of the Communications Program at Governors State University in University Park, Illinois

Listening to the Song of Life is timely and much needed in our current transitional age. Aptly covering traditional social scientific research on inter-human, interpersonal listening, Baesler then takes the reader on a journey. Transcending traditional boundaries, this sensei of the listening arts shows us through theory, experience, and mystery how listening to the human soul includes a focus on self, others, nature, and the divine as they contribute to our health as human beings – the soul, in context, embodying and feeding connection.
Douglas Kelley, Professor Emeritus of Communication, Arizona State University, and author of Just Relationships, Intimate Spaces, Marital Communication, and Communicating Forgiveness (with Vincent Waldron)

E. James Baesler’s book, Listening to the SONG of Life, is a touchstone for understanding how his personal journey and life experiences informed the development and curriculum of his Listening course. The class structure he proposes uniquely reflects that journey, illustrating how improved listening skills can lead to greater personal understanding, improved human connections, and enhanced bonds with nature and the divine. His curriculum and teaching activities mirror his course philosophy that learning should parallel the many facets of listening encountered by individuals in their daily lives. His book provides practical suggestions as well as a vision for listening as a foundation for cultivating our best self. Offering an alternative perspective to traditional listening curriculums, it is a recommended reading for those currently teaching or considering developing a listening course.

Debra Worthington, Professor of Communication, Auburn University, and author of Handbook of Listening (with Bodie), The Sourcebook of Listening Research (with Bodie), Listening (with Bodie and Fitch-Hauser), and Listening, Community Engagement, and Peacebuilding (with Bodie and Beyene)

Listening to the SONG of Life offers a useful pedagogical framework for introducing students to our multiple imperatives to listen. In his words, Baesler invites readers to “enter the more magnanimous world of listening to all of life, oneself, plants, animals, elementals, the Divine, and other humans.” Recognizing the many contexts of listening, this book widens the aperture of what it means to engage in “high-quality” listening and provides useful metaphors, activities, and journaling prompts, all of which elevate one’s capacity to become more aware in a world full of distractions.
Graham D. Bodie, Professor of Media & Communication, University of Mississippi, and author of *The Handbook of Listening* and *The Sourcebook of Listening Research* (with Worthington), *Listening, Community Engagement, and Peacebuilding* (with Worthington and Beyene), and *Listening* (with Worthington and Fitch-Hauser).

Listening to the Song of Life is clearly a labor of love. It is also a major accomplishment...Baesler’s holistic perspective is the book’s greatest strength and its greatest weakness...I know of no other work that finds something to say about listening in as many disparate sources. Citations of articles in the British Journal of General Practice and The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion exist alongside frequent references to works by popular authors like Ken Wilber, perhaps best known for his mystically- and spiritually-influenced “theory of everything”...Baesler is best when writing about his classroom experiences, and since there is relatively little available to guide teachers of listening, this work would be worth having in one’s pedagogical library...

John Stewart, Professor Emeritus of Communication, University of Dubuque, and author of *Bridges Not Walls, U&Me, Personal Communicating, and Racial Equity, and Dismantling Racism One On One*.

Although I didn’t want to read the chapter on nature at first, it has profoundly deepened my view of listening. Because the ego is much less necessary in listening to nature, it forms a wonderful bridge to the divine. Thank you James, for stimulating me enormously with this book to put the divine more centrally in my work on listening.

Victor Pierau-Schoeber, Economist and author of *Leadership in Listening*, and CEO of Connessence

Dr. Baesler’s course on listening to the SONG of Life was a rich multimodal experience for me as a graduate student and I’m grateful he is sharing his ideas and resources with the world. His foreword says the book is for scholars and others with an interest in listening. It’s really for anyone
who wants to live deeply and meaningfully. This book offers a fresh and original multidisciplinary, multi-sensory perspective of listening. Reading it is both evocative and enjoyable. I recommend it wholeheartedly!

Casey Moore, The Productivity Coach (MA, PCC, CPLC, CPO®)

In this enlightening chapter [listening to God-Goddess-the Divine], the author invites you to explore the practice of deep listening to the Divine. He is a gifted storyteller, and as you engage with real-life examples, both personal and from classroom conversations, you will be drawn into the mystical nature of spiritual communion. Prepare to expand your understanding of this sacred Mystery with a variety of embodied practices and reflection questions. These tools are designed to connect you to your own inner wisdom and strengthen your spiritual resilience. The lessons in this chapter offer a vital antidote to the chaos and uncertainty of today’s world. Discover how the process of listening to Spirit can impact your relationship to every facet of life.

Kay Lindahl, CLP, Founder of The Listening Center, Co-Founder of Women of Spirit and Faith, and author of The Sacred Art of Listening, Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening, and How Does God Listen?
Introduction

What is your purpose in reading this book?
Would you like to learn more about:

Creating a virtuous cycle of self-reflective learning?
I order fifteen to twenty books every summer to read and harvest the best parts on 3 x 5 index cards, which I transfer to a blog...listening to these “best parts” lead me to other books in a virtuous cycle of learning.

Why you do the things you do?
For me, there’s no better reason to do something than LOVE...and real love requires that we stop, pay attention, and listen deeply in our relationships with self, people, nature, and the Divine.

Peering into the seabed of your consciousness?
I borrowed this phrase from my first meditation teacher Easwaran Eknath who describes the profound experience of reaching the seabed of consciousness, something that I occasionally experience in meditation which is described in the chapter on listening to the Divine.
Gaining more insight into the feelings and needs of others?

One of the continuing challenges in my life is understanding the feelings and needs of others. When I frame these understandings as a listening game, it can be a daily source of merriment as I often guess incorrectly.

Managing conflicts in healthy ways?

It seems that every day holds conflicts (inner and outer), which I often stumble through, sometimes work through, and occasionally resolve by attentive listening.

Providing love for others?

Gary Chapman’s “love languages” assist me in listening for the love language of others and providing the specific kind of love they need...affirmations for my partner, quality time for my sons, and works of service for my employer.

Experiencing health benefits from spending time in nature?

From spring to late fall, part of my morning is spent in the backyard near the koi pond, listening to the tingles of the sun on my skin and the enriched air from the fig tree and green plants nearby—these often enhance my mood and energy and can linger through the morning.

Feeling a closer connection with Mother Nature?

One of my daily Mother Nature practices is to hug the trunk of a forty-foot cedar tree in our backyard, listening with my senses of touch and smell.
If I’m listening well, I sometimes intuit subtle feelings and energies—too intimate to put into words…i’m honored to call the cedar tree friend.

Creating a garden of Eden?

During the past decade, I’ve slowly transformed our landscape on the home property (which was mostly lawn) into an edible “Garden of Eden,” a kind of food forest. Currently, we enjoy over eighty edible plants and trees: nut and fruit trees, varieties of berries and grapes, root vegetables, vines, herbs, flowers, and an assortment of traditional annual vegetables. The process of creating and tending the garden of Eden requires patient listening to the land and the plants to understand how everything works together as a living being, an interconnected system of relationships. I find much pleasure, beauty, and joy in this kind of nature listening.

Meditation and Contemplation?

For over three decades every morning I meditate, and in the last two decades, I also meditate in the late afternoon or evening. This special kind of listening to the Divine frequently energizes, revitalizes, and sustains me.

Discovering greater value and meaning?

I’ve been a reader ever since seventh grade when Mom brought home some paperback books from the drugstore to help me cope with an illness that left me confined to the living room sofa for over a month. My love for reading is a special kind of listening toggling between listening to the author and to my own thoughts. Listening when reading swings open the doors to the universe, yielding greater value and meaning.
Exploring engaging and embodying the Divine?

I enjoy dancing Roth’s *Five Rhythms* every Sunday with my son for the past ten years, and listening to his *Ethnic Beatz* session every Friday evening. I also make it a priority once a week to invite the Divine to co-create with me colorful mandalas and compose haikus.

Perhaps there are other things you would like to learn about listening to the SONG of life…jot a few of them down here and/or listed questions that you would like to explore.

Topics I’d like to learn more about:

1. 
2. 
3. 

Questions that I’d like to explore:

1. 
2. 
3. 

XXVI | E. JAMES BAESLER
Author Foreword

In listening to the SONG of Life, I invite you to explore your responses to the questions in the previous introductory section. This will prepare you to increase your knowledge and cultivate your skills for deeper and more profound listening encounters. SONG is an acronym for listening to Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine (abbreviated as “G” for Goddess-God in the SONG acronym). Review the previous set of questions and notice the four SONG contexts. The first set of three questions is about listening to Self (S), the second, listening to Others (O), the third, listening to Nature (N), and the fourth, listening to the Goddess-God—the Divine (G). I invite you to travel with me through the four listening contexts throughout this book. As you journey, you will collect listening knowledge and practices that enrich, fulfill, and satisfy your listening encounters throughout the entire SONG of life. As you read, I hope you discover that everything is singing a song that is part of the greater SONG of life. Listen with me.

How the Book is Organized

I invite you into the magnanimous world of listening to the SONG of life. In this world, sensory and intuitive abilities are cultivated to intentionally listen to life within us, with other humans, the natural world, and the Divine. Developing these natural listening capacities enriches our mind, body, and spirit and integrates these areas into a broader sense of self that finds interconnections with many life forms, forces, and energies.

The book pairs listening theory and research with listening practices. Each chapter opens with an original haiku. The haikus can be used to practice listening for poetic possibilities. The first chapter provides a ratio-
nale for, and description of, listening to the SONG of life followed by an autoethnographic journey that led to developing and teaching the Listening to the SONG of Life college course. The next four chapters follow the sequence of the listening to the SONG of life contexts for self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. Chapter Seven covers developing and testing an assessment measure for listening to the SONG of life called L-SONG. And the closing chapter explores future research, experiential learning activities, and resources relevant to listening to the SONG of life.

Who Should Read Listening to the SONG of Life?

Instructors, Scholars, and Students of Listening

Listening to all of life is a paradigm shift in the academic field of listening. Teachers, researchers, and students of listening will find the perspective of listening to the SONG of life a radical departure from the traditional academic view of listening to others. Innovative ideas, especially in academia, are not readily accepted so I include research evidence from journals, books, case studies, and interviews wherever possible to support the new perspective of listening to the SONG of life.

Scholars will find novel resources on listening to engage with and add to their research agenda. Instructors will find a variety of experiential learning activities to incorporate into their listening courses. With creative modifications, the experiential activities are adaptable to primary and secondary grades and other venues like workshops and retreats. Students, both undergraduate and graduate, will find an abundance of new listening topics for projects and papers and a wealth of activities to experiment with to hone their listening skills.

Individuals with Specific Interests in Listening

Each of the four SONG contexts holds possibilities to enrich the lives of individuals with specific interests in listening. I suggest several listening opportunities for each of the SONG contexts. Those interested in mind-body medicine and placebo effects in health care and healing will
discover ideas related to self-listening as mindfulness. Those working in counseling relational dyads and small groups, mediation in the legal system, and negotiating in business will find fresh ways to listen to others with compassionate empathy. Organizations that promote outdoor activities in nature, like Outward Bound, summer camps for children, and wilderness survival, will find the innovative ideas for listening to nature as will those engaged in gardening, permaculture, and regenerative farming. Finally, I offer those with a sense of the Divine (however they conceive the Divine) several options for experiential and embodied practices for listening to the Divine.

**Why listen to me?**

My journey to becoming a full professor at Old Dominion University began with a broad humanities and social science background from a unique degree I created called “Human Relations and Communication Studies.” I specialized in interpersonal communication in my Master’s and Doctoral degrees with concentrations in stories, statistics, credibility, and educational psychology. I am a Communication Professor in the Communication and Theatre Arts Department of Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. In this capacity, I develop unique courses in Nonviolent Communication and Peace, Communicating Love, Dream Research Methods, and Listening to the SONG of Life. I taught twenty-four different communication courses during my thirty-three years at my home institution.

My research agenda in the last decade focuses on autoethnographies related to teaching the courses I’ve developed, especially the Listening to the SONG of Life course. I published thirty-three peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles and presented thirty-seven conference papers. Over half of this research is housed in Old Dominion University’s Digital Commons repository. These publications are available through Old Dominion’s Perry Library at no charge to anyone with internet access. Activity on my Digital Commons’s site shows over 8000 downloads represented by seven hundred and sixty-nine organizations from one hundred and fifty countries worldwide as of January 2023.
An Invitation

Welcome to listening to the SONG of life! Let us begin our journey by exploring what it means enter the more magnanimous world of listening to all of life, oneself, plants, animals, elementals, the Divine, and other humans. May we learn to listen to the intricacies, delicacies, and beauties of the entire SONG of life, beginning with Chapter One.

_E. James Baesler_
Summer, 2024

Notes

1. I love haiku poetry. I’ve been reading and writing haikus for over two decades. It all began on a retreat with the discovery of a nature book in the retreat library. The haikus that open each chapter in this book are intentionally written in lowercase with minimal punctuation to maximize interpretative possibilities. My favorite way to read haikus is to meditate on the first line as an overall context, allowing an image to form while covering up the other two lines with the hand. Moving the hand down reveals the second line of the haiku which builds dynamic tension in comparison to the first line. And then, if it is a good haiku, the last line surprises the reader by resolving the tension creatively. For more on the pleasure of reading and writing haikus, refer to Jane Reichold, _Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-On Guide_ (New York: Kodansha, 2013). To read more of my haikus, refer to Baesler, E. James, *Haiku Ellipses...Invitation...Response* (blog) (2023), https://haiku-ellipses-jbaesler.blogspot.com/.

2. I designed and gained approvals from six academic departments and their respective deans for this 140-credit undergraduate degree in the following subject areas: communication, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and religious studies.

3. The syllabi for these courses are available from the author upon request. Email: Jbaesler@odu.edu.

4. Old Dominion University’s Digital Commons, Perry Library, https://digital-commons.odu.edu/. Type "Baesler" in the search dialogue box for a list of my publications and download options.
CHAPTER I

Introducing Listening to the SONG of Life

listening to the SONG

the SONG of life calling you

rich, full, beautiful
1.0 Introduction to Listening to the SONG of Life

As I awaken to a new morning, with eyes still closed, I am thankful to be alive another day. I hear my partner’s breath next to me. With both of us alive, I know it is already a good day. Turning back the covers, feeling coolness on skin, tasting dry mouth, eyes open to the colored poster on the ceiling above. The poster reminds me of practices to cultivate today such as meditation, mantra, and training the senses. Sitting up, sliding off the bed, feet feel the soft carpet and sense a grounding connection to the earth below.

This sample of sensory rich experience is what I mean by “listening to the SONG of life.” While the entire sequence in real time lasts no more than a minute, this kind of listening awakens me to the newness of the morning, bringing a sense of quiet joy that accompanies me into the day. I invite you to listen to the SONG of life, not only in your morning, but throughout the day.

In the following sections I introduce listening to the SONG of life in further detail. The first section provides an academic perspective of listening to the SONG of life. I begin by reviewing the academic landscape of listening definitions within the field of Communication. I suggest that the current understanding of the boundary conditions of listening within the field of Communication is too restrictive. I argue for an expansion of the boundary conditions of listening. This transition to a broader conceptualization of listening to the SONG of life requires a paradigmatic shift. I begin the shift with the recognition that the conceptual boundaries of listening need not be confined to the single academic discipline of Com-
munication. Rather, the idea of listening belongs to multiple academic disciplines like psychology, sociology, anthropology, and communication. While not an academic expert in all of these disciplines, I point to others who are experts and suggest that we consider and converse with them to provide a more comprehensive understanding of listening to all life forms and forces. This multidisciplinary perspective of listening encompasses a significant part of what I call listening to the SONG of life. Following this transition, I explore five metaphors and models to assist the reader’s comprehension, visualization, and retention of the central ideas in listening to the SONG of life.
1.1 A Communication Perspective of Listening

To define listening in the field of Communication, I review the following resources. I review journal articles published in the *International Journal of Listening* \(^1\) from its inception in 1987 through 2023, and articles from searches conducted in *Communication and Mass Media Complete* and *Google Scholar*.\(^2\) Of the resources found, three publications represent major attempts to conceptualize listening in the field of Communication.\(^3\) First, Glenn’s review of fifty definitions of listening highlights the most important listening themes as attention, perception, interpretive, verbal and nonverbal cues, memory, and a potential response. Second, Witkin and Trochim describe a conceptual map of listening using cluster names such as sensory impressions, context, active testing, empathy, and composite powers. And third, Worthington and Bodie suggest that a single all-encompassing definition of listening is undesirable. Instead, they contend that listening should be defined by research grounded in a particular theory. Theoretical perspectives in listening emphasize different constructs, for example, cognitive, affective, behavioral, and relational. Janusik labels these four listening constructs the Listening Quad.\(^4\)

I also uncovered two often-quoted definitions for listening from international sources. The *International Listening Association’s* task force in 1994 created the following definition of listening:

Listening is the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. It involves the ability to
retain information, as well as to react empathically and/or appreciatively to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.\(^5\)

And the *Global Listening Centre* defines listening as:

\[
\ldots \text{a multimodal process that underlies effective interpersonal and intercultural relations. Listening is part attitude } \ldots \text{ part skill } \ldots \text{ and part physical, driven by a host of physiological, sensory-motor, cognitive, and affective functions } \ldots \text{ these elements shape the perceptual lenses through which humans interpret and strive to understand themselves, colored by each individual's cultural background. }^{6}\]

In addition to the listening concepts from the review of the literature, these later two definitions add further ideas to the conceptualization of listening as a multimodal process, an attitude, a skill, and a set of individual and cultural perceptual lenses.

**Notes**

1. *The International Journal of Listening* is the main academic journal on listening in the field of Communication. The journal is sponsored by the *International Listening Association*.

2. *Communication and Mass Media Complete* is the most comprehensive database of academic journals in the field of Communication. According to the *EBSCO* website, *Communication & Mass Media Complete* includes 917 active indexed and abstracted journals. 877 of them are peer-reviewed. [https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/communication-mass-media-complete](https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/communication-mass-media-complete). *Google Scholar* is another well-regarded academic index to journal articles, books, and professional papers including Communication and other academic disciplines related to listening in the Humanities and Social Sciences. For both of these databases, I conducted a title search with the keywords "listening" AND variations of the term "definition."


1.2 Transitioning from Communication to a SONG of Life Perspective of Listening

The previous Communication perspectives of listening are bounded by human relationships. In conventional Communication, anything outside the human domain is not defined as listening. This Communication listening boundary represents a larger paradigm about listening that includes a constellation of beliefs, values, methods, and practices of the community of Communication scholars. Unfortunately, this Communication paradigm of listening severely restricts additional ideas about listening such as, listening to oneself (e.g., thinking, reflecting, talking to oneself), listening to the sights, smells, and sounds of the natural world (for instance, a desert sunset, a yellow rose, a hound dog barking), and listening to the Divine (such as in meditation or prayer).

I argue for a paradigm shift from the Communication view of listening as exclusively listening to humans to an expanded view that includes listening to other life forms, forces, and energies. There is a precedent for this expanded view of listening gleaned from a review of 382 journal articles from the *International Journal of Listening* over a thirty-year period. I found only three articles (less than one percent) suggesting the possibility of this wider perspective of listening. These sources include Robson and Young’s self-listening as inner speech (listening to self in the SONG of life), Nautiyal’s listening to the natural world (listening to nature in SONG), and Schnapp’s listening to the Divine (listening to Goddess-God-the Divine in listening to the SONG of life).
Three additional sources written by Communication scholars, outside of the three sources found in the *International Journal of Listening*, provide hints that listening is not confined to other humans. First, Purdy describes topics that fit listening to self in the SONG of life such as, dreaming, journaling, self-talk, and listening to the body. Second, Goodall invites us into listening to the signs of the spirit in a local community where communication serves as the, “. . . primary experiential source of all lived and imagined connections to all life forms and forces . . .” And third, Wolvin suggests that listening may include more than humans when he writes, “. . . another exploration of listening could take us to a consideration of non-human listening: listening to animals; listening to music; listening to the environment. . .” Purdy, Goodall, and Wolvin all point to the possibility of a broader view of listening beyond listening to other humans that includes listening to self, others, nature, and the Divine.

The intellectual move from a singular to a multidisciplinary perspective of listening is analogous to one of the themes in the novel *Flatland*. The two-dimensional world of Flatland is inhabited by geometric shapes like the square, who cannot conceive of the three-dimensional world of Spaceland inhabited by geometric shapes like the sphere. To borrow a different image from Plato’s *Republic*, the humans looking at the shadows in the cave find it difficult to imagine a world outside the cave illuminated by sunlight. Analogously, when listening is conceptualized from the perspective of a single discipline (the square in Flatland or the humans in Plato’s cave), it is difficult to conceive of listening from perspectives outside of that discipline. In summary, many scholars in the field of Communication become accustomed to their disciplinary conceptualization of listening as only human listening that they find it difficult to imagine the possibility of listening to other non-human forms of life as suggested by listening to the SONG of life.

My intent is not to argue against the normative Communication view of listening to other humans. Rather, I hope to expand the Communication view of listening to humans to include additional kinds of listening represented by the SONG of life. This broader view of listening invites us to recognize and cultivate relationships with non-human life forms as sources of information, knowledge, and wisdom. Indigenous peoples of the world
give testimony to listening and cultivating relationships with elementals, plants, animals, and spirits. Siegel calls our intraconnected relationships with each other and the natural world “MWe.” I conceptualize these relationships as part of listening to the SONG of life which utilizes all five senses in addition to intuition.

Notes


7. MWe is an abbreviation of "Me" plus "We" and highlights our connection with each other and the natural world. Siegel elaborates on the role of many wisdom traditions such as Indigenous peoples of the world (e.g., the North American Inuit, Lakota Chumash, and Tongva, those of South America, the Inca and Tayuna, those of Polynesian Islands, the Maori of New Zealand, and the Aborigine of Australia) and the role of contemplative spirituality (e.g., the ancient philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Stoicism, and the meditative traditions of Buddhism, Christian Centering Prayer and Hindu traditions). Daniel J. Siegel, *IntraConnected* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2023).
1.3 The Role of the Senses and Intuition in Listening

Given that humans can sense more than sound, it seems reasonable to expand the Communication definition of listening as conscious awareness of sound (hearing and listening to other humans) to a conscious awareness that uses the other human senses (touch, taste, smell, and sight). For instance, we can “listen” with our hands, beyond the ability of sign language, as in the sense of touch. We can also feel the subtle pulsation in our palms when we hold hands. We can feel the softness of cat fur, and the smoothness of a flower’s petal. In a similar manner, listening to the SONG of life includes the listening capacities of all five senses.

Listening to the SONG of life also includes an “intuitive” sense described by various writers as:

... a way of knowing... based on four levels of awareness: physical (bodily sensations), emotional (feelings), mental (images) and spiritual (mystical, beyond rational),¹... an inner experience and awareness... your sense of being you... your sense of experiencing life,... an elaborate internal intelligence operation... that continually monitors our internal and external environments, processes the information, and makes it available to us in subtle ways [such as intuitive hunches]³... a decision-making method that is used unconsciously... It is rapid, subtle, contextual, and does not follow simple, cause-and-effect logic,⁴ [and] Implicit knowledge or implicit learning... knowledge from the past that was forgotten, energetic sensitivity... [the] ability of the nervous system to detect and respond to the environment... and nonlocal intuition... knowledge that cannot be explained.⁵
From these five definitions, a picture of the intuitive faculties of listening emerges as a knowing that is physical (the five bodily senses), intellectual (the mind as thoughts and feelings), and aspects that are energetic, subtle, spiritual, and beyond the rationale.

Notes

1.4 Two Modes of "Knowing-Listening"

Thus far, I have argued that the communication definition of listening to others needs to be expanded to include listening to the SONG of life with the five senses and with an intuitive sense of knowing. This intuition is connected to two ways of knowing-listening. Ken Wilber in *The Spectrum of Consciousness* presents an exhaustive review of philosophical, psychological, and theological literature about two modes of knowing that I consider as two modes of listening to the SONG of life.¹ Wilber summarizes the two modes of knowing as, “We have . . . two basic modes of knowing . . . one . . . termed symbolic, or map, or inferential, or dualistic knowledge [e.g., factual statements based on senses: “I see a red light ahead”]; while the other has been called intimate, or direct, or non-dual knowledge [e.g., subjective statements based on non-sensory data: “I feel elated”].”² I suggest that listening also operates using two modes of knowing. Listening can be dualistic, based primarily on the five senses, and listening can be non-dualistic, more intuitive in nature. In sum, the two modes of dualistic and non-dualistic knowing characterize a “knowing-listening” that is operative in listening to the SONG of life.

Notes

There are concepts closely akin to intuition such as, tacit knowledge, insight, instinct, and creativity, attention, intention, contemplation, and consciousness. From these concepts related to intuition, a progression of listening ideas can be articulated beginning with conscious awareness, moving to attention, intention, and finally ending with contemplation. First, there is consciousness, the fundamental awareness of being alive. The sense of consciousness awareness allows us to connect with the inner world of perception (e.g., feelings, thoughts, bodily sensations) and the outer world (outside of the body, experienced through the senses and intuitive faculties).

This attention has two dimensions. Attention can be located on a dimension of narrow-focused through expansive-inclusive, and on a second dimension of observational-evaluative through absorption-union. As attention is given to an object-subject in awareness, intention may also arise. This intention can influence the individual and the object of attention as evidenced by McTaggart’s exhaustive review of the scientific literature on intention. Contemplation represents a further progression of listening as attention and intention by adding the qualities of reflection, introspection, and mindfulness.

Characterizing the listening process as a system of interacting parts that involve awareness, attention, intention, and contemplation is a working hypothesis that is explored throughout the book. While the listening process is written in a linear fashion, it is possible for more than one process to occur simultaneously. Further, while speculative, it is possible that we cycle through this listening process many times a minute.
Notes


7. McTaggart, *The Intention Experiment*.


To summarize, listening to the SONG of life represents a developmental progression beginning with conscious awareness as a starting point. The progression continues with attention processes like sensory perception, meaning-making, intuitive understanding, and dualistic and non-dualistic ways of knowing. This process can evolve into the deeper listening of contemplation as a long, loving, leisurely, look at the real\(^1\) which may progress into the deepest kind of contemplative-meditative spiritual listening described by world religious-spiritual traditions as nirvana, satori, enlightenment, awakening, mystical union, and cosmic consciousness.\(^2\)

Future chapters will cover each aspect of listening to the SONG of life (self, others, nature, and God-Goddess-the Divine) in greater depth. To conclude this section of Chapter One, I develop metaphors of listening to the SONG of life to assist the reader in further understanding and recalling the four SONG contexts.

Notes

2. Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*. 
1.7 Listening to the SONG of Life as Typology, Metaphor, and System

A Concise Typology of Listening to the SONG of Life

The most concise description of listening to the SONG of life is a simple typology. Listening to the SONG of life is an acronym that stands for listening to “S” as Self, “O” as Others, “N” as Nature, and “G” as Goddess-God-the Divine.

Listening to the SONG of Life as Metaphor

Rippling Waves in a Pond

More than a simple typology, listening to the SONG of life can be described metaphorically as a series of concentric waves rippling from a fountain in the middle of a pond. From the central fountain of self-awareness in the pond, waves ripple outward in circular rings. Each ring is a different context in the SONG of life. The first circular ring around the fountain represents listening to others, the next ring, moving outward toward the edge of the pond, represents listening to the natural world. The last ring of rippling waves that touch the edge of the pond represents listening to the Divine.
Sonic Vibration

Moving from the visual metaphor of rippling water to a sonic metaphor of musical strings adds further depth to an understanding of the listening to the SONG of life. Consider the four listening contexts as different strings on a ukulele. Each string produces a unique tone when plucked. So too, listening to a particular context in the SONG of life produces a unique tone. When the musician uses their fingers to push two or more strings against the fretboard of the ukulele and strums across the strings, a blended tone or chord is produced. So too, when we listen to two or more tones in the SONG of life, we can hear a blended, and often richer, chord of life. As we cultivate listening to multiple tones in the SONG of life, we hear an arrangement or sequence of chords known as a song. There are many such songs in the greater SONG of life that can be experienced as we consciously develop our listening capacities.

Rings on a Target

Imagine the listening contexts as four circles arranged like rings on a dart board. The smallest circle occupies the center or bull’s eye, the next largest circle surrounds this center, the third circle surrounds the second, and the largest circle surrounds all the others (the outer rim of the dartboard). The inner most circle represents listening to self, and involves being centered, open and aware of one’s thoughts, emotions, and needs. This self-awareness can expand to include a receptive awareness of other human beings in the circle called “other” that surrounds the center of self.
Listening to others includes listening to their verbal and nonverbal messages, and listening to their emotions and needs via compassionate empathy. The circle of others can expand to include non-human others in the natural world of the third circle such as micro-organisms, insects, animals, plants, trees, rocks and minerals, and celestial bodies.

Human beings exist in the context of the natural world, and our relationship with nature includes listening to nature. Finally, our consciousness of the natural world can expand to include an awareness of the supernatural or supraempirical world.

This fourth circle, subsuming all the others, I call the Divine circle represented as “G” for Goddess-God in the SONG acronym. I encourage readers to adopt their own naming for the Divine circle depending on their religious-spiritual-philosophical orientation.

System’s Perspective of Listening to the SONG of Life

A system is a goal-oriented artificial human creation of interconnected inputs, throughputs, and outputs that models dynamic processes in the world. Inputs include raw materials, intelligence, and resources. Throughputs are activities that act on and coordinate the inputs. Outputs are the transformed inputs returning to the environment outside the system. The system is goal oriented and uses feedback loops to maintain specified
parameters over time. The system is bounded by a semi-permeable membrane with the functionalities of producer, measurer, comparator, standard, goal setter, error signal, manager, and feedback. There are also levels within a system called subsystems (or micro systems) and higher levels that subsume the system called suprasystems (or macro systems). It is beyond the scope of the present work to present a complete system of listening to the SONG of life. For exploratory purposes and heuristic value, I sketch the relationships of two listening to the SONG of life systems.

The first system of listening to the SONG of life describes the relationship between the four parts of the SONG as couplets. I use the abbreviations of “S” for self, “O” for other, “N” for Nature, and “G” for Goddess-God-the Divine to explicate fourteen unique system couplets. The couplets are S to O, O to S, S to N, N to S, S to G, G to S, O to N, N to O, N to G, G to N, G to O, O to G, G to S, and S to G. I create three hypothetical examples to provide a sense of how these system couplets are related. By exploring SONG as couplets, we introduce a wider perspective and deeper understanding of listening relationships compared to the individual SONG contexts.

The first system relationship (couplet S to O) posits that listening to self influences listening to others. Listening to self through reflection, meditation, and journaling can uncover personal needs. With this knowledge, the self seeks relationships with others to meet those needs. Conversely, listening to the needs of others (couplet O to S) can uncover additional personal needs. For example, if the other (O) describes how Tai Chi helps them deal with work stress, the self (S) may be reminded of its own need for de-stressing from work related pressures.

A second example illustrates how listening to others influences listening to nature (couplet O to N), and how listening to nature influences listening to others (couplet N to O). Listening to a friend describe a delightful and destressing walk in a local park can motivate one to spend time at a park listening to the flora and fauna of nature (O to N). Our experience listening to nature at the park might enliven the desire to share the experience with our friend (N to O). Ideally, the two friends might plan a weekend campout to hone their listening skills with each other and with nature.
A third example describes how listening to nature can influence listening to the Divine (couplet N to G), and how listening to the Divine can influence listening to nature (couplet G to N). Feeling the need to start the day on a positive note, we open the window to hear the song of birds and our spirit is lifted (N to G). Later, during morning meditation, the words of the meditation morph into a kind of bird song (G to N). Inspired, we continue to listen for signs of the Divine during the day.

These examples are meant to illustrate possibilities for exploring (in our personal lives, teaching, and research) the rich and complex interrelationships between the four listening to the SONG subsystems in the greater SONG of life system. In modeling systems, Meadows suggests that we can listen to the system:

We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can’t control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them.\(^3\)

May we all learn to dance with the systems represented by the SONG of life listening contexts.

Notes

1. A ukulele is a musical instrument with four nylon strings that looks like a small guitar.


A review of the literature on listening in the field of Communication defines listening as a perceptual, meaning-making, and interpretive process between humans. A broader definition of listening includes listening to non-humans like nature and the Divine, and a way of knowing that includes intuitive faculties in addition to the five senses. This inclusive, broader definition of listening I call listening to the SONG of Life where SONG stands for listening to self, others, nature, and God-Goddess—the Divine. This magnanimous perspective of listening to the SONG of life is defined and illustrated using a typology, metaphors, and a system’s perspective. The interrelationships between the four subsystems of the SONG are illustrated. These ideas represent the foundation for understanding listening to the SONG of Life. In the next chapter, I narrate an autoethnographic account of how the Listening to SONG of Life course developed and is taught as an undergraduate-graduate college course.
CHAPTER II

Teaching Listening to the SONG of Life

journey into SONG

travel with me on the path

hear, taste, smell, touch, see
2.0 Introduction to Teaching
Listening to the SONG of Life

Listening to the SONG of Life Course

How much time do you spend listening during a typical day? One hour? Three or more hours? If we consider the SONG of life definition of listening', then listening includes all communication processes in life except message production as in writing and speaking. But even in the intentional acts of creating messages, there are elements of listening when we speak (for instance, gauging the facial reactions of others) and write (considering word choice for a specific demographic). In our current sender-oriented self-broadcasting social media society, listening is often overlooked as a vital part of the communication process. Conservatively, I hypothesize that listening to the SONG of life comprises over half of our waking hours. For example, we listen to our alarm or song upon waking, news feeds on our phone or television news, listening to the small talk of people we live with as we prepare for the day, billboards and signs draw our attention on our commute to school or work, then at school and/or work there are emails, voicemails, phone calls, video conference calls, lectures, and trainings that we listen to and process before we respond . . . and so the day is filled with listening. Something this large and pervasive in our lives is worthy of our attention, study, practice, and mastery.

For years I asked myself, if listening comprises such an enormous part of our lives, why is there no communication course about listening in my home department of Communication during the first twenty-four years I served as a faculty member? I would ask students this question, and they
confirmed the need for a listening course. Some students add a turnabout question, “Why don’t YOU teach a listening course?” After several years of the same student refrain, I finally did offer the first listening course in the Communication department at my home institution. This is the story, an autoethnographic account, of how I conceived, created, and taught the first course in Listening to the SONG of Life.

I developed and taught the first undergraduate listening course at my home institution during the fall semester of 2014. The flyer for the new topics course depicted a pink conch shell on a sandy Caribbean beach with the following phrases written in big colorful lettering:

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Discern Inner Wisdom

Connect with Feelings and Needs

Behold the Beauty of Nature

Discover the Deep Divine in All

Listen with Dr. Baesler this Fall in Communication 495:

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In the flyer for the first listening course, the word “SONG” in the phrase “listening to the SONG of life” is an acronym that represents listening to the whole of life in the contexts of Self (S), discern inner wisdom, Others (O), connect with feelings and needs, Nature (N), behold the beauty of nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine (G), discover the deep Divine in all.
Notes

1. A simplified definition of listening to the SONG of life includes using our attention, intention, and all our senses and intuitive faculties to perceive, understand, interpret, and make meaning of life experiences in the contexts of self, others, nature, and the Divine.

2. At my home institution, I went through the typical process that any new course does. First, the course is taught as a "topics class" to determine if there is sufficient student interest. Next, if there is enough student interest, the faculty member proposes that the new course be considered as part of the regular curriculum. Then, a subcommittee of the department evaluates the proposed course, and if approved, the course becomes part of the regular curriculum.
2.1 Autoethnography as Method

The methodological rationale for using autoethnography as story to describe the new approach to teaching the Listening to the SONG of Life course is embedded in two assumptions. First, language is a primary medium by which we are conscious, understand the world, and communicate our learnings to others in stories. Second, there are many signs in the teacher-student learning context that, when read with the assistance of the imagination, can open new understandings of the relationship between teacher and student in the ongoing story of life.

I hold four criteria for “good” autoethnography as a personal standard. First, autoethnographies that I narrate should be rooted in the personal experience of the author (auto) and in the lives of others (ethnography). Second, the autoethnography needs to connect with a stream of ideas in scholarship or some system of ideas (e.g., a philosophy, religion, or spirituality). Third, the autoethnography should engage readers in ways that facilitate mindful reflection and life-enhancing praxis. And fourth, the autoethnography should be grounded in the human mystery of the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit. To summarize, for me, a good autoethnography is a personal and emotionally engaging story about meaningful events in the author’s life that connects with the story of others within a conceptual framework, theory, or stream of ideas for some worthy purpose.

The present autoethnography on developing and teaching the Listening to the SONG Life course fulfills, at least to some degree, each of the four criteria for a good autoethnography. The story of teaching the Listening to the SONG of Life course is rooted in my teaching experience as a professor (auto) and in the lives of my students (ethno). There are connections...
in the autoethnography to a body of literature that uses formal (e.g., scholarly journals and books) and informal sources (e.g., nonacademic books and digital resources like TED talks). The verses of Listening to the SONG of Life organize the content of the story as a song. And the description of the listening activities, and student responses to them, hopefully inspire teachers to reflect and consider new options for learning in teaching their listening courses (praxis). The autoethnography is a holistic representation of the interconnections of listening to the SONG of life in the contexts of self, others, nature, and the Divine.

In the next sections, I demonstrate the need for the new Listening to the SONG of Life course by reviewing literature in listening pedagogy and by narrating two personal stories about planting seeds.

Notes

2.2 Reviewing Listening Pedagogy

A review of listening pedagogy indicates that my home institution is typical of many institutions of higher education in the United States that relegate the teaching of listening to a unit in an undergraduate survey or interpersonal communication course. Data from 1995 show only five percent of eight hundred institutions (forty total) had an entire course in listening. About ten years later, two convenience samples of institutions of higher education in the U.S. (thirty-six in one sample and twenty in the second sample) report that less than half of the institutions surveyed (thirty-nine and forty-five percent, respectively) have an entire course devoted to listening. While over a decade has passed since these two research studies, my limited personal network of colleagues, and my informal review of over 1000 U.S. colleges and universities, indicates that there is still a considerable gap in the development of listening curricula in many Communication departments in the United States.

I realize that my personal network is quite limited when compared to the national data-based samples of listening curricula in U.S. colleges, but my personal network does represent a limited set of real people, and so I advance the claim about the lack of development of listening curricula as informed speculation with one caveat. By development of listening curricula, I mean a series of listening courses. The first course should introduce students to the listening literature (theory and research) and provide opportunities to develop listening competencies. There should also be at least one additional listening course at the intermediate or advanced level that builds on the knowledge and skills learned in the introductory course. Finally, one notable exception to the lack of development in listen-
ing curricula is the well-developed “Integrative Listening Model” curriculum taught across the curriculum at Alverno College.\(^5\)

Why is there such a gap in the development of listening curricula when most Communication educators would probably agree with arguments supporting the necessity of developing listening courses in the undergraduate curriculum? There are probably many reasons for the gap, such as a lack of faculty who specialize in listening pedagogy, high faculty workloads, lack of institutional funding for the development of new courses, and competing curricular agendas.

For those U.S. institutions of higher education with at least one listening course in the undergraduate curriculum, many of these courses are centered on learning about listening knowledge and skills in a traditional lecture-discussion format. Knowing about listening knowledge and skills is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a comprehensive listening education. The missing component in most listening courses is “...how to teach listening so that students could not only comprehend but also \textit{apply} effective listening skills.”\(^6\) Simply put, knowing about listening is experientially distinct from engaging in listening. For example, defining the concept of empathy and listing the steps for displaying empathy is a phenomenologically different experience than empathizing with a real person in face-to-face, real-time dialogue. The lack of emphasis on personal engagement in many listening courses is a shortcoming I address in this autoethnography by suggesting an alternative approach that teaches students to listen to the SONG of life.

\section*{Notes}


4. Ideally, listening courses include practice, feedback, and further practice until a predetermined level of listening competency is met. This is difficult to achieve in a single introductory listening course. Hence, there is a need for at least two listening courses (one introductory and one intermediate-level course) in every Communication curriculum.

5. Kathleen Thompson, Pamela Leintz, Barbara Nevers, and Susan Witkowski, “The Integrative Listening Model: An Approach to Teaching and Learning Listening,” in Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century, ed. Andrew Wolvin (Malden: Blackwell, 2010), 266-286. This listening curriculum focuses on receiving, constructing meaning, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. I am not aware of any empirical research to validate the “success” of this listening approach across the curriculum.

2.3 Before Teaching Listening to the SONG of Life: Two Decades of Planting Seeds

Two stories, from pre- and post-tenure time periods, illustrate how “planting seeds” eventually sprouted into the Listening to the SONG of Life course.

Pre-tenure, I found myself navigating winding mountainous roadways from the driver’s seat of a 1976 Chevy Nova. With navigational assistance from my partner, we found our campsite among the sweet-smelling woodlands of pine, oak, and maple. Looking across the campsite at my partner’s growing abdomen, I felt grateful for the new life growing within her as I reflected on my inner growth. One book I read on that campout significantly nurtured my inner growth, *The Mantram Handbook.*

I began reflectively reading about mantram prayer for the first time. Little did I know how this simple prayer would help me listen to, and cope with, the stresses of tenure, fatherhood, intimate relationships, and illness through the next two decades. I imagine the mantram seed planted as an acorn on that campout. I visualize the tree now, inside of me, like the child was inside my partner, well rooted, steadily growing, maturing into something mysterious that eventually lead me to birthing and teaching the Listening to the SONG of Life course.

Moving from the pre-tenure years to my immediate post-tenure year, another significant seed was planted on a Sunday afternoon after a religious service. A wise elder in my community announced a video showing after the service about a local retreat center. The last retreat I attended was
in my late teens. Intrigued by the possibility of exploring my adult spirituality on retreat, after the service, I watched a fuzzy video tape play for five minutes on a small television screen set atop a mobile cart near the corner of an otherwise unoccupied room. There was me, the elder, and the video. No one else in the community of over two hundred people answered the invitation. The video describes *The Well Retreat Center* located on ten acres beside a small lake in Isle of Wright County in the state of Virginia.

Over time I would discover more riches in nature at the Well Retreat Center than the video could portray. Visually, the landscape of the retreat center is stunning. Additionally, the video provided a glimpse inside the hermitages that I would eventually call home while on retreat. Rough wooden walls surround a bed, chair and table, and bathroom— austere but adequate. The main retreat center contains offices, meeting rooms, a cafeteria, a library of religious-spiritual books and tapes, and a small chapel. Inside the chapel, a brightly colored stained-glass mural of the retreat center rests against one wall opposite three chairs. In the center stands an oak-colored wooden altar with a white candle atop. I made it a ritual to visit the chapel at the beginning and end of each retreat. During my retreat years, the Well Retreat Center, especially the library, chapel, and natural setting, became a quiet oasis of refreshment for me where I listened to the SONG of life.

The seed, in the unusual form of a community elder showing a five-minute video of a retreat center, led to me journeying on solo and group retreats at *The Well Retreat Center* over thirty times in the next twenty years. Over the course of these years, through *listening* in silence and meditation at the retreat center and at home, all of life, especially nature, began to speak to me in a new way.

Other seeds planted at the retreat center sprouted and eventually produced fruit in the form of academic research and publications. As an illustration, on one retreat, well past midnight in the private library, I discovered books about prayer. My reflection and meditation on these books led to a new line of academic research on prayer that sustained me for over twenty years. I envision my retreats as nourishing a “tree of life” with different kinds of fruit on the branches—some love fruit is for family, other fruit is for academics, and one particular kind of fruit, perhaps a pome-
granate with many ruby red seeds, developed into the course I call Listening to the SONG of Life.

These two stories, the pre-tenure mantram story and the post-tenure retreat story, mark a twenty-year period of spiritual renewal, resulting in many changes in my personal and professional lives. Looking back over the last twenty years since that post-tenure transition period, I view listening to the SONG of life as a gestalt, with different figures of the SONG standing against the foreground of life. I came to a deeper understanding of myself (self in the SONG) by listening to my feelings, needs, and experiences through a special kind of journaling.

My connection with nature was further revitalized a decade ago when I began creating an edible food forest. This type of garden models the structure and function of natural forests for the purpose of providing humans with food, herbs, fodder for animals, and so forth. I also started climbing trees and digging holes again—my two favorite non-academic activities as a young boy growing up in Sunnyvale, California. With the help of gardener-permaculture-food forest teachers, I found a new appreciation of, and connection with, trees, the earth, and the wonders of nature (“N” in SONG). Lastly, the growth in my personal prayer and meditation life with the Divine (“G” in SONG) translated into a professional passion for prayer research. When I finally decided to teach the listening class, these four contexts of my life converged into a gestalt that I dubbed “listening to the SONG of life.” This two-decade gestation period finally gave birth to the organizing framework and foundation for the Listening to the SONG of Life course.

Notes


2. The retreat center is named, “The Well Retreat Center” and was a non-denominational center for religious-spiritual individual and group retreats in addition to hosting religious-spiritual workshops and community events. Unfortunately, the Well Retreat Center is no longer in operation. For the complete story of The Well Retreat Center see, E. James Baesler, “Journeying Into the Well: An Autoethnography of 35 Retreats Across Two Decades,” The
3. At The Well Retreat Center there are many varieties of trees (oak, pine, walnut, mimosa), birds (geese, robin, chickadee, sparrow), flowers in abundance (rose, dandelion, tulip, peppermint), different kinds of animals (ground squirrel, brown patched rabbit, white tailed deer), and various insects (sky blue dragonfly, monarch butterfly, and garden spider).


6. Further information about the personal and professional changes in my life are published as, E. James Baesler, "Prayer Life of a Professor," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 120 (Winter 2009): 9-16.


10. See note 5.
The acronym SONG stands for the first letter in each of the following words: Self, Others, Nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. SONG represents four conceptually distinct but related contexts of the life-world. Among the resources I consulted in developing this acronym are the following. Research in the peace literature highlights intrapersonal (Self in SONG) and interpersonal-group (Other in SONG) peace-making. Contexts from the Theistic Spiritual Outcome Survey measures three types of love that correspond to self, others, and Goddess-God-Divine in the SONG of life. And, a system’s perspective of the SONG of life describes the relationships among the four contexts of the SONG. I interpret the system’s perspective of the SONG of life to mean four interrelated ways of being in the world, each higher level subsuming the previous levels in a manner similar to the holarchy networks of communication described by Wilber.

My intention in developing the Listening to the SONG of Life course is for students to discover and cultivate their listening skills by exploring the four interrelated contexts in SONG. By way of illustration, students learn to attend to the inner workings of their mind (self-listening), empathize with others, experience the wonders of nature, and discover Divine interconnections. Course learning goals are described on the first page of the syllabus:
The course introduces students to Listening to the SONG of Life through practices in exploring and developing listening competencies, theoretical perspectives and models of listening, and research about listening. All three areas—practice, theory, and research—are applicable across the contexts of Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine.

In the Listening to SONG of Life course, I review three theoretical models of listening, cognitive, behavioral, and relational. For listening research, I use Janusik and Rouillard’s on-line document that organizes claims and evidence for fifteen different listening categories (e.g., meaning, memory, leadership, barriers, and styles).

For listening practices, experiential learning activities are the primary mode of inquiry. To increase students’ self-awareness of their listening strengths and challenges, they engage in a variety of listening practices in and out of class. For these experiential activities, students design, execute, and reflect on ways to improve their listening competencies in each of the four listening domains of SONG. These “mini experiments” are recorded in listening learning journals. In addition, for “home study” each week, students are presented with a list of resources related to one of the listening contexts in the SONG of life. I invite them to explore the resources, record what they have learned in their learning journals, and share one of these learnings in small groups the following class period. To assist students in home study, the following criteria, posed as questions, are provided to guide their journal writing:

- Which of the course resources provoked the most curiosity and why?
- What did you choose for meditation . . . what insights percolated?
- What questions popped, and how did you answer one of them?
Which experiential activity did you engage with... what did you learn?

How engaged did you feel while learning this week... why?

Anything else you want to share?

After describing the learning goals, and the use of a journal as a method of assessment, the end of this section of the syllabus reads:

I encourage you to be open to new experiences in listening to yourself, others, nature, and the Divine—this allows for the possibility of growth, life, and cultivating new sensory awareness, attitudes, and actions related to listening in your everyday life... you may be surprised at what you uncover and discover in our sixteen weeks together.

The semester long listening course is organized as a sixteen-week SONG of life. The SONG is divided into four verses, listening to self, others, nature, and the Divine. In the middle of the SONG there is a refrain, consisting of a midterm journal assessment, recitation of, and listening to, student learning poems, and individual student conferences. Likewise, there is a refrain at the end of the SONG, an end of term journal assessment, poem, and conference.

Notes

1. A google search in December of 2015 for the phrase “SONG as self, others, nature, and God” revealed one anonymous Facebook webpage (the page is now deactivated) with the identical phrase. Thus, I cannot claim to be the
first to use this acronym.


6. A complete copy of the Listening to SONG of Life syllabus is available from the Author upon request. Email jbaesler@odu.edu, and type "Listening to the SONG of Life syllabus" in the subject line. In addition, I invite you to tell me about yourself and your interest in listening to the SONG of life.


2.5 Narrating the SONG: Assumptions, Description, and Elaboration

In this section, I provide the reader with a sense of what it means to be in the sixteen-week undergraduate Listening to the SONG of Life class. I describe and elaborate on listening activities and learnings from lecture and student discussions associated with each verse of the SONG of Life.

There are several qualifications that frame the story of my experience of listening to the SONG of Life in the classroom. First, the story is necessarily incomplete because it represents the single viewpoint of one instructor. There are fifteen to twenty-some other student viewpoints in the classroom each semester. The story is based on my interpretation of the most important and meaningful activities and learnings. Second, the story is partly based on memories of conversations with students in and outside of class. There are probably many memorial distortions operative in the selection and narration of classroom events and discussions. I attempt to offset these memorial distortions by taking notes after each class. Third, I bear witness to times when I’ve felt the inspiration of the creative spirit in writing the story, a more mysterious and intuitive kind of influence that I cannot fully explain. Finally, the story is rooted in my worldview-standpoint as a full Professor of Communication trained in social science, aligned with the interspiritual mystical tradition, and imbued with my life experiences as a sexagenarian, husband, and father.

The story would be more complete if I could include quoted voices of students journeying with me during the semester, but due to compli-
cations with the human subjects committee, I am not ethically able to include excerpts from student journal writings and poems. However, I do have my personal memory and class notes to draw on. Using these resources, I reconstruct student voices by paraphrasing their words. As a partial validation of these reconstructed student voices, I obtained human subject’s approval to survey former students from the listening course. I invited students via electronic mail to rate an amalgamation of six key student excerpts from the present autoethnography. Twenty-five percent (five of twenty) of students agreed to complete the survey. In ninety-three percent of the cases, student rated the excerpts as, “Consistent with my experience in the class.” This evidence suggests that the majority of the reconstructed student voices in the autoethnography align with the experience of some of the students from the course and are not simply memory distortions based on instructor bias.

Ultimately, my purpose in narrating this story is to provide readers with teachings, learnings, and insights that may benefit those interested in incorporating one or more verses of the SONG of life into their teaching, research, and service (for instructors), into their thinking, conversations, and writing (for students), and into their everyday life (for others interested in various aspects of listening). I now turn to narrating what it feels like to be in the Listening to the SONG of Life course—one verse at a time, beginning with listening to self.

SONG of Self: Silence and Solitude

What does it mean to “listen below the noise?” I asked students during our second week of class. Students easily identified with the term noise, but the phrase “listening below the noise” was more difficult for them to grasp. Students quickly enumerated external noises such as traffic outside of the building, chatter of talk in the hallway, and the hum of the overhead projector in the classroom. Social media also carried a noise frequency for students. By way of illustration, consider the following student comments. “I feel like I have to respond to every text right when I get it,” “I need to update my Facebook status at least once a week,” “I have to see
if the people I’m following on Twitter have any new posts,” and “I’ve got
to check out my friend’s pics on Instagram.” After this initial discussion
about external noises, some students began discussing internal noises, for
instance, “Gurgles in my stomach,” “I’m just itching to go on break,” and
“Maybe my own random thoughts are a kind of noise.” At this point, I
introduce the idea of listening below the noise. LeClaire defines listening
below the noise as a way of being alone, in silence and solitude, with the
self. Some students seemed intrigued by the idea while others found the
prospect of listening in solitude and silence “boring,” “tolerable,” and “ter-
rifying.”

Reminding students that this is a course in listening, I asked them to
remain open and receptive to LeClaire’s ten-minute audio story. After lis-
tening to LeClaire’s story, students are eager to ask questions, “How could
she stay silent for a whole 24 hours?”, “Twice monthly?”, “For over twenty
years?!”, “I don’t get how being silent made her more in tune with others?”
and “How can she stay comfortable in her own skin with all those thoughts
running around?” Curiosity and wonder in the form of questions now per-
vade the atmosphere of the class. As this energy peaks, I invite them to lis-
ten to the silence and solitude within themselves.

I challenge students to carve out time (not less than one, but no more
than six hours) the following week to be silent in a private quiet place
without talking to anyone, and without the influence of media — Just Be.
After students complete their time in solitude and silence, their journal
writings reveal that most of them could not recall a recent time in their life
when they intentionally created space for silence and solitude. Reactions
to the solitude and silence activity varied greatly. Some students felt frus-
trated with continuous mind chatter filling the silence, others were aware
of the chatter but could detach from it, and still others experienced their
thoughts slowing down, accompanied by feelings of peace, like “muddy
waters becoming clear.”

In the ensuing student discussion, we discovered diverse ways to prac-
tice the art of silently listening to the self in solitude. For illustrative pur-
poses I recount some of the student ideas for being in silence and solitude.
Simply pausing is an aid to recollecting oneself in the car upon arriving to
school, work, or home. Sitting outside under a covered porch, on a park
bench, or on a patch of grass makes it easier to free oneself from the tether of electronic devices. And making a ritual space by clearing a corner of a room, shed, or garage for a private place to be alone is conducive to cultivating silence and solitude.

There are seeds of silence and solitude in each of us that, in due season, sprout in a place where we listen below the noise, discover our true self, and perhaps in time, blossom and bear fruit for the service of others. In the words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton:

The truest solitude is not something outside you... it is an abyss opening up in the center of your soul... You do not find it by travelling but by standing [being] still... here you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and... a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity.¹⁰

The class activity of listening below the noise begins to orient students in the direction of their interior life, a life so beautifully and poetically described by Merton. The benefits of silence and solitude are available to all who are willing to listen to the self in the SONG of life speaking below the noise. In the next section, I turn to the second verse in Listening to the SONG of Life, listening to the “other.”

SONG of Other: Surfing the Waves of Empathy

In a talk to members of the Google organization, Buddhist teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn quotes Swami Satchidananda who reportedly said, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf!”¹¹ According to nonviolent communication teacher Marshall Rosenberg, waves of life energy are continually emanating from human beings, and we can learn to surf these waves by listening empathically.¹² In class, we learned to surf the waves of energy from another person by having each person in a small group tell a short story from the past week. Then, group members attempt to surf the person’s wave of energy by empathizing with their feelings and needs. Rosenberg references the work of Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef who
describes a human matrix of needs and satisfiers that are culturally and historically universal.\textsuperscript{13}

We adopted the following question to structure an empathic response when listening to another, “Are you feeling…(guess the feeling), because you are needing…(guess the need).”\textsuperscript{14} Sometimes we catch the other person’s wave of energy, experiencing the exhilaration of metaphorically popping up on the surfboard and riding their wave of energy into the shore. Other times, we miss the wave or wipe out. But even in wiping out, our attempts to empathize with the other person demonstrates caring and support. This active empathic engagement sustains a connection with the waves of life energy flowing from the other person.\textsuperscript{15}

Students resonate with the surfing metaphor as a means to understand the process of empathic listening since the beach at the Atlantic Ocean is a mere thirty-minute drive from campus. In the language of surfers, sometimes it is hard to “catch a wave” because the wave is too humongous, intense, or otherwise gnarly. Likewise, it is challenging to catch the feelings and needs of others when their story is embedded in language that blames or criticizes the listener. In such cases, we may first need to empathize with our own feelings and needs before empathizing with another.

Some students remained skeptical about empathically surfing waves of energy from others outside the classroom. They express their concern, “Dr. B, this is cool for class, but my friends aren’t gonna listen like that...if they’re done talking and I don’t say anything right away, they’re gonna think somethings wrong with me!” “Yes,” I replied, “That’s probably going to happen because of the elongated time it takes to clarify our own feelings and needs, listen and verbalize the feelings and needs of the other, and obtain feedback from the other to ensure the accuracy of our listening.” After empathizing with the student, I provided a simple metaphor that seemed to satisfy. “Like surfing, empathizing just takes practice!”

Interlude: Voicing Our Learnings

The students and I recite learning poems to mark the mid-semester assessment.\textsuperscript{16} To motivate students to meditate, write, and recite a learn-
ing poem for the class, we listen to Sarah Kay recite her poem entitled
“B...” which begins with the phrase, “If I should have a daughter. . .”.17
The class sat in rapt attention as she recited her poem, and when Kay
paused at the end, the class applauded with intensity. After the poem, Kay
shares insights and activities for developing a poetic voice. With inspira-
tion from Kay’s poetry and message, students are ready to create and
share their listening learnings as poetry. A week later, students recite their
learning poems. There was a palpable silence in the room while each stu-
dent in turn gave voice to their personal learnings as poetry. When the
last student finished reciting their poem, one student in the class play-
fully remarked, “Dr. B, don’t you have a poem for us?” I replied, “I sure do!”
Unfolding a poem from my back pocket, I began to slowly recite, “Wonder-
ings and Hopes of a Professor.” After the mid-semester interlude, we con-
tinued the journey of listening to the SONG of life by exploring the song
of nature.

SONG of Nature: Sunflowers and Tubers

The second half of the term begins with me placing grains of sand and a
small yellow flower in the palm of each student. I ask students to let their
gaze softly focus on these natural objects resting in the palm of their hand
and meditate. After a time, I write some lines on the whiteboard and then
recite part of William Blake’s poem, Auguries of Innocence, “To see the World
in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in
the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.”18 In listening to Blake’s
words as they gaze at the sand in their palm, some students report feeling
a genuine connection with nature. Some of their insights include how the
micro grains of sand resting in their hand also make up the macro world
around their hands, that processed sand makes up parts of this classroom,
and that sand is embedded in the concrete walkways on campus. Other
students report that Blake’s poem inspires them to relax with the flower in
their hand, smell the aroma, behold the golden color, and feel the velvety
petals.

I have a vivid memory of a small group of students adorning their hair
with the sunchoke blossoms that I gave them as they departed class that
evening. Their smiling and laughing as they rearranged the flowers in each other’s hair became my joy.

After this initiation into listening to nature, we engaged in other nature activities. For instance, we offered the gift of our breath (exhaled carbon dioxide) to green plants, and in return, the plants offered their gift of breath (oxygen) to us as we inhaled. We sat in a small grassy area outside of class surrounded by trees, shrubs, and flowers with closed eyes and silently named the individual parts of the soundscape surrounding us. And, we mindfully ate a single raisin in the space of three minutes. Overall, we explored diverse ways to listen to nature, buzzing insects, singing birds, animal movements and sounds, colorings and textures of plants, brightness and warmth of sunlight, and the feel of the earth on our bare feet.

Our discussions of the different nature activities left students with mixed feelings: awkward, perplexed, surprised, peaceful, renewed, and happy. As one illustration of these mixed feelings, I recall the story of a student that said, “Putting my head into a green plant in a public place was one of the silliest things I have ever done, but after breathing with the plant for about a minute, I found myself feeling inexplicably happy.” Another student found connection with nature in a mature Magnolia tree that she observed from our second story class window during the first half of the semester. Recounting her story to the class, she said,

I felt drawn to the tree, hugged it like an old friend . . . I saw a name plate next to the tree, and when I googled the name, it was a professor that had died over a decade ago . . . I’ll always remember the name of that professor and that special Magnolia tree.

Another insight from experiencing nature came from “listening to the feel of a stone.” One student noted, “You can feel things about the stone that you cannot see with the naked eye.” This insight reveals experientially that we possess latent abilities to listen with more than just our ears and eyes. In the feeling stone activity, there are subtle textures of the stone that we cannot see with the naked eye, but that we can explore, know, and under-
stand by feeling the stone with our fingertips. Michael Cohen suggests, based on thirty years of leading workshops and extended trips in nature, that humans possess at least fifty-two senses, and I hypothesize that we are capable of listening to all of them.20

The nature section of the course ends with the professor handing out a thumb sized, light brown colored, plant tuber to each student. Recall that I handed out small sunflowers to each student at the beginning of the nature section of the course. The tubers and sunflowers came from the same plant in my garden known as the Jerusalem Artichoke Helianthus tuberosus or more informally, the sunchoke. The flowers from sunchoke in my garden had faded with the cooler temperatures of fall, and I harvested the tubers the day before I handed them out in class. I asked students if they could see a connection between the flowers I handed out two weeks earlier and the plant tubers I gave them today. Gradually, students began to articulate the universal circle of life in nature. I felt a sense of excitement building as the discussion slowly filled in the missing pieces of the circle of life that I was sketching on the board as they voiced their ideas. Finally, the circle was complete. The tuber gives birth to plant, plant to flower, flower to seed, and seed gives birth to tuber, in a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. We marveled at the wisdom we created based on our experience of deeply listening to nature.

As a follow-up, I challenged students to plant the tuber in a pot, or in the ground, three to four inches deep, and then patiently listen and wait. In spring, the tuber puts out shoots and grows into a six to eight-foot sunchoke, or a three to four-foot plant if potted. If we listen well and take care of the sunchoke, the following fall season will bring a harvest of twelve petaled bright yellow flowers to enjoy. And the edible tubers can be consumed in the company of friends. This follow-up challenge involves listening to the needs of the plant, cultivating the soil to ensure the spread of roots, ensuring ample sunshine by attending to the movement of the sun, providing appropriate moisture by listening to rainfall, and conscious breathing with the plant to maintain a sense of connection. In return for listening deeply to the plant, the sunchoke yields beauty, nourishment, and wisdom about the great circle of life. The section on listening to nature comes to an end with this final challenge, and we con-
continue to explore the next verse in the SONG of life—listening to the song of the Goddess-God-Divine.

SONG of God-Goddess-the Divine

Lectio Divina

Written accounts of an individual’s direct experience with Goddess-God or more broadly the Divine, when validated by a community of believers, is sometimes raised to the status of “sacred scripture” among world religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism among others. Listening deeply to a holy text or sacred scripture, as in prayer or meditation, can guide the listener into something akin to the original Divine experience that inspired the sacred writing. Deep listening can also connect the listener with a community of believers embodying the meaning and lived experience of the sacred text. One way to practice this deep listening to sacred scripture, in the Christian tradition, is called Divine reading or lectio divina.

The Priest at the Well

Developed by monks in the Middle Ages, lectio divina is a method of Divine reading applied to sacred scripture. Monsignor Chet Michael, a dynamo of Divine energy and the octogenarian retreat master at the Well Retreat Center, shared the Lectio Divina method as one of the important spiritual practices during the retreat I attended. Standing not more than five feet tall, snow-haired and wrinkled, with dancing eyes beneath black-framed glasses, he described the workings of the Holy Spirit to a group of about twenty-five of us retreatants sitting in a circle in the Great Room at the Well Retreat Center. His teachings and counsel during that weekend mark a high point on my spiritual journey. Monsignor taught this method as the “Four R’s,” Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest.
The Four R’s of Listening to the Divine

I begin our evening listening class with the words, “We are going to listen to the Divine through sacred reading.” After sipping some herbal tea that smelled like candied peppermints, I discuss a special type of reading called *lectio divina* or sacred reading. I explain. It’s different than the way you read a textbook or the way you might scan a social media site. This method of reading applies specifically to Divinely inspired texts like those of the major world religions, for example, Christianity’s *New Testament*, the Jewish *Torah*, the Muslim *Qu’ran*, the Hindu *Vedas* and the Buddhist *Dhamma-pada*. You can also use this method for any text, like poems, literature, or musical lyrics, that you believe is Divinely inspired.

For many students, the first issue in attempting the *lectio* method is finding a sacred text that they want to read. A few students can recite poems by heart from grade school, but most students have long forgotten them, and many don’t believe these poems to be Divinely inspired anyway.

I write on the whiteboard in red letters: “The 4 R’s of *Lectio Divina.*” Under this title, one beneath the other, I write four capital “R’s.” Next to the first “R” I add the letters “ead” (Read). Then I say: There are four “R’s” to the method of *lectio*. The first is *Read*. We read a short section (a few lines or paragraph) of a text that we believe to be Divinely inspired. We read *slowly*, as if we are a connoisseur sipping a fine wine, savoring the flavor. As we read, when we discover something that “tastes good,” we stay with that feeling of goodness and begin the second step of *Reflecting* (the second “R”) on the meaning of the text. Metaphorically, we let the wine swish around in our mouth, enjoying the taste until there is no more taste (meaning) to be savored. After considering the meaning of the text (literal and symbolic), we ask ourselves: what *Response* (the third “R”) does this passage require of me. That is, what action am I being called to? Once we commit to a concrete resolution, we *Rest* (the fourth “R”) with the passage, not trying to do anything in particular...just being with the passage. If we have more time, we return to the passage to find another tasty sip of wine and make our way through the four steps again. In just a moment, we will have a chance to practice the four “R’s” of *lectio*, but first, I ask: are there any questions?
To practice the method of lectio divina, I project on the classroom screen a Divinely inspired poem from the book Prayers for a Thousand Years. Part of the poem reads:

May we listen to one another in openness and mercy.
May we listen to plants and animals in wonder and respect.
May we listen to our own hearts in love and forgiveness.
May we listen to God [the Divine] in quietness and awe.

I ask the students if they notice any connection between the poem and the SONG of life. After some discussion, students eventually notice that the poem contains all the elements of listening to the SONG of life, self (“our own hearts”), others (“one another”), nature (“plants and animals”), and Goddess-God-the Divine (“God”).

I allot two minutes for students to engage in each of the four R’s of lectio divina (eight minutes total). At the end of each segment, I invite students to “bring to a close” that step in the lectio process, and record something if they need to before proceeding to the next step. After concluding the fourth step of resting, we discuss the process and what we have learned.

Student Reactions to Listening to the Divine

One student remarked, “That went by way too fast...I don’t feel like I had enough time . . . I didn’t even get past the first stanza in the poem.” I replied, “It is okay if you didn’t finish the poem. Remember, the purpose is to listen for the Divine nudge, to find something that speaks to you. Once you’ve found something, you savor it before moving on.” As for the time pressure, I encourage students to experiment with the lectio method outside of class when they can allot at least fifteen to twenty minutes for the practice. Then they can compare their experience of the extended time outside of class with the more compressed time in class. We later
explore which conditions optimize the ability to listen and connect with the Divine and why.

Another student playfully remarked, “This is deep. You can really get a lot out of a few words. We should read our textbooks this way.” Another student countered, “No way. It would take way too long, and those college books aren't Divinely inspired anyway!” I smiled in agreement. Overall, students are uniformly surprised at how a short phrase from a sacred text can be the gateway to Divine vistas, meanings, and insights.23

In student conferences near the end of the course, three students who self-identify as “not religious” or “atheist” found new connections with the Divine. For one student, the new connection is described as “Something larger than me, a feeling that there is more to life than just me, that there is something out there that I can connect with.” For another student, the Divine connection was a return to, and reframing of, their family’s religious roots. This student was estranged from their family’s fundamentalist Christian practices, but the experience of practicing lectio divina rekindled an interest in approaching the Bible in a new way. They found this new way more “meditative, practical, and restful.” Still another student expressed their new connection with the Divine as “. . . mysterious, hard to explain, a presence.” I appreciate this student’s attempt to language the numinous, something that inevitably falls short of the actual experience but is important and meaningful.

I’m reminded of the Taoist idea that the Way cannot be verbally spoken or communicated to another person through ordinary language. Rather, the Way is known through direct experience,24 that is, partly through listening. Similarly, lectio divina provides a way to experience the Divine through deep listening. My observations indicate that most students with a religious or spiritual faith express their connection with the Divine in our class discussions and in their journal writings with words like “renewal, growth, peace, and happiness.” The joy of being able to facilitate these kinds of positive listening experiences with students is the fulfillment of a life-long dream for me, for I, too, am experiencing renewal, growth, peace, and happiness.
Practicing Listening to the Divine

I invite readers of this book to consider performing an age regression experiment. What kinds of books, poems, or musical lyrics did you hold as sacred as a child . . . adolescent . . . young adult . . . middle-aged adult . . . older adult? When you compare sacred writings across the lifespan, do you notice any theme that ties the stages together? In contrast, how have your views about sacred writings evolved over time. That is, how are the sacred writings unique or different in each stage of life? Finally, if you were to pick a sacred passage for practicing lectio divina sometime within the next week, what passage would you choose to read, reflect, respond, and rest in...why this one? Set aside a specific and unhurried time and place to explore listening to the Divine using the practice of lectio divina.

Notes


4. For each of the six statements representing amalgamations of student voices, I asked students to choose from a range of statements that best matches their personal experience in the class. The choice among statements are as follows, "consistent with my experience in class," "partially consistent," "not consistent," or "no recollection of this statement."

5. By “noise” I mean both internal noises (e.g., thoughts, emotions, and intuitions) and external physical noises outside the body (e.g., the sound of an air conditioning or heating units inside a building).


7. This interview with Ann LeClaire is deactivated from the internet. I have not been able to find another substitute video by LeClaire. Instead, now I summarize the content of the video for the class based on my notes when I first
listened to the original audio recording.

8. I define “without the influence of media” as no texting, Facebooking, gaming, Skyping, Facetiming, Zooming, Discording, Googling, Netflying, listening to music, reading, and so forth.

9. The phrase “muddy waters becoming clear” is attributed to the sage Lao Tzu. Metaphorically, if our mind is muddied by thoughts, and we still the mind in meditation, the thoughts (like mud in the water of the mind) will eventually sink, and we will be able to see clear to the bottom of the container. I tested this myself with a bucket of water and a handful of clay soil. Swirling the soil in the water, I could only see mud. Waiting twelve hours, the water still appeared muddy. It took several days before the mud sank and I could see clear to the bottom of the bucket. The lesson for me is, yes, muddy waters do clear, but it often takes awhile! For more on Lao Tzu’s philosophy of muddy water see, Ira Progoff, The Well and the Cathedral: An Entrance Meditation (Malibu: Dialogue House Library, 1983).


12. Rosenberg’s hour-long audio presentation on empathy and nonviolent communication is no longer available on the internet. Related resources on empathy can be found on the Center for Nonviolent Communication’s homepage at https://www.cnvc.org/.

13. Manfred Max-Neef, Human Scale Development (Arlington: Apex Press, 1991), and Manfred Max-Neef, "Development and Human Needs," in Real-life Economics: Understanding Wealth Creation, eds. Paul Ekins and Manfred Max-Neef (New York: Routledge, 1992). In the human needs matrix, needs are categorized as a combination of axiological (e.g., subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, and creation) and existential (e.g., being, having, doing, and interacting) criteria.


15. Those interested in expanding their feelings and needs literacy to enhance the ability to empathically connect with the feelings and needs of others can consult Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication, 2005.

16. Students also submit a compilation of weekly journals as part of the mid-semester assessment.


Michael J. Cohen, *Reconnecting with Nature*, 2007. Some of the senses (beyond the typical five senses) that Cohen lists are, temperature, heliotropism, balance, proximity, the passage of time, and electromagnetic fields. Cohen believes that we can actively cultivate listening with these senses to enhance our connection with, and understanding of, the natural world.

These religions are illustrative. There are many more religions that use sacred scripture or holy texts in their rites and rituals. For instance, see, Joel Beversluis, ed. *A Sourcebook for the Community of Religions: An Interfaith Guide to Religion and Spirituality* (Novato: New World Library, 2000).


We ended the term the same way we marked the middle of the term by voicing our listening learnings through poetry. My face felt wet with tears welling up on more than one occasion as I listened to the heart-felt poems that conveyed the breadth and depth of student learning from listening to the SONG of life throughout the semester. In their individual student conferences, students highlight moments like, “This has been a life-changing experience for me,” “I will actually use what I learned,” “I learned more in this class than in any of my other Communication classes,” “I hope you offer this again because my friends want to take it.” I felt a sense of fulfillment in what we accomplished together. I reflect on the semester as well, bringing closure to the last class by reading my poem, *Dr. B. Dreaming*. Students lingered after class, we talked some, and more importantly we listened to our song of life.
My Hope for Those that Listen to the SONG of Life and a Preview

My hope is that we can open spaces in our lives to cultivate an ability to listen to the many SONGS of life within and among the four circles of life. There are songs of sowing, reaping, dancing, loving . . . songs that help us cope with fear, hate, disease, destruction, and death . . . and songs of courage, hope, resilience, transformation, and renewal. From our personal centeredness in the greater SONG of life, I hope students, teachers, and others can model for each other how to listen more intentionally, mindfully, and compassionately to the harmonies, melodies, chants, and hip-hop beats that play among the four circles of the SONG of life. May those who endeavor to teach and learn how to listen to the SONG of life experience the beauty, vastness, and joy of the great SONG of life.

The next four chapters explore what it means to listen to the SONG of life in greater detail. Each of the four listening contexts is developed in the order of the SONG acronym. Chapter Three describes listening to self, Chapter Four is listening to others, Chapter Five is listening to nature, and Chapter Six concludes with listening to Goddess-God-the Divine. I describe and explain listening topics in each chapter based on my teaching, research, and personal experience listening to the SONG of life. The topics are not meant to be exhaustive but illustrative of the areas that could be covered in teaching, researching, and practicing listening to the SONG of life.
CHAPTER III

Listening to Self

intentionally

mindful, curious, present

listening to self
3.0 Introduction to Listening to Self

The Nature of Self

The question “Who are you?” or “What is the self?” is a complex and deep one. Consider the following story of the Buddha and the following paraphrase I’ve created that illustrates an additional quality vital to an understanding of listening to the self.

A traveler came upon the Buddha and impressed by his radiance and peace, asked him:

TRAVELER. Are you a god?
BUDDHA. No.
TRAVELER. Perhaps you are a magician or wizard of some kind?
BUDDHA. No.
TRAVELER. Are you a man?
BUDDHA. No.
TRAVELER. Are you an angel?
BUDDHA. No.
TRAVELER. Then, please tell me, what are you?
BUDDHA. I am awake!
AUTHOR. Who are you?
READER. What do you mean who are you? I’m _________(insert your name).

AUTHOR. Really? Is that all you are?
READER. Well, no, I’m a . . . (list some of the roles you identify with in society...for example, teacher, student, worker, manager...add age, political affiliation, religious-spiritual-philosophy, sexual orientation...)

AUTHOR. Yes, but is that the whole of who you are?
READER. Well, I am (list things related to your personality, for example, outgoing, diligent, kind . . . and things you love doing, for instance, listening to music, hiking, watching movies, journaling . . .)

AUTHOR. Okay, it that it? Is that everything?
READER. Let me see . . . I have a mind, body, emotions . . . is that what you mean?

AUTHOR. Yes, AND . . . is there anything else?
READER. I don’t think so.

AUTHOR. So, if you were to summarize . . . how would you define your SELF?
READER. I thought I knew, but now I’m not so sure.

Notes

3.1 Listening to Self as Awake, Aware, Conscious

To be awake, enlightened, and fully conscious is not the typical response most people provide to the question, “Who are you?” Yet, consciousness is an essential part of our human nature. Paraphrasing medical doctor and researcher Larry Dossey, “awakedness” is pure awareness, consciousness, part of the Big Self, the Great Spirit, the universal mind. Dossey provides evidence from ancient and modern sources that we are more than our individual minds, that we are part of One Mind. Our conscious awareness is beyond the limits of the body, personality, memory, beliefs, feelings, social roles, and genetics. A greater understanding of this awakened aware consciousness is essential to understanding what it means to listen to the self in the SONG of life.

Wheel of Self Awareness Listening Meditation

The importance and relevance of listening with our conscious awareness is illustrated by Daniel Siegel’s “Wheel of Awareness.” The wheel is a method to link the different elements of the content of awareness into an integrated whole. The hub of the wheel represents what we can know within awareness. The spokes that go out from the center of the wheel represent our conscious focus of attention as represented by areas or sectors on the rim of the wheel. The sectors are divided into various “senses.” The five senses are the outer world, the sixth sense is the body, the seventh sense represents mental activity, and the eighth sense symbolizes rela-
tionships. Finally, awareness can “bend back” on itself, aware of the feeling of awareness.

Wheel of Awareness Practice

Allowing awareness to follow along the rim of Siegel’s wheel of awareness is a meditation in listening to the self. In the wheel of awareness meditation, each sector of the self on the rim is reflected on in turn. In this process of listening, the various aspects of self are integrated into a coherent whole. After completing the wheel of awareness meditation, Siegel recommends reflecting on additional questions for further understanding:

How did it [our awareness on any point of the wheel] first come into awareness? Does it come suddenly or gradually? . . . once it is in awareness, how does it stay there? Is it constant or vibrating, is it steady or intermittent? And then how does it leave awareness? Suddenly, or gradually, or . . . if it is not replaced by another mental activity, what does the space feel like between two mental activities . . .

Practicing the wheel of awareness meditation, and reflecting on the post meditation questions, provides a deep engagement of listening to the self in the SONG of life.
Les Femi and Jim Robbins present another perspective of the self using the language of attention. Conscious awareness consists of attention, the contents of attention, and the witness of both. When brain activity between attention and its contents is “out of phase,” self is experienced as separate from the contents of attention. Whereas, when brain activity is “in phase,” the experience of a unified whole emerges, and the self becomes “unself-conscious,” that is, the sense of self “disappears.”

The quality of attention called “open focus” allows the self to hold different forms of attention, narrow and diffuse, and objective and immersed. It is possible for the self to hold these different forms of attention simultaneously while also maintaining a flexibility to shift focus depending upon on the situation and intention. Open focus is an inclusive attention style that takes in multi-sensory information simultaneously. Femi summarizes the profundity of an open focus approach to attention, “When we change the way we pay attention, we gain the power to profoundly change the way we relate to our world on every level—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.”

### Open Focus Awareness

One way to begin cultivating an open focus sense of self-awareness (to listen to self) is to imagine “feeling responses” that spontaneously emerge from your responses to the following questions (it is recommended to pause for fifteen seconds after each question):

- **Can you imagine the distance or space between your eyes?**
- **Can you imagine the space inside your throat as you inhale?**
- **Can you imagine the space inside your mouth and cheeks?**
Can you imagine the space inside your ears?\textsuperscript{9}

I view the cultivation of open focus attentional practices as another “listening to self” meditation that, like the wheel of awareness practice, expands, develops, and fosters a greater sense of self.

Listening to Self as an Energy House

Victor Pierau uses the image of an “energy house” for understanding self-awareness and its relationship to listening.\textsuperscript{10} Picture the energy house as a circle divided into four pieces of pie labeled physical, emotional, mental, and “purpose or spirituality,” with our personality as a smaller circle in the center. By paying attention to each of these areas within ourselves (i.e., listening to these aspects of the self), we can gauge how much energy the self has available for listening to others.\textsuperscript{11}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Energy Keeping Practices</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pierau provides practical “energy keeping” insights for each of the four areas of the energy house that I paraphrase here.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\textit{Take in fresh air and sunlight to support energy in the physical area of the energy house.}

\textit{Take short breaks regularly to stay mentally alert.}

\textit{Reflect on your emotional reactions to others for the emotional area of the energy house.}
Work towards meaningful goals for the spiritual area.

All four quadrants of the energy house, physical, mental, emotional, and purpose-spiritual are part of listening to self in the SONG of life.

From Ego to Kosmic Perspectives of Listening to Self

Wilber and colleagues\(^\text{12}\) provide another perspective on self-awareness that begins with ego and ends with the Kosmic level of awareness. The ego-centric focus on “me” is the self-absorbed state of consciousness. The next level, called ethnocentric, is the identification with a particular group, tribe, clan, or nation. Another level up, worldcentric consciousness expands self-identity to include all humans. Finally, the highest level of development, encompassing an identification with, and caring for, all sentient beings is called Kosmocentric. Self-awareness potentially contains ego, ethno, world, and Kosmo centric levels of consciousness.

Within these states of self-awareness, there are lines of development that can be depicted on an integral psychograph.\(^\text{13}\) This graph includes several crucial areas of self-awareness and development including cognitive lines, self-related lines (e.g., needs, morals), talent lines (e.g., music, spatial, mathematical), and spiritual, aesthetic, emotional, psychosexual, and interpersonal lines.

Increasing Awareness of Developmental Lines Practice

One activity to heighten awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of our developmental lines is to consider our responses to the following questions:

- What am I aware of (cognition)?
Responding to and reflecting on answers to these questions is engaging in and cultivating a greater awareness of and listening to self in the SONG of life. As a protocol, one could write each question at the top of a page, representing one question daily to meditate on. On the first day, the first question, repeat the question several times silently and/or aloud to establish a firm intention. Then, sit comfortably, breathe easy, and let the mind percolate responses to the question. All you need do is allow the process to unfold by observing the responses, and when you are distracted, gently return to the question by silently repeating the question. After whatever time you have allotted for the meditation, you can journal your responses. I encourage you to note one insight that might be testable in your everyday life. Devise a small test to carry out sometime during the day. At the end of the day, note the results of your test, including if you would like to repeat the test with some variation. When you feel satisfied with the outcome, proceed to the next question. Through this process across the days/weeks, you develop a keener awareness of how listening to the SONG of life applies to the unique personal circumstances of your own life.

Listening to the Authentic Self

What is the authentic self, and is it possible to listen to it? Julia Mossbridge conceptualizes the individual as having conscious, unconscious
or subconscious, and superconscious minds, and a body. The conscious mind is, “...a linear, serial-processing logical system that maxes out at four factors...” whereas the subconscious mind, “...[is] a nonlinear, parallel-processing system that routinely deals with multiple factors and presents its results to the conscious mind without an explanation.” The superconscious mind is the, “...source of our connection with the universe... [where universe] includes everything that exists... [and has] three critical features: inclusivity, connectivity, and autonomy.” All of these aspects of the mind working together to direct our life is the “authentic self.”

### Listening to the Authentic Self

Mossbridge provides a “listening experiment” to invite individuals into relationship with these three aspects of our authentic self by filling in the blanks for the following starter statements:

- **I love to...**
- **I feel best when...**
- **I remember being excited about...**
- **These days, I am learning how to...**
- **I hope it’s not arrogant to believe that I can...**
- **It’s probably not unique, but I think my calling might be related to...**

To experiment with this listening practice, one may copy and paste this set of questions into a document representing six consecutive days (six sets of questions, one for each day). At a time of your choosing (mid-day, evening, or end of...
day), briefly record your gut-level responses to the questions without much con-
scious reflection. Review your responses for the six days for each question sepa-
rately on the seventh day. See if you note any patterns across the days for each 
question. What do the patterns reveal about how well you are listening to the 
SONG of life? In what ways are you growing? How might you improve? Try the same 
activity in a few months and compare results to see how well you cultivate 
the ability to listen to your authentic self.

Defining Self Depends On Where You Are

Thus far in listening to the self in the SONG of life, I described several 
perspectives of the “self” along with activities designed to develop the 
capacity to listen to the self. One theme among all the perspectives of lis-
tening to the self is that they depend on “where you are.” The Youniverse 
Explorer is a model demonstrating how the sense of self changes depend-
ing on “where you are” as an observer in the Youniverse Explorer. Beginning 
with the physical body, it is possible to metaphorically drill down to 
smaller layers of the self within the body. There is the body’s skin, organs, 
cells, molecules, and atoms. Smaller than the parts of the atom, there is 
nothing discernable from current scientific instrumentation. The body’s 
tiniest basic unit of matter remains a mystery! Conversely, the process 
can be reversed. We can travel back up to the physical body level defined 
by its physical outward features such as height, weight, and skin tone. 
From here, it is possible to travel further outward (upward), away from 
the body, by powers of ten meters. Eventually, we imagine ourselves on 
earth viewed from the perspective of the moon, stars, Milky Way, farther 
galaxies, and to the edge of the known universe beyond which is a mys-
tery.

From these micro and macro viewpoints in the Youniverse Explorer, the self appears to be contracting and expanding in relation to the center of 
the witnessing observer. As an observer, Lang notes that there exists a 
silent void or space from which the person is observing.
Lang provides a simple experiment to demonstrate this phenomenon, which I describe as follows. Standing or sitting, notice that you cannot see your own face. From your first-person perspective, looking out at the world, you are headless! If you hold your hands out in front of you, clearly, they are there. But if you move your hands slowly back behind your head, your hands “disappear” into the great void, the empty space, the silence. When you bring your hands forward again, the hands arise from the void. Lang describes our “self” as this, “. . . void, the Great Space, Emptiness, the True Self, the Openness here, this Clarity, Stillness, the place I am looking out of, my No-face, my No-head.” This is the private identity that we have for ourselves. It is the core of the self. The self of the SONG of life that we are learning to listen to when we contract and expand ourselves in the Youniverse Explorer.

Notes


2. Larry Dossey, One Mind, 2013. Some of the ancient sources Dossey draws on are Buddhism, Christianity, Upanishads, Hermes Trismegistus, and for modern sources he relies on Richard Maurice Bucke, William James, Carl Jung, Erwin Schrodinger, Ken Wilber, Huston Smith, Davide Bohm, Rupert Sheldrake, Lynne McTaggart, Ervin Laszlo, Dean Radin, Stephan A. Schwartz, Charles Tart, and Russell Targe, among others.


6. The neuro brain language of “phase synchrony” described by Femi is somewhat technical. One helpful image for understanding the ideas of “in and out of phase activity” is to consider a group of singers. When the singers are singing in harmony, they are “in phase,” whereas when the singers are singing in different keys, they are “out of phase.”
7. Les Femi and Jim Robbins, *The Open-Focus Brain*, 2007, 46-54. There are two dimensions (narrow-diffuse, and objective-immersed) that make up four quadrants of attention in the open focus system. As an illustration, narrow attention is defined as concentration on a limited field of experience (e.g., visually, a single point in the field of experience with no attention to the periphery) while diffuse focus is a more inclusive and softer kind of attention (e.g., visually, gazing at a landscape).


9. These questions are a sample of an open focus guided meditation from Les Femi and Jim Robbins, *The Open-Focus Brain*, 2007, 64-65.


11. While Pierau defines "others" as other humans, I define "others" more broadly to include other people, nature, the Divine, and ourselves.


13. Wilber et. al., *Integral Life Practice*, 2008, 81-85. Wilber et. al. consider developmental lines as, "... many kinds of 'smarts' available to us ..." each relatively unique and independent of the other lines. The levels of consciousness are like "fluid waves" while the developmental lines are like "sinuous streams."


16. Julia Mossbridge, *The Calling*, 2019, 35-36. Mossbridge suggests conducting this listening experiment several times a day for a week to look for patterns in the inner workings of the three types of mind operative in the authentic self.

17. The activities are Siegel’s Wheel of Awareness, Femi’s Open Focus, Pierau’s Energy House, Wilber’s Levels of Consciousness and Lines of Development, and Mossbridge’s Authentic Self.


19. Powers of ten refers to scientific notation where any number can be
expressed mathematically as a power of ten. For instance, the number $10$ is expressed at $10^1$, and $100$ is $10^2$ while $.10$ is $10^{-1}$, and so forth. A visually stunning video of these powers of ten models the inward and outward processes of Harding’s Youniverse Explorer. Charles Eames and Ray Eames [writers and directors]. *Powers of Ten*. Pyramid Films. September 4, 1977. See also Philip Morrison, Phylis Morrison, Charles Eames, and Ray Eames, *Powers of Ten: About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (New York: Scientific American Books, 1990).

3.2 Defining Self in Listening to the SONG of Life

This selective review of the literature on “self” reveals that the self includes at least all of the following:

- Physical body and senses
- Emotions, affect, feelings
- Mental or cognitive components
- Spiritual, purpose, higher self, one mind
- Attention and awareness, the void-space-emptiness
- Consciousness, subconscious-unconscious, and supraconscious
- Ego, ethno, world, and Kosmo centric levels

To listen to the self in the SONG of life, the role of attention, awareness, and consciousness is the primary vehicle for listening to the contents of the self (and all the other SONG contexts). The hub of the Siegel’s Wheel of Awareness\(^1\) is the closest approximation of what I mean by the capacity of “self” to know itself as body, mind, emotions, and spirit and recursively turn its attention upon itself to explore awareness or consciousness.

Using this definition of self in the SONG of life, I explore two additional methods to cultivate listening to the self. The first method describes three types of journaling: neurocycling, short-term journaling, and comprehensive journaling. The second method I develop is an extended autoethnographic account of how I teach meditation as listening to self in the
classroom. I use this type of classroom meditation to encourage students to develop their capacities to listen deeply to the self in the SONG of life.

Notes

3.3 Journaling as Listening to Self

Psychologists Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz suggest that getting to know yourself as “your own best friend” is the beginning of a genuine, authentic, and happy life. All mature friendships involve self-revelation, including our relationship with ourselves. I suspect that, for many individuals in industrialized modern countries, life has not afforded them with extended periods of intensive self-reflection. For at least some of these individuals, there are undiscovered landscapes in their self-identify maps. Or, in the words of Newman and Berkowitz, they have not learned how to be their own best friend.

One way to begin learning more about oneself and becoming one’s own best friend is to listen to one’s life story. In the process of listening and reflecting while creating a life story, one discovers (or rediscovers) what is vital to life. In the process of committing the story to writing, areas of life are revealed that provide meaning, purpose, and satisfaction, in addition to areas that need attention, growth, and healing. A comprehensive life story is a milestone in self-reflective listening that can be facilitated through a journaling process. I consider three types of journaling as self-listening practices: a daily journaling process called neurocycling, a short-term journaling for healing, and comprehensive life journaling.

Listening as Neurocycling to Integrate Daily Life

Neurocycling is a method of daily journaling designed to integrate life as it is lived each day. I consider neurocycling a scientific-based method of listening to self. Neurocycling involves five sequential steps, gathering, reflecting, writing, rechecking, and active reach. The gathering step
involves listening and observing our thoughts and emotions. The second step of reflecting is an active dialogue with ourselves about what we are thinking and feeling. The third step of writing provides an organizational framework for the thoughts and feelings. In the rechecking step the writing is reviewed for accuracy and completeness. The final step of active reach is the application of what was learned.

Caroline Leaf’s clinical research and case studies uses biological and psychological markers to demonstrate the efficacy of neurocycling over time. Some of the statistically significant positive changes from neurocycling (based on experimental and control group comparisons) are cellular telomere increases, electrical brain activity coherence, psychosocial improvements, and decreases in cortisol and homocysteine from blood tests. In sum, neurocycling benefits “…mental health, brain health, blood physiology, and cellular health…”4 The next method of journaling I describe is a short-term form of journaling that also shows positive impacts on health.

Short-Term Journaling for Healing

In several short-term journaling experiments, James Pennebaker compared college students writings about a personal traumatic experience or superficial experiences.5 Initially, results for the trauma group indicated that journaling increased stress levels. However, by the end of the week of daily journaling, most individuals in the trauma group were able to create a cohesive story about the stressful event instead of living with the uncertainty and anxiety of an incomplete and chaotic story. Across several studies, results for the trauma group, compared to the superficial writing group, showed psychological (mood and positive outlook) and physiological (better immune function and fewer doctor visits) improvements, which persisted after six weeks.
Listening to Self to Heal through Journal Writing

To obtain the healing benefits of listening to self through short-term journal writing, Pennebaker has several recommendations that I paraphrase here. First, write about a stressful issue that you need help resolving. Explore both objective facts surrounding the issue and feelings about the issue. Write when you feel the need, but do not use writing as a substitute for action. Keep the writing confidential for yourself. Knowing that the writing might be disclosed to someone restricts the content of the writing. Ideally, the writing should be free flowing and uninhibited.

Expect to have some negative feelings immediately after writing. This is normal and the feelings should dissipate within the hour or within a few days. Writing is not a miracle cure for tragedy. In severe cases with long-term negative emotions, one should seek professional help.

Listening to thoughts and feelings through short-term journaling about a stressful event has many positive benefits. In Pennebaker's words, most people that follow the protocol for writing about a stressful event for several days in a row report, “... feelings of relief, happiness, and contentment soon after the writing studies are concluded.”

Comprehensive Journaling for Life

As an undergraduate, I had the good fortune of taking a *Death, Dying, and Religion* course from former Trappist monk Richard Keady. Part of the course introduced Ira Progoff's practice of comprehensive journaling.

There are four dimensions of self that one can listen to and reflect on in Progoff’s journaling process. The life-time dimension introduces chronological time in the external world and the subjective inner perceptions associated with events on the external timeline. One creative time-line journaling technique includes “time stretching” into the past and future to
uncover life lessons from the past and aspirations for the future. The dialogue dimension includes relationships with persons, work, body, senses, circumstances, and society.

There is a separate section in the journal for prompts and writing about each of these areas. For instance, one might journal about an interpersonal conflict to identify and integrate the shadow side of personality. The depth dimension of self encourages unconscious content to take form in consciousness via dream logs, twilight images, imagery extensions, and inner wisdom dialogue. As one example, there is a meditation for discovering a wisdom teacher in a nature setting, posing a question, and dialoguing about the answer through journaling. Finally, the meaning dimension of self invites one to listen for whatever brings meaning and purpose to life. This includes philosophical and spiritual reflections about the purpose in life. Listening to all four “self” dimensions through Progoff’s journaling process provides a comprehensive view of self, allowing for an expanded and integrated sense of self.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I introduce class meditation as listening to self in the SONG life course. In this extended autoethnography, I begin with an anecdote and then develop the why and how I teach listening to the self as meditation in the classroom.

Notes


2. Caroline Leaf, *Cleaning up Your Mental Mess: 5 Simple, Scientifically Proven Steps to Reduce Anxiety, Stress, and Toxic Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021). Leaf is a neuroscientist and presents original empirical experiments to support the efficacy of her system of journaling called neurocycling.


4. Caroline Leaf, *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*, 2021, 65. My outline of Leaf’s steps of neurocycling does not include the complexities and nuances of the process. Leaf’s book presents a detailed account of the mechanics of neurocycling.

of writing for 15-20 minutes (depending on the experiment) for four consecutive days about either a personal traumatic event or superficial topics. Students in the trauma condition were instructed to let go and write their deepest thoughts and feelings, while the superficial topic participants were "...asked to write about superficial or irrelevant topics, for example... describe in detail such things as their dorm room or the shoes they were wearing."


7. Ira Progoff, *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1992), 27-30. In Keady’s class, we used Progoff’s book to practice journaling throughout the course. The details of how to engage in this self-listening reflective journaling process are covered in the book. Here, I outline the self-dimensions to provide a sense of the scope of Progoff’s comprehensive journaling process.
3.4 Listening Deeply to Self in the Classroom: Meditating to Cultivate Attention and Insight

In this section I narrate the why and how of meditating in the classroom. The general ideas can be applied to those providing meditation instruction outside the classroom such as in a workshop or other small group setting (e.g., health care, therapy, sports, and spiritual contexts).

It is Thursday evening, almost 7:00 p. m., and students begin to file in for the once a week listening class that begins at 7:10 and ends at 9:50. Some students notice the word *listen* printed in big bold blue letters on the whiteboard. I begin the term, “Welcome, I’m Dr. B . . . I invite you to ‘drop out’ of your digital world for a few minutes, and ‘drop in’ to your inner world by meditating with me.” I provide preliminary instructions on meditation, and the whole class sits quietly, holding the word *listen* at their center for a few minutes. Softly I speak, “It’s time to bring your mediation to a close [pause], slowly open your eyes [pause], take in a deep breath [pause], stretch a bit if you like [pause]. I invite you to share something from your mediation with the class.”

Hesitantly, one student raises their hand and speaks. Eventually, others join in, “That was the first time I’ve been able to relax all day”, “I’ve never meditated before”, “My thoughts kept jumping around”, and “I wondered what you meant by ‘listen,’ like, maybe that’s the whole point, we need to listen more.” I affirm and encourage all responses.

Classroom meditation is a kind of self-listening. The *content* of the meditation may involve any of the SONG of life contexts such as others, nature,
and the Divine in addition to the self. This kind of meditation as listening to self is part of an upper-level undergraduate course on listening. I teach this kind of meditation in a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses including Religion and Health, Dream Research Methods, Communication Theory, Nonviolent Communication and Peace, Communicating Love, and Listening to the SONG of Life.

Goals and Purpose of Meditation in the Classroom

Care must be exercised by the instructor in teaching meditation in the classroom. It is vital to emphasize that we hold the goals of meditation loosely, like a bird in the hand. Often, when there is too much emphasis on trying to reach the proximate goal of meditation, the benefits of meditating are hindered. In the version of meditation I facilitate for the class, I communicate several interrelated goals for students. I encourage students to cultivate experiences of first-person attention, concentration, and awareness. I invite them to develop capacities for insight, imagination, exploration, and discernment. I want them to recognize that the ideas percolating from meditation are part of their course learnings and can be applied to everyday life. In addition, another goal (beyond the idea of meditation as self-listening) is to provide an opportunity for students to dialogue about their personal insights discovered during meditation.

There are many types of contemplative practices that cultivate deeper listening in the life world contexts of self, others, nature, and the Divine, including, for example, meditation, prayer, art, poetry, and dance. Meditation is situated as one of many types of contemplative practices. Virtually every known religion-spirituality has some type of meditation practice. Of the many types of meditation, the class meditation described herein combines the two traditional meditation practices of concentration and insight. The class meditation utilizes focused attention on a symbolic center while simultaneously holding an attitude of openness and acceptance of insights related to that center. These meditative skills of concentration and openness are generalizable to broader listening processes. By way of illustration, in human communication, listening may involve an intentional focus on another person (i.e., their thoughts,
feelings, needs, and behavior), and being open and understanding of the ideas that emerge from the dialogue with that person.

The intention of introducing meditation at the beginning of the class period is three-fold. First, meditation can assist students in transitioning from the stressors of the day (e.g., other classes, work, and personal relationships) to a more relaxed and open learning environment. Specifically, the simple preliminary meditation behaviors of sitting erect with eyes closed and breathing deeply can stimulate feelings of relaxation and renewal. Second, the meditative skill of concentration is focused on a symbolic center while attending to ideas that percolate from that center. These attentional listening processes can arouse wonder and curiosity for students, preparing them for discussion later in class. Third, students that choose to share their meditation experience provide intellectual fuel for the often unexpected and rewarding dialogues that follow meditation.

Preparation, Steps, and Procedures for Meditation in the Classroom

Ideally, instructors introducing meditation into the classroom already engage in a personal daily meditation practice. Instructors that embody a long-term daily meditation practice respond to student questions about meditation from the ground of their own personal experience. There is no substitute for an authentic meditation teacher that has traveled the path of meditation for many years (or at least many months!). I recommend instructors engage in some form of daily meditative practice for at least several months before introducing students to meditation in the classroom.

I suggest introducing the idea of meditation the first day of class as the first item on the agenda. Provide a context for the meditation, for example:

I invite you to meditate with me on a word (or phrase) for a few minutes. Meditation is not an esoteric practice that requires you to believe in a particular type of religious dogma, but rather a method of reflection designed to assist you
Instruct students to “turn off” all electronic devices and “turn on” to their inner world. Provide specific instructions on how to meditate beginning with choosing a word or phrase for the class to meditate on that represents a theme for the course content of that class period. Write this word (or phrase) on the board next to the word “meditation.”

I introduce the basics of class meditation in the following ten steps. All the posture related instructions (steps one through five) are helpful in creating a sense of stillness and self-respect, but they are optional for those that prefer a different posture. I recommend beginning with steps seven through ten and add additional steps to these each time the class meditates until all the steps are covered. Periodically, it is helpful to review the steps with the class by asking students to describe “how to meditate” to a friend who is unfamiliar with meditation. By drawing the steps of meditation out of the students rather than telling them the steps, it becomes apparent what areas need further review.

Following are the ten steps to mediating in the classroom that I developed over the last decade:

1. Sit with the spine erect, like a violin string attached to the base of the spine and extending up through the crown of the head. Taught but not too tight. The head is erect and centered with the chin tucked slightly in.

2. Legs are uncrossed with feet flat on the floor to promote blood circulation in the lower body.

3. Hands rest comfortably on the thighs, palms open and positioned up or down to provide a sense of stability.

4. The mouth is closed or slightly open with the tip of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth or resting gently against the back of the lower teeth to decrease salivation and facilitate a sense of stillness.

5. The eyes can be gently closed or remain open. If the eyes remain open, the gaze should softly focus on the floor or a spot below eye level about three feet
in front of the body. The proximal goal is to cultivate an interior focus on the symbolic center by decreasing external distractions.

6. Exhale completely, then breathe in slowly and deeply through the nose, hold briefly, and breathe out slowly and fully. Do this three times. Then, let go of breath control and breathe naturally to induce a sense of calmness, relaxation, and focus.

7. Bring conscious attention to the symbol of the day (the word or phrase suggested by the instructor) by silently repeating the word or phrase a few times. Then, hold the symbolic word or phrase at your “center” (e.g., in the area of the head, heart, or gut) for the remainder of the meditation. This provides a mental and somatic focal point for the meditation.

8. Cultivate an attitude of openness and acceptance of thoughts, feelings, or images that emerge and are related to the symbolic center. Witness without judgment. Allow ideas space to emerge and grow.

9. If you discover that your thoughts are moving too far away from the symbolic center (e.g., thinking about your next class, or planning a menu for dinner), then acknowledge where you are (e.g., “I have moved from my center”), and gently return to the center by silently repeating the symbolic word or phrase. This step requires some discernment and discipline and is only invoked when one is aware of feeling disconnected from the symbolic center.

10. Continue nurturing the presence of the symbolic center, remaining open, holding ideas related to the center, and returning to the center as needed until the meditation time is brought to a close (announced by the instructor).

Guiding Students Through the First Meditation

After providing preliminary instructions and answering questions, initiate the meditation in class by modeling the meditative posture and reminding students of the instructions aloud the first few times you meditate together as a class. For example:

Let us begin our meditation by sitting comfortably with eyes closed or softly gazing at a spot in front of you on the floor [pause], breathing easy and comfortably from the belly [pause], gently and silently repeat the word you are
holding at your center in the head, heart, or belly [pause], allowing ideas to emerge from this center, and when you feel distracted, gently returning to the center by silently repeating the meditation word [pause], continue in this manner until the end of the meditation is announced.

Initially, the class might meditate for two to three minutes. Keep track of time or set a mobile phone device to quietly “chime” at the end of the meditation. Gradually increase the meditation time each class period until, at the end of a sixteen-week semester, the class is meditating for about ten to fifteen minutes.

The meditation period is concluded (with the option of a live or digital chime) by further verbal instructions from the instructor such as:

As you feel ready [pause], begin to bring your meditation to a close [pause], gather your thoughts, images, and feelings [pause], reconstruct the classroom in your imagination [pause], take a few deep breaths [pause], gently open your eyes and re-orient to your external environment and each other [pause], stretch a bit if you wish.

Post Meditation and Class Debriefing

After the meditation, there is an option to invite students to write about their meditative experience for a few minutes. Writing immediately after the mediation solidifies insights that tend to otherwise evaporate from working memory rather quickly. Writing can also clarify and assist with elaborating on the initial meditation insights. Sometimes, for instance, an image appearing briefly during meditation, when unpacked by the writing process, can uncover hidden meanings. Moreover, students find it easier to share something from their meditation experience when given an opportunity to write about their experience. Perhaps the act of writing itself, engaging the kinesthetic modality, seeing the concrete words, or simply having time to gather one’s thoughts, better prepares students to share their meditation experience with the class.
After the meditation and optional writing activity, invite students to share part of their meditation experience with the class. Students might share something about the actual experience of meditation or content related to the ideas that surfaced during the meditation (e.g., a feeling, thought, image, or question).

I intentionally decrease the impact of potential demand characteristics associated with asking students to share their meditation experience by reminding students that they are free to keep their experience private. There are times when we may not feel like sharing our mediation experience, and that is okay. I also remind students that sharing their experience is not a graded activity.

As students begin to share, I do my best to affirm their experience without judgment. Depending on the content they share, I may ask them to elaborate. For instance, if a student shares a one-word response, I might ask, “Could you tell us more about that?” For other responses, I might relate their insight to the course content, ask a question to the class, or use their response to provide further meditation instruction. For instance, if a student shared, “My mind just kept racing. I couldn’t focus on the center,” I might respond with, “That is a common and normal experience. Our minds can be like grasshoppers jumping all over the place. By gently returning to your center each time you are distracted, you strengthen your ability to concentrate.” The sharing of meditation experiences in class is often surprisingly fruitful in facilitating class discussion about the day’s topic.

In the beginning, a few students may respond critically to the meditation practice with comments like, “I don’t like meditating” or “I don’t see the point of meditating.” I have found it best to affirm these feelings and provide more information for them to consider. By way of illustration, I might respond, “Yes, meditation can feel awkward at first. I invite you to consider meditation a form of self-exploration, a chance to listen to yourself. You may discover surprising things about yourself. Hang in there a few more times before you render a final verdict.” Students usually adapt to meditation by the third or fourth session. Some students even express how they look forward to the meditation time.

Students are encouraged to listen to their own inner wisdom when
choosing to participate in class meditation or not. For those few that need to (e.g., someone with a recent untreated trauma that is not currently in therapy), I offer an “opt-out” option where they can observe a “time of silence” while the rest of the class meditates. No one needs to know they are opting out as they externally appear to be meditating. Respecting student autonomy is vital. As instructors, I believe we should encourage, but not force. The choice to meditate or not ultimately rests with the individual. Some discernment is required in these matters as sometimes students are loaded with negative cultural conditioning associated with the word meditation. In such cases, I explain that our class meditation does not require any religious or spiritual beliefs. I invite them to consider the meditation time as a process of listening to self, a time for reflection, contemplation, and introspection.

A few students every semester immensely enjoy the meditations and want to learn more. For students already grounded in a particular religious or spiritual belief system, I recommend exploring resources about meditation in their faith or tradition. For other students less inclined toward religion or spirituality, I recommend exploring “mindfulness meditation” beginning with either Thich Nhat Hanh or Jon Kabat-Zinn, or by exploring internet apps on mindfulness meditation. Both Hanh and Kabat-Zinn are based in the Buddhist tradition, and their methods of meditation can be learned in a secular form.

Assessing Classroom Meditation

I do not recommend instructors formally assess students’ meditative experiences as part of the course grade as it sets up the expectation that there is a “right” or “best” meditation experience. Also, the continuous sense of evaluation while meditating is antithetical to the purpose of meditation. Ideally, one meditates for the sake of meditating, and the insights and skills that develop are secondary benefits.

However, if one needs to create an evaluative component for the meditation (e.g., to satisfy the administration that students are learning), I recommend some form of self-assessment. By way of illustration, students can journal about what they learn from their meditation each week and
evaluate themselves with a letter grade at mid- and end-of-term. The evaluation could be based on an instructor generated rubric such as “quantity and quality” or “effort and insight.” Alternatively, students could create their own rubric for grading individually. Another possibility is to have the class collectively create the rubric. For instructors who need a sense of control, rubrics can be approved or sent back for revisions until a mutually agreed upon rubric is complete.

Notes

1. In this type of meditation, one’s "center" is a place in the body where attention is directed to gently “hold” the meditation word or phrase. For many students, their center is in the head, heart, or gut area of the body. Some students already know where their center is, but for others that do not know, I encourage them to experiment with different places in the body and see what feels most natural and comfortable for them. The following source provides a neuroscientific perspective on the head, heart, and gut as information systems to which we can listen. Daniel J. Siegel, IntraConnected. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2023), 105-107. Another resource on the philosophy and experience of centering is, Mary Caroline Richard’s, Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

2. I do not require students to share anything from their meditation with the class if they, for any reason, do not feel comfortable. The meditations and sharing are not part of the course grade so there is no external motivation to share. Students can retain confidentiality of the content of their class meditations for the entire course if they choose to. However, I encourage students to share something (e.g., an emotion, comment, question, image, or insight) if they feel the urge to. I explain that their sharing may be something that someone else wanted to say but was too shy to voice. Their sharing might also spark an insight for someone else, and help the another person learn something new. In sum, I encourage them to share not just for themselves but for the benefit of others as well.


5. For a comprehensive typology of meditation, see, Daniel Goleman and

6. Susan Kaiser-Greenland suggests that children [and I add, students in college as well as adults outside the college context] are adept at smelling or spotting inauthentic teaching. She writes, "...keep it real by teaching only what you have directly experienced." This is a challenging but foundational motto for teaching that I try to live by. Susan Kaiser-Greenland, *The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 52.

7. For those not familiar with meditation, or those just beginning to meditate, see the following source for an introduction to several types of meditation in a variety of spiritual traditions that cultivate concentrative and insight types of meditation central to the proposed classroom meditation. Marcia Z. Nelson, *Come and Sit: A Week Inside Meditation Centers* (Woodstock: SkyLight Paths, 2013).

8. There are many sources that influenced my version of classroom meditation. I have read books and journal articles on meditation for over three decades. Thus, a comprehensive list of sources is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, there are three notable sources that are helpful and stood the test of time for me. Gerald G. May, *The Open Way: A Meditation Handbook* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1977); Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation: An Eight-Point Program* (Petaluma: Nilgiri Press, 1978); and, Herbert Benson, *Relaxation Revolution: The Science and Genetics of Mind Body Healing* (New York: Scriber, 2011).

9. Some meditation teachers like to use a musical instrument to signal the onset and conclusion of the meditation. For instance, one can "sound" Tibetan Tingsha Cymbals or a Singing Bowl for this purpose.

10. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994). There are also many computer apps (applications) for meditation available online. As one example, I recommend Jeff Warren's thirty-day "How to Meditate" program on the Calm app. I have personally completed this program several times and felt inspired to create, along with my son, an album of songs related to these meditations as a gift for Jeff. These are available to anyone who wants to listen and learn more about mindfulness meditation. The entire album of seven songs is about ten minutes. Link to the album here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OtZGMYaBKHCOd-hVgeHMcwLVRsQ9BJ3VzePFvSdBQRzKQ/edit.

11. These recommendations about assessing meditation also apply to instructors teaching meditation outside of the classroom in, for example, health care, therapeutic, sports, or spiritual contexts.
3.5 Questions for Reflection and Practices to Consider for Listening to Self

When considering the story of the Buddha and his answer to the question, “Who are you?” with the reply “I am awake!”, what does it mean for you to be awake...to be conscious...to be enlightened? How does the process of awakening to awareness relate to listening to the SONG of life? I do not view enlightenment, or becoming awakened, as a terminal state but as a continual process of becoming. Rick Archer’s website, *Buddha at the Gas Pump* (batgap.com), has a tagline that captures this processual idea of awakening, “Conversations [over 700 interviews as of July 2024] with ‘Ordinary’ Spiritually Awakening People” (emphasis author).

Which of the listening to self activities attracted you the most? Consider taking a trip around the rim of the Wheel of Awareness, practicing an Open Focus approach to your experience for five minutes, taking stock of the current state of your Energy House, locating yourself on the Ego to Kosmo centric levels, developing a personal integral Psychograph, and/or exploring the expansion and contraction of self in the Youiverse Explorer.

Three types of journaling were described as methods of listening to the self. Which method—daily nerocycling to integrate thoughts and feelings, short-term journaling to heal a stressful event, or the comprehensive Pro-goff approach to journaling—most appeals to you? Take fifteen minutes to
explore one of these methods on the internet, and if you feel inclined, test out one this week to cultivate listening to yourself.

Having read the extended autoethnography on meditation in the classroom as a way of listening to the self, how can you adapt this method of meditation to your everyday life? Another possibility for meditation is to take a five-minute meditation break to relax from the day’s stressors, listen to yourself, and see what insights emerge.
3.6 Chapter Summary

This concludes the chapter on listening to self. In summary, several unique aspects of listening to self are enumerated with accompanying activities. Three types of journaling are described as additional ways to listen to the self along with resources for further development and understanding. Finally, an extended section on listening to the self through classroom meditation is described with specific instructions for instructors to teach and assess meditation in the classroom. In the next chapter we transition from listening to self in the SONG of life to listening to others.
CHAPTER IV

Listening to Others

awareness expands

compassionate empathy

listen to others
4.0 Introduction to Listening to Others

Defining the Scope of Listening to Others

In listening to the SONG of life, listening to “others” in this chapter means listening to other human beings. While “others” could mean anything other than the listener (e.g., other people, animals, a Divine being), in the context of the SONG, the letter “O” stands for “Other” humans, typically one other person. Even in group situations, in U.S. academic and business cultures in particular, usually one person speaks while everyone else listens. This cultural dynamic of a single authority figure talking to many others is also prevalent in societies outside of the U.S., for example, many European and Asian school systems adopt this type of communication structure.

Much of the research on listening to others in the human-to-human context is from the Communication and Social Psychology disciplines. Consequently, most of the literature reviewed for “listening to others” is based on these fields. I focus on “best practices” in my review of the listening literature. I also review classic and contemporary texts in the field of Communication, and TED talks on listening. Much of this research is based on face-to-face human communication. Consequently, I focus on best practices for face-to-face live human communication. Until the last few decades, digital communication research was relatively scarce. However, since digital communication is now part of mainstream society, I briefly consider digital listening issues toward the end of the chapter.

There are vast numbers of topics in interpersonal listening that could
be addressed in this chapter. I intentionally limit the topics covered in this chapter on listening to others based on my experience teaching the listening class for the past decade and on my knowledge and professional opinion of what I believe to be critical listening topics. As a preview, this chapter covers the listening topics of best practices, empathy, digital listening, and an extended description and commentary on the listening stick practice.

Notes

1. By "digital communication," I mean communication that that takes one out of the immediate context of live in person face for face interaction by using another channel or medium of communication as in, for example, texting, email, podcasts, FaceTime, Zoom, Discord, Google Hangouts, and other social media such as Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, LinkedIn and the like.

2. Consider the forty-some-year history of The International Journal of Listening. Each title of a given journal article could be a potential topic in this chapter. In addition, a perusal of indices of books on interpersonal communication shows a variety of listening topics. For instance, see indices in Julia T. Wood, Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2019), and John Stewart, Bridges Not Walls: A Book About Interpersonal Communication (Dubuque: McGraw-Hill, 2011).
4.1 Best Practices for Listening to Others: Classic and Contemporary

Classic advice about listening to others that stood the test of time is the six “guides to good listening” presented in Ralph Nichols and Leonard Steven’s, Are You Listening?:

1. Take time to listen.
2. Be attentive.
3. Employ three kinds of verbal reactions only.
5. Never evaluate what has been said.
6. Never lose faith in the ability of the talker to solve his [or her] own problems.

The six guides to good listening are heavily influenced by Carl Roger’s nondirective client-centered therapy. The potential value of adopting a nondirective listening style is summarized in Nichols and Steven’s book (quoting Rogers):

If I can listen to what he [or she] tells me, I can understand how it seems to him [or her], if I can sense the emotional flavor which it has for him [or her], then I will be releasing potent forces of change within him [or her].
I wondered how Nichols and Steven’s 1957 advice squares with contemporary listening research. In a 2016 empirical study of 3492 participants, Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman identify the top five percent of “great listeners” as those who:

- are not just being silent (silence; not interrupting); they ask insightful questions and paraphrase ideas (paraphrasing) to demonstrate understanding.
- create a safe environment (taking time) in which complex, difficult, and/or emotional issues can be discussed.
- observe nonverbal cues of the face, gestures, posture, breathing, and perspiration.
- challenge assumptions, disagree, and make suggestions in a way that supports the other person in a cooperative manner.
- identify and validate emotions in a supportive nonjudgmental way (no moral judgment/evaluation).  

Four of the six qualities of “great listeners” identified by Zenger and Folkman in 2016 are similar to the “guides for good listening” proposed by Nichols and Stevens in 1957. But there are also important differences. Zenger and Folkman’s findings that great listeners challenge assumptions, disagree, ask questions, and make suggestions sharply contrasts with Nichols and Steven’s foundational advice based on Rogerian nondirective listening.

I suggest that these apparent contradictory findings are actually complementary. Namely, there is a time and place for nondirective listening, and another time and place for questioning, disagreement, and making suggestions. For instance, if a family member is exiting a doctor’s office in tears, and sharing about their grave medical diagnosis, then that is probably not the best time to question them about the wisdom of the doctor’s prognosis. It is probably a time and place to use nondirective listening, empathizing and providing comfort. Later, at a more appropriate time and place, one might inquire about the validity of the diagnosis, and question if a second opinion might be warranted.

In addition to Nichols and Stevens’s (1957) and Zenger and Folkman (2016), there is also an important ethical perspective of listening promul-
gated by Elizabeth Parks and framed as “10 Habits of Spacious Listeners” summarized by the acronym “I CARE FOR US.” I paraphrase Park’s ten ethical listening habits here: Invest (in the dialog), Care (for the dialogue), Authentic (be), Remember (the ongoing story), Engage (in critical problem solving), Focus (on what matters), Open (be open to learning), Respond (to needs), Understanding (yourself, the other, and the dialog), and Stay (as in stay present). Note that Park’s advice subsumes much of the previous advice and adds several other ideas, including remembering, caring, and staying present in listening to others. I explore additional ideas of what makes a “good” and a “radically deep” listener in another section on TED talks, but first I explore classic and contemporary edited books on listening in the next section.

Notes


4. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, "What Great Listeners Actually Do," *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles* (July, 2016): 2-5. Parts from the quote that are similar to Nichols and Steven's "guide to good listening" are denoted in parentheses.

Three edited books on listening to others represent some of the best
listening research in the field of Communication. These three books are
Michael Purdy and Deborah Borisoff’s, *Listening in Everyday Life*, Andrew
Wolvin’s, *Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century*, and Deb-
orah Worthington and Graham Bodie’s *The Handbook of Listening*.\(^1\) I com-
pare the topics of the first two books, noting similarities and differences,
and suggest what topics could be added. Second, I describe how the Wor-
thington and Bodie volume increases the scope of listening topics and
provides multidisciplinary perspectives of listening to others.

Purdy and Borisoff’s foundational chapter on listening covers the need
for listening, research on listening, and the ethics of listening. Missing are
theories of listening. Wolvin’s foundational chapter improves on this by
including theoretical perspectives of listening. Purdy and Borisoff’s vol-
ume does not contain chapters on listening methodology while Wolvin's
volume contains two chapters on methods, one for quantitative and one
for qualitative listening research. Both edited volumes contain chapters
on listening and intercultural, interpersonal-dialogic, education, and ser-
vice-business communication. The Purdy and Borisoff book chapters on
listening in health, helping professions, journalism, and digital presence
do not have counterparts in Wolvin’s edited volume. Surprisingly, the
Purdy and Borisoff chapters on listening in health care and listening in the
digital world are not continued as major topics in the Wolvin edition. This
gap is inconsistent with the dramatic increase in health care and digital
communication publication trends between 1997 and 2010.\(^2\)
Finally, both books include unique topic chapters on listening to others. Specifically, the topics of listening and gender, eavesdropping, and lawyer-client relationships are unique to the Purdy and Borisoff volume, while chapter topics on listening and spirituality and religion, second languages, and cognitive psychology are unique to the Wolvin volume. Not represented in either edited volume are topics related to listening and racial equity, inclusion, and diversity.

While the Purdy and Borisoff chapter on digital presence could not anticipate the enormous increase in digital communication scholarship over the next decade, by the time of the publication of the Wolvin volume in 2010, Prensky’s idea of “digital natives and immigrants” is well known. Yet, scholarship in digital listening does not mirror this upward trend. Since Prensky’s landmark study of 2001, Prensky published a series of scholarly books on the changing landscape of the digital world in education. For all three edited volumes on listening to others, the body of research on digital listening merits more attention. There is only a single chapter on “mediated listening” in the Worthington and Bodie volume. I briefly return to the topic of digital listening toward the end of this chapter.

The Worthington and Bodie edited volume on listening to others overlaps and expands many of the listening topics covered in the Purdy and Borisoff and the Wolvin edited volumes. In particular, the Worthington and Bodie handbook covers four methodological approaches to listening (physiological, phenomenological, interpretive, and empirical), eleven disciplinary perspectives on listening (ranging from architecture and linguistics to musicology and philosophy), multiple chapters on teaching listening, a section on contexts and applications (including mindfully listening to others, health care, and healthy democracy), and finally a section on emerging perspectives (e.g., performance studies, augmented reality, peace, and listening to silence). While this volume represents a comprehensive view of the field of listening to others, it does not address any of the additional listening contexts in listening to the SONG of life, namely, listening to self, nature, and the Divine.

I expect future edited books on listening will continue the tradition of foundational chapters covering definitional and theoretical aspects of lis-
tening, especially from the perspective of multiple disciplines, as exemplified in the Worthington and Bodie volume. Future edited volumes on listening should also continue to include chapters on listening methodology for those interested in understanding and conducting listening research. A useful extension of the methodological approaches for listening to others, noted in the Worthington and Bodie handbook, is available in *The Sourcebook of Listening Research*.

I hope that future edited books on listening will incorporate, or at least acknowledge, the full range of possibilities in listening to the SONG of life. I imagine additional chapters in future edited volumes covering each aspect of the SONG of life, listening to self (an extension of Purdy’s intrapersonal listening), listening to others (represented in all three edited volumes), listening to nature (a new chapter not represented in the previous three volumes), and listening to Goddess-God-Divine (an extension of Schnapp’s chapter in the Wolvin volume). A future edited volume of listening would also include multiple chapters on digital/mediated listening (extending the chapter on mediated listening in the Worthington and Bodies volume), and address issues of listening diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Finally, I would expect to see chapters on topics similar to the previous volumes on listening in education, law, music, politics, peacebuilding, health care, intercultural, training and development, mindfulness, and silence.

In the next section, I move from reviewing print resources to digital resources on listening to others, namely TED Talks.

**Notes**


2. These dates correspond to the publication dates of the two edited volumes. The gap in representation of health care and digital communication in the second edited book is inconsistent with the increase in published research in these areas as evidenced by a Google Scholar title search (February 6, 2023) for the keywords “health care” and “digital” for the years 1997 and 2010 which
revealed an increase in sources found from 6000 to 15,000 for health care, and an increase of 10,000 to 65,700 for digital sources.


5. One could argue that the idea of "appreciative listening" as found in some early taxonomies of listening such as Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn G. Coakley's, Listening (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995) could conceptually include listening to self, nature, and the Divine.

6. Deborah Worthington and Graham Bodie, ed. The Sourcebook of Listening Research (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2018). The sourcebook includes sixty-five profiles of measures related to listening to others, including information about the construct, description, scoring, reliability, validity, sample studies, critique, and scale when available.


9. Perhaps this is too much to cover for a single edited book on listening. The sheer volume of material in listening to the SONG of life may be better suited as four edited volumes, one for each of the SONG of life contexts with an introductory volume that provides a context for listening to the SONG of life. The present book might be considered the first of the four volume set in that it provides an introduction to listening to all of the contexts in the SONG of life.
4.3 TED Talks on Listening to Others

TED is a non-profit organization that sponsors “talks on TED” that are open access and seek to, “…discover and spread ideas that spark imagination, embrace possibility and catalyze impact…” [Ted talks are] devoted to curiosity, reason and imagination…knowledge and wonder…” I found thirty-five TED talks on listening to others, review each talk for “best listening practices,” and summarize findings.

The TED talk speakers varied from high school and college students (two of thirty-five) to professionals (e.g., musicians, journalists, and entrepreneurs) to academics (e.g., schoolteachers and professors). Very few speakers cite listening research. Most speakers use personal narratives as evidence for their claims. Reviewing the titles of the TED talks show the relationship of listening to power, understanding, and learning. Clustering key ideas from the content of the talks, I find two broad types of best listening practices that I label “good listeners” and “radical deep listeners.” I describe each of these types of listeners and discuss the implications for listening to others.

Good Listeners

Summarizing the best listening practices for the TED talks, “good listeners” engage in the following kinds of behaviors and attitudes. Good listeners minimize distractions in the environment and put away personal distractions (like mobile phones) to afford the other person with some degree of privacy, and to provide them with a feeling of safety and com-
Good listeners focus and attune to the other with undivided attention. They invite the other to speak through open-ended questions and do not interrupt except to periodically paraphrase the other’s ideas to ensure that the person feels heard and that they as a listener are accurately understanding the message. Good listeners do not make moralistic judgments about the content of the message or the speaker. They show continued interest in the other person by asking questions that invite the other to explore deeper without turning the focus back on them as the listener. Finally, good listeners attend to the emerging agenda, goals, emotions, and needs of the other person. Taken together, these best listening practices are likely to facilitate the other person feeling heard, listened to, understood, validated, affirmed, cared for, and even loved. These “good listener” practices are further enhanced through a deeper kind of listening that emerged from the TED talks.

Radical Deep Listeners

Radical deep listening moves beyond good listening as it requires more mindfulness, compassion, and self-discipline on the part of the listener. Radical deep listening begins with a mindset of openness, humility, vulnerability, and compassion. In radical deep listening, the listener lets go of the arrogance that they already know the answers, the assumptions of their personal world view, and the fear of what the other may request of them. In radical deep listening, the other person is viewed as a potential teacher, someone to learn from.

The most difficult part of radical deep listening is overriding our biological response to opposing views in favor of choosing an open, humble, vulnerable, and compassionate mindset. Human brains have evolved to respond to threats of various kinds by triggering the amygdala stress response of fight, flight, freeze, or faint. To illustrate, when we disagree with another’s point of view, we often experience dissonance and a cascade of emotions that may include feelings of discomfort, disrespect, frustration, and anger. This is a natural innate human response to a perceived threat or attack on our opinions, beliefs, worldview or person.

Instead of following our human nature, the radical deep listener rec-
ognizes the biologically triggered stress response and chooses to override their biology by mentally and behaviorally reaffirming their desire to listen with humility, vulnerability, and compassion. Ideally, the radical deep listener becomes more curious about the other’s views, metaphorically moving next to the other, seeing the issue through the other person’s eyes. The radical deep listener is conscious of their interconnectedness with the other person, and more importantly, they feel this connection with the other. None of the TED speakers address how to override our stress response biology and engage in practices that cultivate becoming an open-hearted radical deep listener. The best advice they provide is, “lean in and learn to be comfortable with the discomfort.” I suggest another way to cope with the biological stress response that better cultivates the ideals of the radical deep listener.

Practicing meditation is a concrete way for a listener to become more comfortable with the discomfort of disagreement with others by cultivating a predisposition for equanimity when a stress response is triggered. Research suggests that the systematic practice of mediation assists in coping and managing stressful situations like those encountered in radical deep listening. There are many kinds of meditation training that are appropriate for cultivating a radical deep listening response to stressful situations.

Some Eastern meditation practices emphasize transcending the personal ego. A few TED speakers follow along this line of reasoning, advising listeners to put aside the ego, empty the self, and create a nonjudgmental space for the other person to speak into. My understanding of ego is that, short of mystical states of consciousness, most individuals will carry their ego with them into the listening situation. Ego as personality, preferences, expectations, and judgments is a part of our humanity. Moreover, there is a healthy sense of ego that we also bring to our listening encounters. For example, self-monitoring our egoic energy levels to determine if we are capable and ready to listen is vital if we are to listen with equanimity, clarity, and caring.
Notes

1. Quoted from the TED home page website, https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization.

2. In 2023, I initially searched the TED talks database using the keywords "listening" and "listen" and found less than ten talks. Next, I performed an internet search for "TED talks on listening" and found additional TED talks. Appendix A lists the thirty-five TED talks reviewed. For ease of access and comparability, I locate the TED talks on listening to others in Appendix A rather than in the Bibliography.

3. For empirical evidence of the feeling of "being listened to" see, Elizabeth Moore, "Being Listened To With Empathy: The Experience and Effect for Emerging and Middle-Aged Adults." Master's thesis, Old Dominion University, 2020.

4. Some of the TED talks suggest that opposing views create conflict and the feeling of being threatened or attacked. Siegel's hand model of the brain shows how "flipping our lid" when stressed (i.e., being verbally threatened or attacked) shifts our biological brain activity from the frontal cerebral cortex to the base of the brain resulting in the activation of the instinctual flight, flight, freeze, and faint responses. Daniel Siegel, Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Tenguin, 2013), 85-88.


7. For example, Transcendental Meditation, https://www.tm.org/.

8. Victr Pierau, Leadership in Listening: The 7 Levels of Listening for Professionals (Hilversum: Booklight Makkum, 2020). Additionally, the "new age" ideal of dissolving the ego can be a form of "spiritual bypassing" detrimental to our well-being, and to our ability to authentically listen to others. Robert Masters, Spiritual Bypassing (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).
4.4 Listening with Empathy

The best practices for good and radical deep listeners, according to the TED Talks reviewed in the previous section, include attitudes and behaviors associated with empathy. Pursing the idea of empathy further, I review scholarly literature on empathy. This led to resources with diverse perspectives on listening with empathy. I summarize several of these perspectives while noting the implications for listening to others, but first I conceptualize empathic listening.

Conceptualizing Empathic Listening

Tom Bruneau’s conceptual and theoretical review of the literature on empathy and listening\(^1\) includes empathy as, object identification (feeling into the other and losing sense of self), intimation (mirroring), psychological (perception and inference making), subject-object interplay (identifying, taking in, and “checking out” an experience), role taking, and cycling (stepping out of self, into the other, back to self, and back to the other). This summarizes the literature on empathic listening through 1989 and represents the disciplinary perspectives of Psychology, Communication, and Sociology.

Cognitive Active Empathic Listening

Over a decade after Bruneau’s comprehensive review of the empathy literature, Graham Bodie and associates\(^2\) developed the concept of “active empathic listening” as sensing, processing, and responding to others.
Active empathic listening is a cognitive perspective of listening and does not directly refer to empathic listening as an emotionally felt activity. Researchers correlate active emphatic listening with a variety of topics, including personality traits, listening styles, social media, morality, and sex differences. Overall, the research demonstrates that the empirical categories of cognitive sensing, processing, and responding are the most important components of empathic listening. In addition to the cognitive perspective to empathic listening, there is an affective component of empathic listening.

Affective Empathic Listening

Philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich purportedly said, “The first duty of love is to listen.” This quote sets the tone of an essay on affective listening by Kory Floyd. According to Floyd, we all need love, and affection is one way to meet that need. Affection is something we feel, and affective communication is something we do. Empathic listening is part of the affection dynamic and includes nonverbal immediacy (e.g., smiling, warm vocal tones, open posture), feelings, validation as positive regard, and demonstrating that the other person is important by the listeners gift of time, attention, and energy. These affective qualities of listening, when integrated with the cognitive perspective of listening, broaden our understanding of empathy.

Five Types of Empathy

Daniel Siegel’s typology of interpersonal empathy includes both affective and cognitive qualities, as well as additional qualities compatible with empathic listening. Siegel’s interpersonal neurobiological perspective of human relationships includes five types of empathy that inform an understanding of empathic listening. Empathic resonance is feeling what another feels (affective empathy). Empathic perspective-taking is imagining oneself in the other person’s position (cognitive empathy). Cognitive empathy is an elaboration of perspective-taking with the added component of understanding (also part of cognitive empathy). Empathic con-
cern is receiving another’s suffering and imagining what one could do to relieve the suffering. Then, if possible, carry out that action (affective, cognitive, and the new component of compassionate action). Empathic joy is experiencing the excitement and happiness of another’s good fortune (affective empathy). Together, these five types of empathy integrate the me (individualized self) with we (the co-created interpersonal relationship with another) into MWE (the extension of self to all other relationships, including humans and the natural world). MWE is a broader, richer, and more inclusive way of understanding empathic listening. The integrated MWE idea is compatible with the expansive perspective of listening to the SONG of life.

Neuroscience of Empathy

The ability to “see inside the brain” through functional magnetic resonance imaging (FMRI) began in the early 1990s. Therefore, pre-1990 literature on empathy could only imagine what the neuroscience of listening might look like in the brain. Recent FMRI research of individuals telling and listening to stories while having their brains scanned provides evidence that, “… speakers [brain] activity is spatially and temporally coupled with listener’s activity… listeners brain activity mirrors the speaker’s activity with a delay . . .” To translate, the memories and ideas in the speaker’s brain couple (show similar brain patterns) with the brain of the listener in statistically significant ways. Comparing variations in the speaker’s story (e.g., playing the story backwards, scrambling the words, and quoting the story) enable researchers to determine that deeper brain coupling (below the surface of the brain) is associated with a stronger empathic connection between speaker and listener.

Further, Marco Iacoboni’s fifteen years of neuroscience research on mirror neurons provides empirical evidence that observers (listeners) can detect the intentions and goals of a speaker. This is also called the “Theory of the Mind” which posits that we “read” the minds of others (understand what they think and feel) through a special collection of cells in the brain called mirror neurons. In short, humans are biologically
equipped with mirror neurons that enable empathic connection with others.

In addition to empathy as brain coupling between speaker and listener, facilitated by the activation of mirror neurons, William Miller and associates discovered the brain’s “empathy circuit.” Miller discovered that frontotemporal dementia disease (loss of capacity to empathize and care about others) is associated with a specific part of the brain. Employing reverse logic, Miller deduced that this part of the brain must also be where the empathy circuits are located. In a series of studies, Miller found connections among various parts of the brain that display a cascade of events initiated by the autonomic nervous system that he dubbed, “the empathy circuit.” He found that the empathy circuit impacts facial expression, heartbeat, breathing, and muscle tension-movement. Miller’s research empirically demonstrates the brain circuitry for empathy, and by extension, the brain circuitry for empathic listening. The foundational insights from the neuroscience of empathy become practical in the following empathic listening practice.

Empathic Listening in Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent communication is a dance of observing without evaluating, identifying and expressing feelings and needs, making positive clear requests, and empathizing with others in ways that makes life more wonderful. Empathy is described by Rosenberg as riding the waves of energy that another person creates. In empathy, the listener connects with the energy of another like a surfer pops up on their surfboard and rides the wave into the shore. Specifically, the listener identifies the feelings and needs of the other’s energy, checking their accuracy through a question like, “Are you feeling ...(guess the feeling), because you are needing...(guess the need).” This feedback demonstrates that the other person’s feelings and needs are important to the listener, and that the listener is seeking clarity and understanding. Once an empathic heart-to-heart connection is established (by accurately identifying the feelings and needs of both participants), Rosenberg predicts that most conflicts can be
resolved within a short time.\textsuperscript{15} The effectiveness of Rosenberg’s nonviolent communication of empathy is supported by some empirical research.

Carme Juncadella provides a systematic review of research on non-violent communication and empathy.\textsuperscript{16} All thirteen studies found were conducted in educational workshops varying from five to forty hours in length. In terms of measuring empathy, nine of the thirteen studies showed positive results for “... empathy scales measuring different aspects of empathy [e.g., emotional empathy, perspective taking, and empathic concern].”\textsuperscript{17} This review provides some empirical support for Rosenberg’s nonviolent communication method of empathy in educational workshop settings. I explore two additional resources for enhancing our understanding and ability to empathize with others’ feeling and needs.

\textbf{Atlas of Emotions as an Aid to Empathic Listening}

Imagine brainstorming positive emotions for ninety seconds (writing the emotions on paper or typing them onto a screen). Then, brainstorm negative emotions for an additional ninety seconds. Which list would contain more emotions—the positive or the negative list? I’ve informally conducted this experiment for three different college classes for more than ten years and, for nearly all students, the negative list of emotions is substantially longer than the positive list. Why are students more readily able to recall negative than positive emotions? Psychologists refer to the human tendency to focus on negative emotions more than positive emotions as the “negativity bias.”\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, for brainstorming both positive and negative emotions, students generally finish writing before time is called. This suggests that their emotional vocabulary is somewhat limited.

The ability to perceive, evaluate, express, and control our emotions is called “emotional intelligence,” and empathy is part of the emotional intelligence complex.\textsuperscript{19} The ability to identify emotions in others begins with identifying emotions within ourselves. Building a rich and broad emotional vocabulary\textsuperscript{20} enhances our ability to listen to others empathically. One way to begin cultivating a rich and broad emotional vocabulary is through the \textit{Atlas of Emotions}:\textsuperscript{21}
The process of utilizing the *Atlas of Emotions* begins by identifying a trigger (the stimulus the precipitated the emotion) for the primary emotional experience on a timeline. The quality of the emotion is located on an intensity continuum that displays a range of emotions (e.g., the intensity for anger ranges from annoyance to fury). Next, a range of responses associated with the emotion is visually displayed (e.g., for anger, responses range from suppressing to actively undermining). Lastly, several resources are provided, from downloadable talks to documents, to assist in emotional management. In short, the *Atlas of Emotions* allows an individual to identify, understand, and appropriately respond to their emotions.

Hypothetically, processing emotions with the aid of the *Atlas of Emotions* should increase the ability to empathically listen to the emotions of oneself and others. Testing the efficacy of this hypothesis awaits future research. The process of accurately identifying the emotions of others with the aid of the *Atlas of Emotions* is the first part of Rosenberg’s method of empathic listening. The second part of Rosenberg’s method of empathic listening begins with identifying the needs of others.

**Human Needs Matrix as an Aid to Empathic Listening**

Standing in the mud in a small Peruvian village, Manfred Max-Neef, an economist from Berkeley, experienced an epiphany that changed the direction of his life. A small man, jobless, hungry, with five children, and a sick grandmother at home, stood across the muddy lane looking at him. With all his economic theories and data, Max-Neef felt dumfounded. He had nothing economically meaningful to say to this Peruvian villager. This epiphany marked the beginning of developing a new language of connecting with the needs of others called *Barefoot Economics*. His contention is that the wealth of a nation should be measured by its ability to meet
human needs and not by economic measures like the Gross National Product.\footnote{25}

Max-Neef created the \textit{Human Needs Scale} to measure basic human needs.\footnote{26} The \textit{Human Needs Scale} is a matrix of human needs (the $y$-axis) crossed by need “satisfiers” (the $x$-axis) of being, having, doing, and interacting. The addition of satisfiers in the matrix of needs is a more complete and accurate picture of the function of human needs than the often cited Maslowian hierarchy of needs.\footnote{27} The human needs matrix represents all of Maslow’s original needs and includes additional needs for the purpose of diagnosis, planning, assessment, and evaluation of groups.\footnote{28}

For the nonviolent communication empathic listener, the human needs matrix is useful for identifying needs in oneself and in others. Once needs are identified, empathic questions are used to assess the accuracy of the needs. Having accurately identified the needs of the other person, the nonviolent communication process negotiates strategies to meet those needs in the form of clear, positive, and action-oriented requests.\footnote{29}

Having considered multiple types of empathy, some of the neuroscience of empathy, and the nonviolent application of empathy by identifying feelings and needs, I briefly consider digital-mediated forms of listening to others in the next section.

\section*{Notes}


3. The closest approximation of an emotional component in the active empathic listening scale is the "sensing" subscale item that reads, "Understanding how others feel." Note the cognitive emphasis on understanding and not on feeling.

4. Kory Floyd, "Empathic Listening as an Expression of Interpersonal Affec-


7. For further development of the me, we, and MWE concepts, see Daniel J. Siegel, *IntraConnected* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2023).


14. A heart-to-heart connection means that each of the participants can accurately identify the feelings and needs of the other person through a series of empathic exchanges. This process can be labor and time intensive, but a heart-to-heart connection increases the likelihood that both parties will meet their needs with a mutually agreeable strategy.

15. An estimated seventy percent of conflict cases that Rosenberg mediated over the past two decades were resolved within twenty to thirty minutes from the time the individuals make a heart-to-heart connection. NVC Marshall Rosenberg San Francisco Workshop, "Basics of Nonviolent Communication | Marshall Rosenberg," YouTube, April 2000. https://www.youtube.com/watch.


17. Ibid., 46.

18. One theory of why humans are more attuned to negative than positive emotions is that the knowledge of “bad things” has survival value in our evolutionary history. For a complete discussion see, Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Catrin Finkenauer, “Bad is Stronger Than Good,” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2001): 323-370.


4.5 Digital-Mediated Listening to Others

Listening to others in the SONG of life is framed as face-to-face live interpersonal communication. I make no attempt to infer that the previous discussion of listening to others in this chapter transfers to the digital context of human communication. I recognize the import of digital listening, especially for digital natives. I present a brief overview of some digital issues related to listening to others, and then provide one practice for understanding and optimizing our digital listening habits.

Critics of digital media like Nichola Carr and Sherry Turkle discuss some of the disadvantages of digital communication in dampening our natural human capacities to listen and relate to one another in live face-to-face situations. For instance, Carr argues that the typical information-seeking habits based on the internet do not allow individuals to consolidate their knowledge in deep and meaningful ways. This superficial information-seeking influences the way we listen to others through digital communication (e.g., mobile phones, discord, email). As one illustration, Turkle’s research demonstrates that the topic of conversation tends to be more superficial when a mobile phone device is present (even if it is not turned on) when compared to a conversation when no phone is visible. One explanation for this finding is that the conversation partner perceives the presence of the phone as a potential interrupter of the conversation, impinging on the privacy and need for attention when discussing intimate topics.

Another point of view argues for the advantages of digital communication and is represented by digital advocates like Clay Shirkey and Marc...
Prensky. Shirkey argues that engaging in digital media creates a “cognitive surplus” for creativity and connecting with others in ways that promote generosity. I add that the positive potential of cognitive surplus hinges on the ability to empathically listen to connect with the feelings and needs of others in ways that promote generosity.

A more comprehensive view of the advantages of digital communication is Prensky’s recent work on empowerment. He suggests that the generation of the next twenty years can be empowered to create a better world through digital communication. Prensky encourages younger individuals to pursue their interests and engage with others to accomplish real-world projects with positive, measurable impacts. Prensky’s radical idea is that the current educational system in the United States is broken beyond repair. Alternatively, he advocates empowerment hubs that allow individuals to express their dreams, listen to, and work with each other in teams around the globe to learn the knowledge and skills needed to make their dreams come true. While empowerment hubs can be local and involve face-to-face communication, for most individuals, the empowerment hubs will primarily rely on digital communication.

Both perspectives on digital communication with others have merit and are supported by empirical research. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to integrate both perspectives in our digital listening. One example of embracing both perspectives is David Levy’s contemplative approach to digital communication. Levy’s general practice, informed by research with students and with those outside academia, is to mindfully attend to what we are doing (the task) and notice how we feel about it.

Essential, Levy’s contemplative approach to digital communication involves mindfully listening to ourselves and others. As one example, Levy invites us to experiment with checking email for a specified time (e.g., 24 hours). Every time we check our email, a record is kept for when we check, why we check (our intention), and how we feel before, during, and after emailing. For the feeling parts, Levy invites us to observe our breathing, posture, emotions, and quality of attention. After the specified time, one examines the log of observations, looking for patterns, and then decides if one wants to change anything. If we decide that something needs to
change, we develop a concrete plan of action to test out the new behavior. This way of digital listening is empowering. Based on data that we collect, we choose how a particular form of digital communication best serves us in our life circumstances at school, work, or home. One can apply this same contemplative approach to listening to others through diverse kinds of digital communication like texting, FaceTime, Discord, Zoom, and so forth.

In the upcoming final part of this chapter on listening to others, I return to the classroom to provide an in-depth account of how to listen more deeply to others through a primitive technology called the “listening stick.” This primitive technology can be utilized to listen more deeply to others in interpersonal dyads, small groups in organizations, and in educational workshops and classrooms.

Notes

1. By digital context, I mean types of communication that use devices or systems employing digital signals. This includes a range of technologies such as email, social media, video conferencing, text messaging, blogs, and so forth.


5. Ibid.

6. The issue of digital phone presence negatively impacting a conversation may be more complex than suggested by Turkle's research. For instance, one study found no negative impact on the interaction when the mobile phone was not noticed, whereas most studies show a harmful effect on the interaction for actual mobile phone use during conversation. John Courtwright and Scott Caplin, "Two Meta-Analyses of Mobile Phone Use and Presence," Human Communication and Technology, no. 1.2 (2020): 20-35.


8. Marc Prensky, EMPOWERED!: Re-framing 'growing up' for a new age (Palo Alto:
9. Prensky, *EMPOWERED!*

10. The two perspectives on digital communication that I outline refer to those that warn of the dangers of digital communication like Carr and Turkle, and those that promote the benefits of digital communication like Shirky and Prensky. These may appear as binary choices, opposite ends of a continuum, but I suggest a third alternative that embraces both perspectives.

4.6 Listening Deeper: From Talking Stick to Listening Stick

I translate the ancient practice of using a talking stick to the practice of using a listening stick in the college course Listening to the SONG of Life. I provide an extended illustration of using the listening stick within the confines of the course. I open with background about the talking stick as a conceptual framework for understanding the process of using the listening stick as a deeper way to listen to others.

The *talking* stick (or talking piece) is historically rooted in the practices of Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.¹ The use of a talking stick as part of the practice of sitting in council is described succinctly by Beyer where:

> ... people sit in a circle and pass around what is called a talking stick. Whoever holds the talking stick gets to speak, and everybody listens. There are no interruptions, no questions, no challenges, no comments. People speak one at a time, in turn, honestly from their hearts, and they listen devoutly with their hearts to each person who speaks.²

Sitting in council probably derives from the more ancient practice of calling the circle, or simply sitting in circle. It is conceivable that our ancestors sat in a circle around the first fires, each person receiving warmth and food while listening to each other's stories.³ Christina Baldwin provides evidence of circle symbols prevalent in the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods, but it is not known when or why contemporary Indigenous people began using talking pieces to structure and facilitate communication within the circle. I speculate that, as the number of individuals around the
circle grew, a few dominant voices emerged, creating an imbalance. To restore balance, perhaps a wise person suggested passing around a sacred symbol (e.g., a stone, stick, or shell) to indicate a person’s right to use the power of speech and the concurrent responsibility of others to listen. The use of the sacred symbol to structure the speaking and listening restores balance to the circle.

Each talking stick uniquely symbolizes the qualities of the person who crafted it. For instance, a talking stick made from the wood of a pine tree might represent a peaceful disposition, rabbit fur wrapped around part of the talking stick could represent being a good listener because rabbits have large ears, and blue beads that dangle from the end of the talking stick might symbolically represent understanding. Even though talking sticks are adorned with different symbols, all talking sticks used in council are the bearer of the speaker’s sacred words. According to Cherokee-Navajo Phyllis Cronbaugh, and based on descriptions of training sessions for sitting in council at the Ojai Foundation. The talking stick serves various communicative functions, such as establishing relational agreements, settling disputes, completing unfinished business, brainstorming creative ideas, achieving group consensus, and building cohesiveness. In the next section, the relationship between the talking and listening sticks is explained, and learning goals for using the listening stick are described.

Talking and Listening Sticks

Kay Lindahl originally coined the phrase listening stick and describes a listening stick activity as a variation of the ancient practice of using the talking stick. A review of the Communication literature for the topics “talking stick” and “listening stick” revealed two journal articles. The first article describes the use of a talking stick as part of a group listening activity. The second article describes the relationship between the talking and listening sticks, and how to use the listening stick in a class activity.

Repurposing the talking stick as a listening stick does not change the basic function of the stick as an indicator of who is talking in the context of a small group seated in a circle. However, the change in nomenclature from talking stick to listening stick dramatically shifts the symbolic mean-
ing. The intent of the talking stick is the creation of speech for the benefit of listeners while the intent of the listening stick is two-fold. As the person holding the listening stick, the focus of attention is on listening to self, and on discerning which ideas to share for the benefit of the group. Second, when others in the group are holding the listening stick, the focus of attention is on listening to them with heart-felt attention and empathy.

Dual Awareness: 2LS

The listening stick as a physical object represents the symbolic intention to listen more deeply to self and others, while the talking stick represents our power to talk. Dual awareness refers to an integration of listening and talking. Imagine that the talking and listening sticks could be integrated into a third stick, a blending of energies and forces like that of the Taoist taijitu symbol.\(^{11,12}\)

I represent this dual awareness of listening and speaking with the abbreviation 2LS,\(^{13}\) meaning listen twice before speaking. There are two types of listening embedded in 2LS. First, there is listening to our own feelings, needs, and thoughts, being aware of our personal center and agenda (the first “L” in 2LS). Second, there is listening to the other, seeking to empathize and understand them (the second “L” in 2LS). And third, in 2LS there is a time for speaking (S) one’s point of view, creating the beginnings of a conversation.

The concept of 2LS\(^{14}\) provides a unique orientation and set of priorities when listening to others that I elaborate on through several sources
including Covey’s habits of highly successful people, the martial art of Aikido, and the musical sensibilities of jamming.

2LS: First Understand, Then Be Understood

The fifth of the seven habits of highly successful people that Stephen Covey champions is, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” For Covey, seeking to understand means empathic listening, and the attitude of listening precedes speaking one’s own agenda. The priority of listening to another’s point of view first (prior to speaking) is compatible with 2LS, representing listening to others before speaking. However, Covey’s focus on listening to others first does not account for the first type of listening in 2LS, namely, listening to self before listening to others. In fairness to Covey, listening to self could fall under habit number seven, “Sharpen the Saw: Principles of Balanced Self-Renewal.” This habit is more clearly related to listening to self in Sean Covey’s children’s version of the seventh habit, “And Remember to Take Care of Yourself.” Listening to ourselves first is a way of taking care of ourselves, ensuring that we sharpen our own sword of attention to remain balanced, renewed, and with sufficient energy to listen to others.

2LS: Aikido Moves

The sword of attention can signify listening to self, but the symbolic sword also has other meanings relevant to listening. The sword of attention is a term used in the martial art of Kendo. Overall, the martial arts have many parallels in communication.

I apply the 2LS abbreviation to a mind-body sequence of movements in the martial art of Aikido called Irimi Tenkan. The sequence begins with the Aikido student centering the body and mind before engaging with an opponent. This initial step is equivalent to listening to self in 2LS. Next, the student enters the opponent’s approach, positioning the body in a way that harmonizes with the opponent’s energy. This second step in the Aikido sequence is equivalent to listening to others in 2LS. The final step in the Aikido sequence is turning in a circular fashion, blending and redi-
recting the opponent’s energy while executing a technique (e.g., a hold or throw). This last step in the Aikido sequence represents speaking in 2LS, metaphorically introducing one’s own ideas into the conversation. The entire Aikido sequence represents all parts of 2LS in the proper order. First, listen to self (centering), second listen to the other (entering), and lastly speaking (blending and redirecting).

2LS: Musical Jamming

In addition to martial arts as a metaphor for illustrating 2LS, music offers various ways to understand listening. I focus here on “jamming” as one example of the relationship between music and 2LS. Jamming in a musical sense, as described by Communication theorist Eisenberg, has four characteristics (transcendent, diverse, fragile, and risky) and four conditions (skill, structure, setting, and surrender). Of these characteristics and conditions, the jamming ideas of diversity and surrender are most relevant to 2LS. In jamming, the diversity of views is achieved by listening to the other musicians in the band and then surrendering to the flow of their music for the purpose of creating a harmonious jam. Once “in the jam,” the individual musician can change the jam by introducing their unique spin on the music. Listening to others playing the jam is the second “L” of listening in 2LS. Surrendering is also part of listening to others. Introducing another musical idea into the jam is equivalent to the “S” of speaking in 2LS.

What seems to be missing in the jamming metaphor is the initial “L” of listening to self in 2LS. While not part of Eisenberg’s jamming idea, it is possible to incorporate the idea of listening to self in a musical jam. Before the jam begins, each musician “tunes” their own instrument. This tuning of the instrument is akin to listening to self in 2LS. Next, the musician listens and tunes to others (the other instruments and players) in the jam. The tuning to each other is akin to listening to others in 2LS. Finally, with everyone in tune, the band “jams together,” simultaneously listening and speaking in a state that I call dual awareness.
Notes

4. The qualities might represent the character strengths or personality of the person, or the qualities might symbolize the desired strengths that the person is in the process of cultivating.
8. A body of communication research describing "listening circles" conceptually overlaps the talking/listening stick practice. Much of this research is in the context of training and organizational communication, which is beyond the scope of the present chapter to review. For example, Gyu Itzchakov and Avraham N. Kluger, "The Listening Circle: A Simple Tool to Enhance Listening and Reduce Extremism Among Employees," Organizational Dynamics 46, no. 4 (2017): 220–226, and Laura Janusik, "Listening Training in Organizations," Current Opinion in Psychology, 52 (August, 2023): 101631. For an introduction to listening circles, see Ingrid Nordi, "Listening Circles-A Path to Better Listening Skills, Listening in Education and Training, no. 1 (2024): 25-30.
10. I performed a title search for "talking stick" and "listening stick" using the Communication and Mass Media database. One article relevant to the talking stick was found and no articles on the listening stick were found. Richard B. Hyde, "Council: Using a Talking Stick to Teach Listening," Speech Communication Teacher 7, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 1-2. [no DOI, call number: PN4071.S73]. I performed a second title search for "listening stick" using the Google Scholar database. One article was found that I drew from for this chapter (used with permission). E. James Baesler, "From Talking Stick to Listening Stick: A Variation on an Ancient Practice," Listening Education 9, no. 2 (2019): 17-34. https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/communication_fac_pubs/40/.
11. Taijitu is a circular yin-yang symbol, half white and half black with a small circle of black within the larger white half and a small circle of white within the larger black half. Symbolically, the larger black half of the taijitu could represent listening to others, and the smaller inner circle within the black representing listening to self. Similarly, the white half of the taijitu symbol could represent speaking while the inner black circle within the white represents listening to oneself while speaking. Taijitu symbolically represents an integration of both listener and speaker.


13. In the original article that I draw on for this part of the chapter (E. James Baesler, "From talking Stick to Listening Stick," Listening Education, 2019), I used the term tallis ("tal" is short for "talk," and "lis" is short for "listen") to represent the dual awareness of listening and talking. For a variety of reasons, including tallis being confused with other meanings of the term (e.g., a Jewish shawl, an English composer, a rock band), I created the new abbreviation 2LS where "L" short for "listen," "S" is "speak", and "2" meaning twice. Translated, 2LS means to hold the dual awareness of "listen twice (to self and others) before speaking."

14. 2LS is an original abbreviation I created for use in the field of listening. However, the term is not completely original outside the field of listening. An internet search shows that others use the abbreviation 2LS to mean a variety of things from the layout of fingers on a bowling ball, a model number of a Chevy Camaro, a music artist, a fire alarm system, and so forth.


20. Irimi is "to enter" and Tenkan is "to turn." The Aikido practitioner enters first (Irimi), blends by turning with (Tenkan), and then flows with and redirects (if needed) the opponent’s energy. C. M. Shifflett, Aikido: Exercises for Teaching and Training (Sewickley: Round Earth Publishing, 2009).

4.7 The Listening Stick

Thus far, I have introduced the historical context of the talking stick, highlighting the transition from talking to listening. I illustrated the significance of dual awareness (listening and speaking as 2LS) through Covey’s habits of highly successful people, an Aikido technique, and musical jamming. In the upcoming sections, I introduce and describe the preparation and procedures for facilitating the listening stick activity as part of the Listening to the SONG of Life course.

I introduce the listening stick activity in the Listening to the SONG of Life course to facilitate a deeper, more heart-focused experience of listening to self (when one is holding the listening stick) and listening to others’ feelings and needs (when others hold the listening stick). The heart-focused emphasis is based on Marshall Rosenberg’s philosophy to make life more wonderful through empathic listening as part of the non-violent communication process.

Preparing for the Listening Stick Activity

Before introducing the listening stick activity to students in class, I suggest crafting and practicing using the listening stick. Alternatively, any meaningful physical object can serve as a listening stick, such as a feather, stone, shell, candle, or even a colored marker will do in a pinch.

Introducing the Listening Stick Activity

The listening stick can be introduced at the beginning of class as an ice-
breaker or sometime later in the course after student introductions. I recommend the latter as the listening stick activity deepens existing relationships, providing a greater sense of cohesiveness. Before providing instructions on the practice of the listening stick activity in class, I narrate two short stories about my relationship with trees and how I crafted the first listening sticks for the course.

**Gift of Trees**

I love trees. When tall enough to pull myself onto the trunk of an almond tree, I climbed to my favorite spot between three branches and sat in awe, overlooking the landscape of walnut, grapefruit, and pomegranate trees in the family backyard in Sunnyvale, California. Now, dwelling on a half-acre in Chesapeake, Virginia, I listen to the trees tell me about the cycle of life, smelling the almond blossoms in spring, sitting beneath the branches of the magnolia in the heat of summer, enjoying the succulent brown figs in late August, watching maple leaves cascade in the cool of fall, and contemplating the naked branches of a pecan in the stillness of winter. Trees bring me happiness and peace.

Trees can also teach lessons when we listen attentively. Trees are rooted in the earth as we are rooted in our ancestors. Their branches reach for the sun as we reach for our goals. Trees often stand together in a grove as we stand together in community. Trees gift us with their very substance in the form of wood that, with some imagination and artistry, can become a listening stick for cultivating and fortifying our personal relationships.

In surveying our property, I spied some branches that fell after a north-eastern storm. I gathered and trimmed cedar, birch, maple, and pine branches to one-foot lengths, then lightly sanded and oiled to accent the grain. These crafted sticks are the centerpiece of a listening stick activity that enhances our ability to listen to ourselves and each other.

**Choosing a Listening Stick**

It is important not to become too fixated on finding and crafting the perfect listening stick and lose sight of its purpose. Recall that any meanin-
ful object, such as a special pen, feather, or candle, can serve as a listening stick. We imbue the listening stick with meaning and power.

Preview of the Listening Stick Activity

Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island use talking sticks in tribal council, but I will call them listening sticks and use them in small groups in the classroom. The person holding the stick is the one who talks while others listen. In Lindahl’s listening stick version of the traditional talking stick activity,\(^5\) the person with the stick speaks, but with a special listening focus. Before speaking, the speaker listens inwardly for an intuitive response to a question, and after their speaking turn, they listen again to create a question for the next speaker. To illustrate further, I chronologically outline the steps of the listening stick activity.

**Instructions for the Listening Stick Activity**\(^6\)

The class is divided into small groups of three to five students (depending on class size) arranged in close proximity in the shape of a closed circle. I let each group choose one listening stick from the collection of listening sticks I crafted, or students can elect to choose a special object from their belongings to represent the listening stick.

1. The first person to hold the listening stick voices the question that I voice at the end of my modeling activity (see item six). Alternatively, students can make up their own question. Or, if students feel the need to choose another question, I provide examples of starter questions.\(^7\) I encourage students to use my modeled question instead of choosing from a list of questions because the act of choosing engages their logical-linear left-brain, and one purpose of the activity is to encourage a deeper, more intuitive right-brain response.\(^8\)

2. The person holding the listening stick closes their eyes and silently repeats the question, listening to whatever content bubbles inside them during the next thirty seconds. Someone not holding the listening stick can set an audible digital timer. While the person holding
the listening stick is considering their response to the question, the other group members have the option to silently listen to their response to the question. The digital timer provides an auditory cue for the person holding the listening stick with their eyes closed to bring their reflection to a close. I encourage students to listen to their thoughts emerge for the entire thirty seconds, even if they feel like they have an “answer” after a few seconds.

3. Next, the holder of the listening stick speaks from the heart, trusting their intuition that whatever they say will benefit the group. As they speak, others in the group listen with heart-felt attention without interruption.

4. When the listening stick holder completes their response, they close their eyes a second time, returning to their inner world, listening for a new question to emerge for another thirty seconds. I encourage students to give voice to the last question that emerges during their thirty-second reflection rather than attempt to choose the “best” of many questions that may emerge during the thirty seconds.

5. Lastly, the person holding the listening stick passes it to the next person along the rim of the circle, who repeats the new question aloud for all to hear. Then, they close their eyes in search of a response to the question for thirty seconds. They speak their response to the group and close their eyes in search of a new question for another thirty seconds. They speak the new question to the group and pass the listening stick to the next person…and so on, until the last person has taken their turn with the listening stick.

6. I model steps one through four for students by holding the listening stick and asking students to provide a question for me. Once a student has voiced a question for me, I close my eyes and repeat the question aloud. Next, I verbalize for the class what I am thinking (students do their thinking silently in the actual practice) in my attempt to respond intuitively to the question, including my struggle to create a meaningful response. I open my eyes and speak my response. Returning to the inner world, I again verbalize my ruminations in formulating a new question. With opened eyes, I give voice to the last question that I reflected on. My last question becomes the group’s
7. Depending on the size of the groups, forty minutes to an hour may be allotted for the listening stick activity. If some groups complete one revolution around the circle, I encourage them to continue a second time, or until time is called.

Tips and Debriefing for the Listening Stick Activity

After completing the listening stick activity, I invite students to reflect on their experience, record something they learned in their journal, and share one of their learnings in their small group. Alternatively, one can encourage students to consider a series of questions to guide their reflection. Some students are eager to comment, question, and share their experiences with each other in the group. Other students seem influenced by the nature of the listening activity and are more receptive and reflective in their communication with group members.

After about fifteen minutes of in-group sharing, I ask each group to choose one learning from their group to share with the class. As a class, we listen to the most important learning from each group, pausing between groups for reflection, questions, and discussion. Unless a question is directed to me, I maintain the role of facilitator for these inter-group discussions.

Lastly, we bring together the threads of the class discussion by summarizing what we have collectively learned. As students give voice to what they have learned, I record keywords and symbols on the whiteboard. Together, we create an acronym for the words and symbols to represent and assist us in recalling our communal learnings.

This concludes the debriefing part of the listening activity. In the next section, I describe some of the learning themes from past class discussions. And where appropriate, I provide further guidance for using the listening stick activity in the classroom.
Learning Themes from the Listening Stick Activity

Comfort and Freedom to Speak

Many students cannot recall a time in their recent past when another person listened to them without interruption, comment, or questioning. Students find comfort and freedom in knowing they can speak as long as needed without interruption. Many daily interactions in our digital-techno-oriented culture are brief (e.g., texting, Twitter tweets, Tinder swipes, and Facebook likes), and carving out extended in-person face-to-face time with another is often a challenge. The listening stick activity demonstrates that it is possible to counterbalance brief and often superficial interactions with more thoughtful and potentially deeper ones.

Improved Equality Through Restriction and Expansion

In addition to the sense of comfort and freedom that the extended interaction time affords, the structure of the listening stick activity serves as an equalizer for group interaction. Normally, dominant speakers in the group are now asked to reflect and listen, speaking only when holding the listening stick. At first, dominant speakers find this restrictive structure frustrating, but most of them begin to see the benefits of listening silently to others as the process unfolds. In contrast, normally reticent students now have a designated time to speak freely without fear of being interrupted. Reticent students enjoy an expanded sense of power in knowing they are guaranteed time to speak and do not need to compete or interrupt someone to obtain a speaking turn. In their journal writings, students report that implementing the listening stick activity in their daily lives creates more equality between interaction partners and small group members.

Discernment in Listening

Another issue that students frequently struggle with in the self-listening part of the listening stick activity is how to discern between competing
thoughts and ideas. Several answers (or questions) will often emerge during the thirty seconds of reflection. How does one discern which response to share with the group? There are two simple ways to discern what to share. First, one can use the previously mentioned method of choosing the last answer (or question) of the reflection period to share with the group. Another way to discern is to recognize that most answers are choices between several goods. There may not be one best answer, but several good answers may exist. Any one of the “good answers” is worthy of sharing with the group. A third, more labor-intensive method of discernment requires further time to ask and respond to three questions: Is what I want to share with the group true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? I suggest that students consider these three questions when a serious issue confronts their group and to allot more time to discern.

Quality of Listening

Students also notice a difference in the quality of their other-oriented listening. Typically, when a small group in class is assigned a question to answer, group members begin formulating answers to the question while feigning listening to other group members who are speaking. Their attention is divided. They cannot formulate an answer and listen wholeheartedly at the same time. To counter this division of attention, the listening stick activity unifies attention by focusing solely on listening to the person holding the listening stick. This is possible since answering the question changes with each speaker’s turn. Individuals do not know what question they will be asked to answer until they are passed the listening stick. Untethered from rehearsing their answer to a standard question for the entire group, members of the group are free to give their undivided attention to the speaker.

Heart-Felt Listening

Many students find it challenging to cultivate the practice of gifting others with undivided listening attention without the aid of a listening stick. Without the physical object of the listening stick as a reminder, it is easy to
listen primarily with the head, that is, to listen for content (e.g., what’s the problem and how to we solve it). We might also find ourselves busy formulating a brilliant response to impress others and inflate our egos. I remind students that the listening stick symbolizes an inner attitude of the heart. They can cultivate this inner heart-felt listening in virtually any communication context or function. We talk about ways to remind ourselves to “listen with the heart” in the spirit of the Buddhist practice of *gathas*. By way of illustration, students and I co-created the following Gatha-like practices. When turning on a light switch, we can silently say, “I will turn on my heart to listen with attention and devotion.” When we see a tree, we can think of the branches from which the listening stick is crafted. When we feel the urge to interrupt our communication partner or group member, we can acknowledge the urge and consciously choose to give more attention to the other person. Other student ideas for creatively remembering to listen from the heart are drawing a small red-colored heart on the back of one’s hand with a washable colored marker, wearing a heart-shaped necklace or wristband, and carrying a heart-shaped stone in one’s pocket.

Applying the Listening Stick Outside the Classroom

Students may discover that the extended response time in the listening stick activity can add a creative dimension to their *self-listening*. For some, their initial response to a question morphs during the thirty-second reflection period into something unanticipated, sometimes something richer, deeper, and more profound than their initial response to the question.

We could not determine how to apply the idea of listening with extended time to in-person public face-to-face interactions between strangers and acquaintances where long pauses like this would be considered a negative violation of social expectations. More than three seconds of silence between speaker turns is often considered an undesirable time lapse in many educational and business contexts in the U.S. Recent research suggests that the interpretation of gaps in the conversation (two seconds or more) may vary depending on the nature of the relationship.
Specifically, silence signals disconnection among strangers, whereas silence between friends increases connection. Thus, the listening stick activity should apply better to close personal relationships than with strangers. For instance, in the context of friendship, one can explain the intention of the listening stick activity and frame the pregnant pauses during the listening stick activity as a birthplace for creative ideas. When practiced regularly, the habit of listening from the heart can expand to other personal relationships at school, work, and home.

Cohesiveness, Communal Truth, and Intimacy

The nonverbal passing of the listening stick from one person to the next in the group, each with a new question to answer and a new question to pose, provides students with a feeling of group cohesiveness. This feeling of closeness is frequently described by students as being part of something larger than themselves. Perhaps the listening stick activity allows students to experience a collective search for a communal truth that no single individual could create independently. A similar feeling of group cohesiveness is reported by Richard Hyde after students complete a one-hour talking stick activity in small group councils. Finally, in their journal writings for the listening class, a few students report successfully applying the listening stick activity in their close personal relationships, resulting in greater intimacy with their partners.

Assessing the Listening Stick Activity

I do not formally assess students’ experiences of the listening stick activity as part of the course grade. In my philosophy of teaching, the sense of being evaluated while one is learning a new skill is antithetical to the purpose of learning. Externally motivated learning for a good grade often decreases learning because the learner is focused on the shortest route to the highest grade and not on the process of learning. Whereas learning based on intrinsic motivation (like curiosity or self-improvement) can enhance the learning process.

For me, as a professor, assessing student learning with traditional stan-
standardized tests (like multiple-choice tests) is also antithetical to the process of learning.\textsuperscript{23} There are many alternatives to standardized assessments of student learning, such as portfolios, presentations, written and video blogs, stories, poems, artwork, comic strips, plays, music, journals, puppetry, and games.\textsuperscript{24}

To assess the listening stick activity, I encourage students to write about what they learned in their listening journal and include something about the listening stick activity in their end-of-semester learning poem. Journals and poems count as part of the course grade and are assessed at mid- and end-of-term, along with student conferences during which we discuss what they have learned.

If an instructor needs an immediate evaluation of the listening stick activity,\textsuperscript{25} I recommend some form of self-assessment. For example, after the listening activity, and after students are provided time to apply the activity outside of class, students can write about what they learned and assign themselves a letter grade based on a rubric that the instructor creates, such as “quantity and quality” of writing, or “effort and insight” of writing. Alternatively, students can, individually or as a class, create their own rubric for grading, and the instructor can approve or recommend revisions. I find these alternative assessments more compatible with the ideals of teaching and learning about listening to the SONG of life in the classroom.

Notes


2. I recommend searching for “talking stick” on the internet to discover instructional websites for creating a "listening stick." I use the term listening stick instead of talking stick. It will be difficult to find instructional videos for creating a "listening stick" as it is a relatively new term in the listening field. Thus, when searching, use the keywords “talking stick.” As one illustration of creating a talking stick (what I am calling a listening stick) see, "How to Make a Talking Stick | Viveca Lammers," YouTube, July 16, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6fPrb-ozw4.

3. Additional resources for practicing the listening stick activity in small groups include Kay Lindahl, \textit{Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening} (Woodstock: SkyLight
I develop the theme of listening to other aspects of nature (the "N" in listening to the SONG of life) in the next chapter.


These instructions are adapted from Lindahl’s book and are revised based on my email correspondence with Lindahl (personal communication, March 22, 2017). Kay Lindahl, *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* (Woodstock: SkyLight Paths, 2003), 32-37.

Some possible starter questions are: When was the last time you had a good belly laugh? When you think about the future, what are you most afraid of? And, Who do you turn to for support in times of need?

Based on personal email communication with Kay Lindahl, March 22, 2017.

Even though the other group members will not be answering the question (since they are not the one holding the listening stick), providing them with the option to answer the question silently allows them to practice self-listening and avoids the feeling of downtime between turns.

Committing oneself to give voice to the last question encourages students to trust their intuition, their deep knowing, believing that the last question will provide whatever the group needs to hear rather than attempting to analyze which is the "best" question logically. This advice is based on a personal email communication with Kay Lindahl, March 22, 2017.

This modeling process, especially when students hear me struggle with formulating a response to the question, reduces some of the anxiety associated with how to practice the listening stick activity.

A sample of such reflection questions might include: What was it like for you? What did you notice about your listening when listening to others...when listening to yourself? What did you observe about the process? Did any patterns or new questions emerge?

Nancy Kline identifies the benefits of providing individuals "time to think" by listening without interruption. Kline writes, "To know you are not going to be interrupted allows your mind to dive, to skate to the edge and leap, to look under rocks, twirl, sit, calculate, stir, toss the familiar and watch new ideas billow down." Nancy Kline, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* (London: Octopus Publishing, 1999), 43.

By way of illustration, students report that in interpersonal relationships, the listening stick activity provides time and space for a shy friend to disclose greater depth about their life that wouldn't normally be possible in an everyday conversation. Students also report that when the listening stick activity
is implemented in groups outside of class, such as a study group, they appreciate the structure of the activity, curbing the talk time of dominant group members and providing anopening for more reticent group members to voice their opinions.

15. These three discernment questions are traditionally known as the Sufi Gates of Speech, and their counterparts are also found in the Buddhist practice called Right Speech (truth, kindly intent, and gentleness). Ann Diller, "The Ethical Education of Self-Talk," in Justice and Caring, eds. Michael S. Katz, Nel Noddings, and Kenneth A. Strike (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1999), 74-92.

16. Context and function are common approaches to categorizing aspects of the field of Communication. By context, I mean, for example, personal, interpersonal, small and large groups, and in-person face-to-face and digital kinds of communication. By function, I mean, for example, decision-making, problem-solving, information gathering, discernment, relationship building, and conflict management. For an example of a functional approach to human communication, see Frank E. X. Dance, The Functions of Human Communication: A Theoretical Approach (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1976). For a contextual approach to human communication, see part three of Julia T. Wood, Communication Mosaics: An Introduction to Human Communication (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016). Listening from the heart can be practiced in any of these communication contexts and functions.

17. In the forward to Robert Aitken’s book, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "Gathas are short verses we can recite during the day to help us dwell in mindfulness and look more deeply at what we are doing." Robert Aitken, The Dragon Who Never Sleeps (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992), i [italics author]. Aitken’s gathas are composed of four lines. The first line, "... establishes the occasion, the second line presents that act of vowing, and the last two lines follow through with the specific conduct that one promises to undertake in these circumstances." Robert Aitken, The Dragon Who Never Sleeps, xvii.


For a complete discussion of the impact of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation on student learning, see Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999).


I created this list based on past student project topics. One alternative to standardized testing that I use in most of my upper-level undergraduate classes is a term project. Students propose a creative project that relates to some aspect of the course. They receive feedback on their proposal, complete the project during the semester, and present what they have learned to the class in the final weeks of the course.

Depending on the educational organization, upper administration may require instructors to submit some form of assessment to demonstrate student learning.
I provide several “best practices” in listening in the following section based on classic and contemporary research, and on TED talks. Which practices seem worthy of testing in your everyday life? Identify one practice that appeals to you. In your imagination see yourself performing the activity sometime in the next twenty-four hours or next week. Then, when the opportunity arises, perform the practice and assess how it serves you.

Good listener and Radical Deep listener

When reflecting on your habitual patterns of listening to those in your close personal relationships, would you say your behavior aligns more often with the “good listener” or with the “radical deep listener”?

When you reflect further, what aspects of the good or radical deep listener might you begin to “play with”?

Biological Cascade and Choice in Listening to Others

When you experience being negatively activated in a conversation (stressed out), can you recognize the biological cascade of events flowing through the body and then choose to respond with empathy? If this is very difficult, consider adopting a mindfulness meditation practice to assist in coping with the biological stress response and/or employing Truitt’s neuroscience-based practices combined with self-havening. These practices may develop more freedom to purposefully choose a more compassionate response when you feel negatively activated in a conversation.
If you are willing to engage in a mindfulness practice to cope with stress, what kind of meditation might you enjoy? Where would you practice? When? For how long? See suggestions in the previous section on meditation to get started or to deepen if you already have a regular meditation practice.

Empathic Listening to Others

Are you more of a cognitive empathizer (identifying with the other person’s content) or an affective empathizer (identifying with the other person’s feelings) or perhaps you empathize with both?

Can you identify any practices in this section that you want to grow in? Which ones?

What small practice might you try to nudge you into becoming a more empathic listener?

Consider the nonviolent communication empathic practice of guessing your communication partner’s feelings and needs. What low-stakes situation might you explore to practice guessing the feelings and needs of your communication partner in the next twenty-four hours? After practicing, discuss your empathic attempt with your communication partner. What went well? What could be modified for next time?

How well developed are your feelings and needs vocabularies? Unless educated in these areas, most individuals could develop a more diverse and richer feelings and needs vocabulary.

To begin increasing your emotional vocabulary, take a five-minute tour of the *Atlas of Emotions* to discover the nuances of your emotions.

To develop a needs vocabulary, visit Neef’s free online book, the *Human Needs Matrix*, and make a list of your daily personal needs on a three-by-five-inch notecard (or write a “note” on your mobile phone) and place it in your pocket. For one week, refer to your needs list sometime before noon and then again before bedtime.

How well are you meeting your own needs? Are there any needs that are consistently neglected? What could you do differently to meet one of these neglected needs in a socially acceptable manner? How does understanding your own needs assist you in empathizing with the needs of others?
Digital Listening

A large proportion of our lives is consumed with digital listening in a myriad of forms. How mindful are you of your digital listening habits?

Re-read the section on Levy’s protocol for mindfully listening to your digital listening habits. Test out Levy’s protocol for one of your digital devices for twenty-four or forty-eight hours. What insights did you uncover? Create a new digital listening strategy that might better serve you if appropriate.

Dual Awareness: 2LS

Recall that the 2LS abbreviation represents a sequence of activities for optimal listening. Begin at the end of your day before bedtime, working backward through the day to explore the sequence of listening and speaking for one significant relationship in your life.

How well does your communication behavior align with the 2LS pattern of listening to yourself first, listening to the other second, and speaking if necessary? Is there anything you might like to change in the way you sequence your communication in this relationship? If so, how might you initiate a small change in the next twenty-four hours?

Listening to Others with a Listening Stick

I invite you to craft your own listening stick. Alternatively, perhaps a meaningful small object (e.g., a seashell, candle, or figurine) could serve as your listening stick.

Re-read the listening stick instructions and make them your own by revising them in any way that makes sense to you. Arrange for a half-hour listening session with a trusted friend in a relatively quiet place that is free of distractions. Explain your version of the listening stick protocol to your friend. Follow the protocol as best you can. Afterwards, spend a few minutes talking with each other about the experience. What insights and learnings emerged? How might you apply these insights to your relationship without using a listening stick?
This chapter begins with empirical research and a review of classic and modern approaches to best practices in listening to others, followed by a thematic description of best listening practices based on thirty-five TED Talks. Next, empathic listening is conceptualized, and active and affective listening research is described. In addition, insights into the neuroscience of empathy are covered. A nonviolent communication perspective on empathy is elaborated which includes an explanation of the import of feelings (the Atlas of Emotions) and needs (the Human Needs Matrix). A brief discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of digital listening is followed by a digital listening mindfulness practice. Finally, I provide an extended illustration of the background, procedures, learnings, and assessment of the listening stick practice.

This concludes the chapter on listening to others. Listening to nature is the next verse in the SONG of life that we will explore. Listening to nature is an extension of listening to “others,” where others refer to the rich diversity of nature–microorganisms, insects, reptiles, sea creatures, birds, animals, plants, rocks, and other elementals.
CHAPTER V

Listening to Nature

the more than human

plants, animals, elements

natural listening
5.0 Introduction to Listening to Nature

Humans Need Nature

Humans need contact, connection, and positive experiences with the natural world. The transcendentalist philosopher Thoreau writes in *Walden*, “We need the tonic of wilderness . . . We can never have enough of nature.”¹ The naturalist John Muir highlights the human need for nature in *Yosemite*, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”² The biophilia hypothesis, first proposed by Edward Wilson,³ suggests that nature is in our DNA, and that we have an innate bond with other living organisms. The living organisms in nature include green nature (e.g., forests and parks), blue landscapes (e.g., rivers and oceans), micro-organisms, insects, plants, reptiles, fish, animals, and the elements.

We are not just part of the natural world. We literally are the natural world. From the plants and animals we consume as food, to the air we breathe, and the micro-organisms that live on our skin and in our body, we are the living container for parts of the natural world. In decades of research using the electron microscope, Joyce Hawkes is convinced that cells resonate with the beauty of nature, and that we in turn resonate with awe, joy, and beauty.⁴

Consider the following two excerpts that illustrate how nature uplifts the human spirit. In the first excerpt, we are hiking with John Muir in the Sierras:
We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making
every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone taber-
nacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an insepara-
ble part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of
the sun . . .

In this second excerpt, we listen to the nature wisdom of Chief Dan
George. Notice his use of the phrase “speaks to me” implies he is listening
to nature:

The beauty of the trees, the softness of the air, the fragrance of the grass, speaks
to me. The summit of the mountain, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the
sea, speaks to me . . . And the life that never goes away. They speak to me. And
my heart soars.

Anyone willing to listen to nature can experience something of what John
Muir and Chief Dan George poetically and vividly describe. Biologist and
environmentalist Rachel Carson calls these nature experiences a “sense of
wonder.” Carson wishes that each child receive the gift of a sense of won-
der, “If I had influence with the good fairy . . . I should ask that her gift to
each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would
last throughout life . . .” Carson advocates cultivating a sense of wonder
by listening to nature:

Take time to listen and talk about the voices of the earth and what they
mean—the majestic voice of thunder, the winds, the sound of surf or flowing
streams. And the voices of living things . . . Robins, thrushes, song sparrows,
jays . . .

The previous observations of naturalists Henry Thoreau and John Muir,
the voice of Chief Dan George, and the wisdom of biologist Joyce Hawkes
and environmentalist Rachel Carson all affirm the value of listening to
nature. In addition to these voices, there is empirical research supporting
the health benefits of listening to nature that I describe in this chapter. But first, I define nature and the scope of inquiry for listening to nature as part of listening to the SONG of life.

Notes

8. Ibid., 84-85.
5.1 Defining Nature and the Human-Nature Context

In this chapter, I distinguish between human beings and the more-than-human. I label the more-than-human world “nature.” In reality, humans are part of the natural world, but it is more convenient and par-simonious to write the word “nature” rather than “more-than-human world.” Bearing this distinction in mind, nature includes everything in the universe other than humans—from micro atoms in the elements, microorganisms, insects, plants, and animals through the macro-level astrophysical universe of planets, stars, and galaxies. This definition of nature is broader than definitions found in typical “nature” research. For example, Capaldi et al.’s review of nature and well-being defines nature as, “. . . environments and physical features of nonhuman origins, ranging from plants to non-built landscapes.” Capaldi et al. further distinguish between human contact with nature, interacting with the natural world, and nature connection, a subjective sense of connection with the natural world. In this chapter, my conceptualization of “listening to nature” is compatible with Capaldi et al.’s ideas of contact and connection with nature.

Throughout this chapter, I use a human-centric orientation in considering the human-nature relationship. The human-centric framework is a very narrow slice of the universe. As philosopher Ken Wilber points out, there are multiple orientations from ego (human) to ethno (group or tribe) to world (planet-global centric) to Kosmos (universal). Ideally, a Kosmo-centric perspective of nature would include all relationships of everything
in the known universe, but such a comprehensive systematic investigation of nature is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Notes

1. Ecologist and philosopher David Abram may be the first to use the expression "more-than-human world" to denote the natural world. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996).


3. My focus is not nature-to-nature relationships. For example, I do not discuss the relationship between plants and insects as in the case of pollination, relationships between animals like bonobo chimpanzees and their predators, or relationships between marine mammals like the bottle-nose dolphin and sharks.

There is a common pattern to much of the early nature research noted by medical doctors Eva Selbub and Alan Logan in their book, *Your Brain on Nature*. Ancient and folk nature medicines (e.g., Indigenous and First Nation peoples, Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Middle Ages) are often labeled “pseudo-scientific” because of their claims rely on anecdotal evidence or scientifically unmeasurable phenomenon. Only later, sometimes after decades of research, some nature medicines are “proven” by science. Selbub and Logan provide multiple examples of early nature medicine being proven later by science, including Roman physician Cornelius Celsus’ advice of walking the garden to improve health, Weir Mitchell’s 1874 “camp cure” (camping outdoors) for overworked urbanities, and nineteenth-century sanitariums designed to emulate nature for improving mental and physical health.

With the accumulation of nature-health research studies, such as Japanese researchers demonstrating scientific health findings for forest bathing, there is a marked increase in the credibility of ancient and folk nature medicine. For instance, some doctors are prescribing nature activities for stress-related health conditions. All of this is relevant to listening to nature because these nature prescriptions (e.g., walking in nature, outdoor camping, designing nature-friendly buildings) involve listening to...
nature (perceiving, interpreting, understanding, and making meaning) in ways that benefit our health and well-being.

Human-Nature Cognitive and Psychological Benefits

Some early nature research began with testing the influence of nature scenes on stressed students (after an exam) and found that nature scenes increased scores on affection, playfulness, and elation.\textsuperscript{5} More recently, Kathryn Schertz and Marc Berman review the cognitive benefits of being in nature (what I’m calling listening to nature).\textsuperscript{6} Their review includes survey, correlational, and experimental research with various nature-based stimuli (e.g., real-world exposure, images, sounds, and virtual reality). Summary results show nature-based cognitive improvements in working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attentional control.

An extensive review of the literature on the effects of nature, including large data-based studies (correlational, experimental, and field studies) and meta-analyses, support the positive benefits of nature on our well-being:

\[
\ldots \text{brief contact with nature produces positive emotional states, green exercise (outdoors in green landscapes) has a positive effect on mental well-being} \ldots \text{people were happier when in natural environments than when in urban ones.}\textsuperscript{7}
\]

Nature connectedness, a stable pro-environmental attitude and behavioral trait, is significantly related to positive affect and life satisfaction in a meta-analysis of thirty studies with 8500 individuals.\textsuperscript{8} Additional reviews of nature research reveal that:

\[
\ldots \text{outdoor educational/experiential learning activities show increased autonomy and sense of well-being including: personal growth, self-esteem, self-regulation, and social competency} \ldots \text{[and nature can increase feelings of]} \ldots \text{awe and inspiration, connection to a greater whole, and spiritual exaltation—the transcendent aspects of eudemonic well-being.}\textsuperscript{9}
\]
Considering the high cost of health care in today’s economy, this literature review on nature suggests that engaging with and listening to nature may be a supportive and cost-effective method to boost mood, reduce stress, and promote health and well-being alongside traditional health care. In the Western world view of medicine, this claim about the positive influences of nature on health fits under the umbrella of alternative or complementary medicine. However, others, like medical doctor Andrew Weil at the University of Arizona, have long argued that nature and other healing modalities (e.g., nutrition, yoga, and meditation) should be considered a disciplinary field in their own right, something he calls “integrative medicine.”

Broadening the Conceptualization of Human-Nature

Gregory Bratman et al. provide a broader conceptualization of nature than the previous research reviewed that includes, “… land, water, potted plants, parks, wilderness, weather, geology, and other forces.” In this broader conceptualization of nature, “nature experiences” include perceptions and interactions with nature using all sensory modalities. Within this broader nature framework, the research reviewed shows that nature experiences have many health benefits.

Bratman et al.’s summary of the nature research parallels that of Capaldi et al. across diverse research settings. These settings include experimental lab studies (e.g., images and sounds have positive benefits for psychological and physiological markers) and fieldwork (e.g., walking in nature vs urban settings results in positive changes for affect, cognitive, and physiological measures). The research also includes cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (e.g., psychological well-being from exposure to green and blue spaces and gardens).

Bratman et al. provide a model of nature’s positive impact on mental health. The four main areas of the model are natural features of nature (size, type, and qualities like composition), exposure (proximity to nature, time spent in contact with nature), experience (interaction patterns, and dose—the amount that is “absorbed”), and effects (mental health and psychological well-being). While the exposure and experience parts of the
model are directly relevant to listening to nature, the model does not explicitly acknowledge the role of listening, particularly in how individuals process their “exposure and experience” in nature. Moreover, the model, in identifying separate variables in the human-nature experience, does not account for the holistic experience of “being in nature.”

A third review of the relationship between nature and health by Howard Frumkin et al. focuses on health and “nature contact.” Several research studies are cited to support each of the following health benefits of nature:

- Reduced stress, depression, anxiety, aggression, ADHD symptoms, blood pressure, obesity, mortality
- Increases in happiness, well-being, life satisfaction, prosocial behavior, and social connectedness
- Improvements in immune function, congestive heart failure, postoperative recovery, birth outcomes, pain control, asthma, allergies, child development [cognitive and motor skills], general health for adults, cancer patients
- Better sleep and eyesight

The forms of nature contact reviewed all assume that the individual is listening to nature through the listening capacities of perceiving, interpreting, understanding, and making meaning. Based on this review, I conclude that listening to nature is a contributing factor to positive human health.

Theoretical Explanations of Human-Nature Benefits

In sum, reviews of the literature on the health benefits of the human-nature relationship by Capaldi et al., Frumkin et al., Schertz and Berman, and Bratman et al. all support the positive health benefits of exposure, contact, connection, and time spent in nature—all of which require some degree of listening to nature. Following, I briefly review five theoretical explanations for the positive human-nature relationship. These theories are Biophilia, Stress Reduction, Attention Restoration, Perceptual Fluency, and Prospect Refuge.

Biophilia theory maintains that humans have an innate emotional
connection to other living organisms, including an affiliation with all forms of nature. Stress Reduction theory\textsuperscript{19} suggests that nonthreatening natural environments invoke positive feelings of well-being thereby reducing psychological and physiological indicators of stress. Attention Restoration theory\textsuperscript{20} posits that nature captivates our attention (called soft fascination), allowing our attentional resources to replenish. Perceptual Fluency theory\textsuperscript{21} emphasizes the ease of processing of natural stimuli, increasing positive emotion which in turn increases attention in a cyclical fashion. Finally, Prospect Refuge theory\textsuperscript{22} maintains that certain landscapes offer a prospect (a clear field of view) and a refuge (a place to hide, to be alone without being monitored), providing a sense of comfort and protection.

These theories are complementary explanations for the positive human-nature relationship. By way of illustration, I demonstrate how various aspects of listening to the seashore can be interpreted through the lens of the five theoretical perspectives. Listening to the seashore can involve visually following the curving seashore line, sensing the coolness of seafoam on the feet, and feeling the warmth of the sun on the skin. These experiences of the seashore (perceptual fluencies) potentially capture and fascinate human attention (attention restoration) with the visual experience of the seashore providing a clear view of the shoreline (prospect refuge theory). Together, these experiences can evoke a feeling of well-being (stress reduction) and enhance a sense of connection with life (biophilia).

Highlighting the Role of Listening in Human-Nature Research

This review of the empirical literature and theoretical explanations of the human-nature relationship describes human exposure, contact, and connection with nature without elaborating on how these processes imply specific types of listening. While exposure to nature may not imply intentional listening,\textsuperscript{23} contact, especially connection, with nature, implies some degree of intentional listening.

I suggest that attentional, perceptive, interpretive, and meaning-mak-
ing processes of listening are significant and underdeveloped parts of the human-nature relationship worthy of further elaboration. In addition, most of the previous research reviewed on human exposure, contact, and connection with nature is aligned with the scientific paradigm. Science is only one form of epistemology or way of knowing about the world.\textsuperscript{24} We need other ways of knowing for a complete understanding of the relationship between listening and nature.\textsuperscript{25} To complete the picture of the relationship between listening and nature, I propose exploring ways of knowing that honor the subjective phenomenological experience of “being in nature.” One illustration of this type of research is called “nature language,” a way of combining the phenomenological experience of listening in nature with a scientific perspective.\textsuperscript{26}

Nature language provides a way to understand human-nature interactions’ depth, meanings, and rich experience. To provide a sense of the variety of these human-nature patterns in nature language, I paraphrase examples from Kahn.\textsuperscript{27} Drop into the feeling of your first-person subjective experience as you:

\begin{quote}
Wonder what lies beyond the winding path on a trail . . . Consider how restful it feels to sit under a large shade tree . . . Jump at the sound of a rattle in the brush while hiking . . . Stand atop a hill with a clear view . . . Reflect on the cycle of life and death while watching flower petals fall.
\end{quote}

There may be a near-infinite number of these nature language patterns depending on the form of nature, person, place, context, and time. Kahn surmises that there are probably two- to three hundred central natural language patterns that describe most human-nature interactions.\textsuperscript{28} This proposed nature language framework is closely associated with the interpretive and meaning-making process of listening to nature.

In sum, there is ample research evidence and theoretical explanations for the human health benefits of nature. There is some evidence for a natural language of human-nature interactions that blends phenomenology and science to highlight the importance of listening in nature. What remains unclear is how to develop our nature listening capacities to take
maximum advantage of these health benefits. In the next section, I explore three ways to increase our ability to listen to nature. First, I explore the multi-modal senses of listening. Second, I describe how flow learning supports deeper listening in nature. Third, I introduce the Japanese practice of “forest bathing.” Each of these sections ends with an activity designed to enhance the ability to listen more deeply to nature and, in turn, experience greater health and well-being.

Notes

2. Not all of nature medicine is proven by science, but some of it is. Scientific proof is probabilistic in nature and based on repeated observations in controlled experiments, valid and reliable measures, statistical covariation, and ruling out rival hypotheses like history, maturation, testing, and so forth. Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing, 1970).
3. I discuss “forest bathing” later in this chapter. An oversimplified definition of forest bathing is mindfully walking through the forest.
10. Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine (website), 2024, http: https://integrativemedicine.arizona.edu/
12. The nature experiences range from live contact with nature, symbolic representations of nature (e.g., photographs or computer images), and simula-
tions of nature in virtual reality.


15. Bratman et al., "Nature and Mental Health."


17. For readability, I reorganized and combined the findings using the keywords "reduced, increases, improvements, and better" (italics author).


23. For instance, hearing the sound of a bird in the distance does not imply active listening to the bird’s song.

24. Siegel underscores the value of non-Western ways of knowing about the world, including "... forms of Indigenous science in the careful observation of nature as well as contemplative insights from extensive meditative practices into the nature of the mind ... they offer crucial and distinct ways of rigorously observing and exploring the nature of our world." Daniel J. Siegel, IntraConnected (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2023), 3. Another example of alternative ways of knowing is Mary Belenky’s women’s ways of knowing where received knowledge from listening to others combines with subjective knowledge from our inner experience to create an integration of voices or constructed knowledge. Mary F. Belenky, Blythe Mcvicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1997). Finally, in graduate school, I learned the basic ways of knowing as authority, rationalism, intuition, and science. These sources suggest that Western scientific
materialism is only one way of knowing. There are other ways of knowing that are valid and useful.

25. Parker Palmer calls this need for understanding the communal search for truth. We need all the voices in our global community to approximate the "truth." Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Hoboken: Jossey-Bass, 1997).


28. Ibid.
Prior human-nature research reviewed assumes that listening to nature is limited to the conventional five senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling. What if humans can engage in more than five sensory modalities when listening to nature?

Exploring Listening to Nature with Fifty-some Sense Modalities

Ecopsychologist Michael Cohen argues that there are fifty-four human sensory modalities that can be activated when listening to nature.¹ Some examples of these additional sensory modalities include the sense of electromagnetic current, the sense of weight, gravity, and balance, the hormonal sense of pheromones, and the sense of time, as in the passing of a solar day, the lunar month, and the change of seasons.²

In reviewing the list of fifty-four senses, several sensory modalities appear as variations of the traditional five senses. For example, the sense of seeing without using the eyes (as in heliotropism) is a variation of the sense of sight. The awareness of air and wind pressure could be considered a variation of the sense of touch. However, many fifty-four senses seem unique and different from the typical five senses as in the sense of time.

In principle, each of these fifty-four senses could be used to listen to nature intentionally. For instance, standing barefoot on the grass, one can sense the body’s weight as part of the earth’s gravitational pull. The feel-
ing of weight and pull initiates moment-to-moment bodily adjustments in balancing ourselves to maintain an upright posture. If we continue to listen, we experience these perceptions as feelings associated with being pulled by gravity (e.g., feeling tension or tiredness) and balancing ourselves (e.g., feeling centered or wobbly). If we listen even further, reflecting on these perceptions and feelings, we might make meaning from these experiences. Insights could include that we are held together by the tethers of gravity and that we are in a continuous dynamic balancing act in life.

The fifty-four senses could be elaborated by describing the perceptions, emotions, and meanings associated with listening to some aspect of nature. Cohen provides eighteen nature activities at the end of each chapter in his book, *Reconnecting with Nature*, that can deepen our capacities to listen to nature beyond (and including) the typical five senses.³ Samples of the titles for these activities suggest how they can increase our competencies in listening to and with nature: The Sensory Nature Walk, Learning from Sensory Nature Connecting, Unity with Nature, Natural Attractions, and Sensing Like Nature.

Hypothetically, intentional listening to nature with our fifty-four senses should engage our perceptual, emotional, and meaning-making capacities, creating a richness, depth, and intimate connection with nature. Cohen’s publication record,⁴ and his experience with thousands of individuals in lectures, workshops, and outdoor programs supports this proposition. However, formal research testing our capacities to listen to nature with all fifty-four senses by other academic scholars awaits future research.

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**Partner with Nature Practice**

“Partnering with Nature” is one of Cohen’s eighteen activities from *Reconnecting with Nature*.⁵ I include a description of “partnering with nature” to provide the reader with a sense of Cohen’s nature activities.
The first step is to find a place in nature that feels like a “natural attraction.” Paraphrasing Cohen, a natural attraction is a sensory appreciation, a felt experience of connection with some aspect of nature. Natural attractions feel alive, enjoyable, and welcoming. Potential natural attractions are available in a variety of nature settings, from the backyard to a park, aquarium, or even a potted plant can serve as a source of natural attraction.

After choosing a natural attraction:

... gain consent for you to visit and enjoy it. Ask ... permission for you to be there [then listen] ... Ask if it will help you learn from it [then listen] ... Look for adverse signals of danger [e.g., thorns, insects, sharp rocks] ... If the area still feels attractive ... you have gained consent ... [listen by] comparing how you feel about being there now with how you felt about it when you first arrived.6

If the initial attraction does not give consent, Cohen suggests that the nature area may feel vulnerable to injury. Or if the area no longer feels attractive because of some adverse signal, he recommends choosing another area.

Once the natural attraction has given consent, one listens for feelings and intuitions. All humans have the capacity to partner and listen to nature. In the next section, I introduce another way to expand our capacity to listen to nature through flow learning.

Listening to Nature with Flow Learning

Another way to expand our capacities to listen to nature is to engage in a “flow learning” approach to nature awareness. Naturalist Joseph Cornell began facilitating nature awareness activities by taking school children on nature walks in the California foothills. During these outings, Cornell dis-
covered methods to connect children with nature.\textsuperscript{7} Cornell formalized his ideas in the book, \textit{Sharing Nature with Children} in 1979, and subsequently added the idea of flow learning. I draw from his book \textit{Sharing Nature}\textsuperscript{8} to describe the flow learning process of listening to nature.

Cornell conceptualizes “sharing nature” (what I call listening to nature) as a sequence of \textit{flow learning} that awakens enthusiasm, focuses attention, offers direct experience, and shares inspiration. In this sequence, a nature guide facilitates the flow learning experience through a group activity. Initially, the facilitator of a group awakens enthusiasm (motivating individuals to listen) by creating an, “... intense flow of personal interest and alertness . . . [that] builds on people’s love of play . . . develops rapport, creates involvement, and provides direction and structure.”\textsuperscript{9}

For awakening enthusiasm, the guide needs to match the group’s age, knowledge, and interests with a specific nature activity.\textsuperscript{10} Next, a calm focus is created to enhance receptive awareness (the capacity to listen) to nature by, “. . . calming the mind . . . increasing attention span and concentration . . . [through] focusing attention . . . [and by] developing observational skills.”\textsuperscript{11} Cornell notes the challenge of focusing attention as the mind tends to wander. Research indicates that adults generate, on average, three hundred self-talk thoughts a minute, and most of these thoughts are not the subject of the current task.\textsuperscript{12} While challenging, mindfully listening with receptive attention is the proximate goal of calm focus.

The next stage, offering a direct experience of nature, is the heart of listening to nature. Offering direct experience is a face-to-nature encounter that:

\ldots promotes personal revelation \ldots awakens an enduring connection with some part of nature \ldots conveys a sense of wholeness and harmony \ldots inspires wonder, empathy, and love \ldots [and] fosters deeper \ldots intuitive understanding.\textsuperscript{13}

This kind of deep listening requires time to immerse oneself in the face-to-nature connection.
Finally, the last step in flow learning is sharing inspiration by reflecting on the listening to nature experience and sharing it with another person. In this step, self-reflection (self-listening) can clarify and strengthen the meaning of the listening to nature experience. The reflection is facilitated through journaling, storytelling, poetry, and/or art. These creative activities provide something concrete to share with another person. In this sharing context, listening empathetically to another share their nature experience broadens the listener’s understanding of nature. I provide one example of a nature activity to illustrate the process of flow learning.

**Emulating a Camera to Practice Flow Learning**

Of the fifty-four flow learning activities that Cornell describes in *Sharing Nature*, I selected the camera activity to illustrate listening to nature. The camera activity requires two people.

One person is the camera, and the other is the photographer. The camera person emulates a camera’s shutter by opening their closed eyes when the photographer taps them on the shoulder (emulating taking a picture). After three seconds, the camera person closes their eyes again. In this way, the camera person intently and silently “listens” with their eyes to whatever the photographer has chosen for them to look at. The photographer leads the camera person (their eyes are closed) by positioning their hand on the photographer’s shoulder or arm to guide them from place to place. The photographer stops and takes a picture whenever they find something beautiful to share. After taking three to five pictures, participants switch roles.

Variations of the activity include the photographer verbally signaling the camera person to take a close-up picture, use a wide-angle lens, pan the scene, or use a telephoto lens. At the conclusion, each person sketches their favorite picture and shares it with the other person. Each person listens with full attention to the other, sharing the beauty of what they captured while listening to nature with their camera eyes.

Next, I describe how the camera activity illustrates the flow process.
Imagine that you are a guide facilitating the camera activity for a small group of young learners. The flow process might proceed as follows. Awaken enthusiasm by asking questions about photography, such as, “Does anyone take photos with a camera other than their mobile phone?” or “What kinds of things do you like to take pictures of?” Next, a calm focus can be created by inviting the youngsters to gaze at the nature around them. Invite learners to look for natural beauties around them by slowly turning around in a circle. Facilitate this by having them pause for a few seconds at each of the four cardinal directions. Focusing attention naturally begins when describing the roles of the camera person and photographer. Offering direct experience begins with the invitation to commence the activity. Finally, drawing and sharing a favorite snapshot completes the flow process.

I facilitate the camera activity in the listening class with students by describing the activity and inviting them to partner with another student and exit the classroom. I suggest exploring several nature areas on campus for “taking pictures.” Upon returning to the classroom, students draw their favorite picture and share their experiences in small groups. After groups have an opportunity to process their experiences, I invite each group to share one learning for the benefit of the class. This concludes the section on listening to nature with flow learning. I continue with the theme of listening to nature as “forest bathing” next.

**Forest Bathing as Listening to Nature**

*Shinrin-Yoku* is the Japanese art and science of “forest bathing” initially introduced by Tomohide Akiyam in 1982 as part of a national health program for nature healing in the country of Japan. There is no direct English translation for *Shinrin-Yoku*, but loosely translated it means:

...bathing in the forest atmosphere, or taking in the forest through our senses...being in nature, connecting with it [intentionally listening to]...smell the flowers, taste the fresh air, [to] look at the changing colors of the trees, hear the birds singing and feel the breeze on our skin.
We can use our senses to engage, open, and connect with nature by listening to the natural world. Results of a Google Scholar title search using the phrase “forest bathing” in March of 2023 revealed two-hundred and seventy-eight resources. Li summarizes empirical research on the benefits of forest bathing as of 2018, “... reduced blood pressure, stress, blood-sugar, depression ...[and] increased cardiovascular and metabolic health, concentration and memory, pain thresholds, energy, immune response, and weight loss.” These results parallel findings from the previous literature review on exposure, contact, and connection with nature. The forested places where the individual listens to nature make forest bathing unique from the previous research. Li recommends that the forest bather slow down, take ample time, and listen intentionally to nature with all the senses. According to Li, the ideal place to forest bathe is in the wilderness, but a park with trees also works.

**Forest Bathing as a Listening to Nature Practice**

Li has many suggestions for how to forest bathe. I paraphrase Li’s instructions for forest bathing in a park with trees as many people have access to a park.

Leave all electronic and digital devices at home. Minimize expectations. Imagine that you have all the time in the world. Find a semi-private and semi-quiet place to sit. Listen fully with all of the senses. For instance, listen to birdsong and leaves in the wind. See the multiple green hues in the landscape. Identify aromas of trees, flowers, and grasses. Try to taste the air. Touch the bark of a tree. Dip your fingers in any clean sources of water. Let your bare feet touch the ground. Let your body and mind feel the intuitive essence of the place. Listen to your feelings. Continue for two hours if possible.

Positive effects, like reduced blood pressure and increased concentration, become noticeable after twenty minutes. These instructions are deceptively simple. They are based on sound empirical studies. Regular forest bathing will yield positive health benefits, both psychologically and physiologically.
Notes


2. For the complete list of the fifty-four sensory modalities, see Michael J. Cohen, *Reconnecting with Nature*, (Lakeville: Ecopress, 2007), 49-51, or conduct an internet search for "ecopsychology.org.”


7. Part of the reason Cornell developed "flow learning" is that he found that the typical guided nature walk as a series of "stop, talk, and answer questions" about points of interest did not readily facilitate children connecting with nature.


10. Ibid., There are fifty-four nature activities to choose from in Cornell's book.

11. Ibid., 39.


15. Ibid., 12.

16. A perusal of these resources revealed qualitative and quantitative experiments, field studies, interventions, correlational survey research, and prescriptive advice. In short, there is ample research to support the practice of
forest bathing for our health and well-being.


18. Li, *Forest Bathing*.

19. Li, *Forest Bathing*, 151. For maximum benefits, Li recommends a two-hour forest bathing session, but even a twenty-minute session provides some benefits.

20. Ibid., 63-116.
5.4 Perspectives on Listening to Nature

The three previous ways to expand our capacities for listening to nature (expanding the senses, flow learning, and forest bathing) can be better understood from three different listening perspectives. Each listening perspective represents a deeper level of listening to nature. These listening perspectives are partly informed by Sean Blenkinsop and Laura Pier-sol’s naturalistic observations of children in nature. Based on this article, the previous literature review, my personal experience, and my reading of student journals of nature experiences for the past decade, I posit at least three distinct perspectives for listening to nature. I label these listening perspectives observation and emotion, active symbolic imagining and meaning-making, and mystical-spiritual. Next, each of these listening perspectives is described.

Imagine spontaneously smiling at the sight of a purple iris in bloom on a sunny spring day. Now imagine seeing the wagging tail of the family dog (or neighbor’s dog) after a long day at work and feeling happy as you pet the dog. These direct encounters with nature illustrate the connection between observation and emotion. We observe something in nature using the five senses and feel emotion(s). These direct sensorial encounters with nature are listening to nature. Observation is an act of listening. Focusing attention on a particular object in nature, perceiving and interpreting (e.g., naming the object), and emotionally responding are also part of the listening process. This perspective of listening is probably the most common experience of listening to nature. It is also the fundamental building block for the next two perspectives on listening to nature. I call this first
perspective of listening to nature the “observational-emotional” perspective.

Another example of listening to nature is taken from my recollection of last winter. I see the potted lemon grass plant in the corner of the living room. The leaves are pale. I feel sad. I surmise that the plant needs more water and light. Moving the plant closer to a sunny window, I pour a glass of water into the pot and reflect. During this winter season, I have also neglected things like my Tai Chi\(^2\) regime. It too has paled like the lemon grass leaves. I decide to rejuvenate myself by undertaking a short Tai Chi session in the morning sunshine and follow it with a tall glass of cool filtered water.

Notice how this listening scenario builds on the previous observational-emotional perspective. After seeing the pale plant and feeling sad, the reflective process of listening uses the plant as a symbol to generate personal meaning. This meaning-making process involves empathy for the plant and noticing its need for light and water. There is also compassion for the plant, empathy translated into the action of providing sunshine and water for the life and growth of the plant. With further reflective listening, the symbolic meanings fold back on the self in considering how to apply what I’ve learned, resulting in undertaking a Tai Chi session and hydrating. I call this second perspective of listening to nature the “symbolic imagining-meaning making” perspective since it adds symbolic meaning-making to the previous observational-emotional listening perspective.

Prolonged and repeated observations, intellectual reflections, and meaning-making with a particular object in nature can create a sense of connectedness with the natural object. In time, a feeling of a relationship or kinship may develop. In the third perspective of listening to nature, the listening deepens beyond observation, emotions, symbolizing, and meaning-making. In this deeper perspective of listening, some individuals sense “communications”\(^3\) from the natural object on a nonverbal level. Sometimes, this communication takes the form of natural language, but more often, the communication is sensed as emotional impressions, energetic feelings, and intuitions.

There are many possible interpretations of communications from lis-
tending to nature from this third perspective. First, this listening to nature may be a simple human projection. The tendency to project human characteristics, motives, and attributes onto non-human objects, like nature, is called anthropomorphism. Second, this deeper listening can be understood as sensing energy from the electromagnetic fields of the natural object. All living things in nature produce measurable electromagnetic fields, and experiments show that these fields are detectable by humans. Third, mystical or spiritual apprehensions may be involved in this kind of listening that are beyond the realm of current science to measure reliably. I call this third perspective on listening to nature the “mystical-spiritual.”

The three perspectives of listening to nature can be active in any human-nature encounter. These perspectives are generally progressive but need not always be so. For instance, the mystical-spiritual experience of viewing the Grand Canyon can occur spontaneously without the second perspective’s symbolic imagining and meaning-making reflective process. One can view the Grand Canyon and feel elated (first perspective of observational-emotional), and from there, continue hiking without progressing to the second (symbolic imagining-meaning-making) and third (mystical-spiritual) listening perspectives.

Within the three interrelated perspectives of listening to nature, there are three frequent objects in nature that humans listen to. These three nature objects are plants, animals, and the elements. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore how humans listen to each of these parts of the natural world. I also invite the reader to consider activities for how to listen more deeply to each of these aspects of nature.

Notes

1. Sean Blenkinsop and Laura Piersol, "Listening to the Literal: Orientations Towards How Nature Communicates," *Phenomenology and Practice* 7, no. 2 (2013): 41-60. The five orientations toward nature communication that the authors identify are direct encounter and simple interpretation, reading signs and understanding symptoms, complex knowing, literal being in the place, and ontological.

2. Tai Chi is a Chinese form of exercise and self-defense that is often performed
for physical and mental health benefits. Sometimes, this system is written as Tai Chi Chaun where Chaun is translated as "fist" or "boxing." Herman Kauz, *Tai Chi Handbook: Exercise, Mediation, and Self-defense* (Garden City: Dolphin Books, 1974).


5. Even though current science may not be able to measure these mystical-spiritual aspects of listening reliably, there are protocols for cultivating this kind of mystical-spiritual awareness. For instance, the protocol given by Arthur Zajonc, based on the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, suggests how these listening abilities can be cultivated through a contemplative-meditation inquiry involving, "... respect, gentleness, intimacy, participation, vulnerability, transformation, organ formation, illumination, and insight." Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (Northumberland: Lindisfarne, 2008), 178-211. For Steiner's methods see, Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds: A Modern Path of Initiation*, trans. Christopher Bamford and Sabine H. Seiler (Clifton Park: Anthroposophic Press, 1994). For Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's contributions to contemplative-meditational inquiry, see David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, *Goethe's Way of Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

6. Other terms related to mystical-spiritual are intuitive, transcendental, and superempirical.
5.5 Listening to Plants

Scientists Listen to Plants

In 1921 George Washington Carver testified before the Congress House Ways and Means Committee about his peanut plant inventions. He discovered one hundred and ninety-nine peanut products. To what did Carver attribute his creative insights? He listened to plants speaking. In Carver’s own words:

\[\ldots\ [\text{the Creator}] \text{ talks to us through these things that he has created (plants) \ldots} \]
\[\text{I get} \ldots \text{ so much information in this way \ldots nature [has]} \ldots \text{ unlimited broadcasting stations, through which God speaks to us every day} \ldots \text{ if we will only tune in} \ldots^1\]

Carver continues, “All flowers talk to me and so do hundreds of little living things in the woods. I learn what I know by watching and loving everything.”

Carver is not the only scientist that listens to plants. Medical doctor Larry Dossey reports that geneticist and Nobel laureate Barbara McClintock, in her research with corn, would:

\[\ldots\text{ crawl down the microscope and stand toe to toe with the [corn] genes, getting an up-close look at their behavior} \ldots \text{ feeling for the organism} \ldots \text{ going beyond the boundaries that separate us from other life forms} \ldots^3\]
This kind of observation and knowing suggests a unique form of empathic listening that the philosopher-scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes as a method, “... in which data [from nature] could be acquired directly from empathy and introspection.”

The Heart as an Organ of Perception for Listening to Plants

Stephen Buhner, an herbalist, senior researcher for the Foundation of Gaian Studies, and author of nine books, provides insight into how humans empathically listen to plants. Buhner presents elegant, complex, and scientific explanations for how the human heart acts as an organ of perception. The human heart can intuit emotional information and meaning from plants through electromagnetic fields. I attempt to summarize the reasoning for this outstanding claim based on passages from his book, The Secret Teachings of Plants.

The Secret Teachings of Plants

Just as the human brain has a mode of cognition that is “verbal-intellectual-analytical” the heart has a “holistic-intuitive-depth” mode of cognition. All living organisms (humans, plants, animals, rocks) create and radiate electromagnetic fields. The human heart can perceive and interpret these electromagnetic fields. Buhner provides evidence that the heart, in addition to its role in the circulatory system:

... is also an endocrine gland producing a variety of hormones ... has a central nervous system with about twenty percent of heart neural cells of the same kind as those in the brain ... has its own memory ... perceives experience before the brain does ... and creates an electromagnetic field about 5000 times that of the brain, measurable up to ten feet from the body.

When the human heart and the plant’s electromagnetic fields come in “... close proximity, the fields entrain or synchronize, and there is an extremely rapid and complex interchange of information ...” The heart
as an organ of perception senses, “. . . specific electromagnetic spectrum carrier waves . . . as a few basic emotions” which, when combined, represent complex emotions. “The heart’s waveforms, experienced as emotions . . . have embedded meaning . . . [that] can be extracted from the emotional flow just as meaning is extracted from the visual and auditory flow.” Those meanings in the electromagnetic fields experienced as emotions, “. . . affect the heart’s rate, hormonal cascade, pressure waves, and neuro-chemical activity.”

Unfortunately, human language of the electromagnetic information sensed by the heart as emotional meaning is very limited and poorly understood in modern society. However, there is a process of listening (sensory experience, feelings, and meaning-making) that humans can practice to:

. . . hook yourself into a living thing [like a plant], you anchor yourself to the nonlinear flow of its life. As your connection is deepened, you begin to flow with its life patterns; you absorb its meanings, intelligence, and particular points of view.

In sum, the human heart can perceive the electromagnetic field waves of plants as information, emotions, and meanings, which, with practice, can be translated into human language. This is one explanation for how humans can listen to plants.

Listening to Plant Activity

Buhner devotes chapters eight through ten in his book to describing how to listen to plants through sensory perception, feelings, and gaining knowledge.
Listening to Plants Practice

For this activity, I paraphrase and quote parts of chapter eight from Buhner’s book on the sensory perception of listening to plants in nature.

Before beginning, I suggest consulting a field guide, or taking the field guide with you, and inviting a person familiar with plants in the local area to accompany you to ensure that the plant you are listening to is non-poisonous.

Take a slow and mindful walk in a natural setting near your home. The wilderness is ideal, but any forested area (e.g., a park or playground) will do. Observe which plant interests you the most. Sit comfortably beside the plant and open your sensorium. Let your eyes focus on the plant’s leaves. Notice their shape... the stem, its color... do not classify... speak as if you were a four-year-old... touch the leaf, feel it with your fingers... let the sensation... fill you... Bend closer to the plant, so its leaf is near your nose. Rub it lightly across your skin... Now smell... Savor it... [let it] enter you... hold the living leaf in your mouth... how does it feel to your tongue... take a small piece of the leaf and eat it. How does it taste?... notice how your body responds... This listening activity aims to perceive and sense rather than think, name, and classify. This initial phase of the listening process is followed by feeling the electromagnetic pulses of the plant. Buhner writes, “... by allowing yourself to describe these plant-generated feelings in any way they come to you... [you take] the step of letting them come into consciousness.” The final step in listening to a plant moves from feeling to knowledge. In this step, “... the analytical capacities of the brain are allowed to generate—of themselves—linguistic descriptions that capture the essence of the thing, the meanings that are encoded within the feelings you have felt.” The heart and brain work together creating, “... gestalt-pictures of understanding by using its stores of memories, information, and experiences.” Buhner further develops this method of lis-
tending to plants in additional chapters on plant medicines for healing in his book, *The Secret Teachings of Plants*.

Listening to Plants as a Psychedelic Experience

*This is Your Mind on Plants* is the title of journalist Michael Pollan’s book on how some plants change human consciousness.\(^{19}\) By consuming certain plants, our sense of reality (our consciousness) shifts, and our consequent ability to relate and listen to life is also transformed. This is a controversial topic for a book on listening since many of the mind-altering plants are illegal in many countries, including the United States. Yet, the impact of these plants on our consciousness and ability to listen is profound and merits our attention and understanding.

Pollan’s book summarizes three classes of molecules in plants that alter human consciousness.\(^{20}\) Morphine in the opium poppy is a sedative and decreases many kinds of pain in the body. However, as of this writing, growing poppy plants for the purpose of harvesting the seeds to make morphine is illegal in the United States and can result in heavy fines and up to ten years in prison. On the opposite end of the spectrum, caffeine in coffee and tea is a stimulant. Caffeine from the coffee bean and tea leaf is legal in the United States and provides an energetic boost to the body and mind. Caffeine is also highly addictive and can interfere with sleep. Finally, mescaline in the peyote plant and the San Pedro cacti is a hallucinogen. Consuming peyote buttons creates stunning visual perceptions of immediate experience. Consumption of peyote and the San Pedro cacti (except for Native American rituals that use peyote) is illegal in the United States.

I am not aware of any controlled research studies that specifically examine the effect of morphine, caffeine, and mescaline on human listening. For those interested in exploring how these plants, and other psychedelics\(^{21}\) impact their consciousness and listening, I recommend proceeding with caution. First, be informed. Read James Fadiman’s *The Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide: Safe, Therapeutic, and Sacred Journeys*, and Neal Goldsmith’s *Psychedelic Healing: The Promise of Entheogens for Psychotherapy and Spiritual
Development. Also, consider other ways to safely explore how altered states of consciousness impact listening through meditation.

Listening While Eating and Drinking a Plant

**Plant Altering Consciousness Practice**

A simple and legal experiment to assess the way plants alter consciousness and influence our ability to listen to nature, self, others, and the Divine is to mindfully consume part of a plant.

For the adventurous, slowly and mindfully consume a small bite of a fresh garlic clove, a bit of raw ginger root, or a tiny portion of a ripe red chile pepper.

Another less dramatic approach is to create and consume an infusion of fresh herbs. Begin by gathering a handful of fresh herb leaves and infusing them in a covered cup of hot water for twenty minutes before mindfully sipping the brew. Start with a handful of lemon balm, chamomile, or any variety of mint. Notice how the plant feels in your brain as you imbibe the infusion. What happens to your body temperature, pulse, skin, and energy level when the plant settles in your stomach after five to ten minutes?

In short, listen to the communications of the plant within your body and mind. See if you can determine how your individual change in consciousness influences the way you listen to yourself, others, nature, and the Divine.

**Notes**


8. Ibid., 90.

9. Ibid., 93.

10. Ibid., 95.

11. Ibid., 115.

12. Ibid., 158-159.


17. Ibid., 170.

18. Ibid.

20. Pollan, *This is Your Mind on Plants*.


23. For other ways to safely alter consciousness using meditation, see the next chapter on listening to the Goddess-God-the Divine. For additional non-drug methods to alter consciousness, see Edward Rosenfeld, *The Book of Highs: 255 Ways to Alter Your Consciousness without Drugs* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2018).

24. Note for those with any kind of allergies. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before ingesting any new plants.

25. If you are not in a locale where fresh herbs are available, you can find them in most open-air markets, farmer’s markets, and some health food and grocery stores. Dried herbs are available year-round in the spice section of most grocery stores. Again, for those with plant allergies, take care to consult with your doctor before trying any new herbal tea.
5.6 Listening to Animals: Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness of Non-Human Animals

Animals form an integral part of human life. Animals are companions in the home, cattle we graze to eat, and wildlife we encounter in our backyards, parks, in the wild, or in zoos. The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in Non-Human Animals, signed by prominent cognitive neuroscientists, neuropharmacologists, neurophysiologists, neuroanatomists, and computational neuroscientists informs us that animals experience emotions, have intentional capabilities, and possess consciousness:

... Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors ... humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness.¹

Given that animals possess consciousness, feel emotions, and are capable of intentional behavior, and that animals are an integral part of our lives, then listening to animals is vital to our understanding and appreciation of human-animal interaction (HAI). The following sections explore this human-animal dynamic of listening to nature.
Human-Marine Animal Interaction

One illustration of HAI research used thematic analysis in encountering, observing, interacting, recognizing, and “reading the signs” of over three hundred Australians’ experiences with marine mammals in the wild. HAI experiences include, “…diving, snorkeling, boating, kayaking, swimming, with a variety of marine animals, such as turtles, seals, sharks, dolphins, fish, dugongs, seabirds, whales and rays…” The interaction patterns revealed several benefits for humans. Among the benefits are esteem and fulfillment (sense of satisfaction, accomplishment), love, belonging, and connection (feeling cared for, included), positive emotions (happy, awed, appreciative), and perspective gaining (insight into a different way of looking). The HAI researchers conclude that there is an, “…innate need for people to feel they have bonded with nature and animals. . . [and] that when humans interact with animals in nature, they describe that their mental health and wellbeing is enhanced.”

The interaction patterns described in Rachel Yerby and Samantha Lukey’s human interaction research with marine animals parallel the three perspectives of listening to nature. The observational-emotional listening perspective begins when the researchers observe and describe participants’ interactions with the marine mammals. The symbolic imagining and meaning making listening perspective is evident in the researcher’s thematic analysis of reading the signs, and in participant accounts of their emotions and lessons learned. The mystical-spiritual listening perspective is apparent in the benefits of HAI. For instance, the impressions of recognizing and being recognized by mammals have an intuitive mystical quality. Other participant descriptions of the HAI experience as “hard to put into words” and “words are inadequate” align with the unspoken numinous quality of the mystical-spiritual listening perspective.

HAI patterns demonstrate that humans listen to animals within the framework of the three perspectives of listening to nature and that these HAIs have many positive benefits for humans. In the next section, I turn from a consideration of human-marine animal interaction to human-land animal interaction, specifically HAI with horses and dogs.
One of the most famous “horse whisperers” is Monty Roberts, a cowboy star at age five, a horse trainer most of his life, the subject of a Public Broadcasting Station documentary, and the author of *The Man Who Listens to Horses*. Roberts developed the technique of “horse listening” (as he calls it) from observations of horse behavior in the wild, particularly when the alpha mare is interacting with a misbehaving juvenile horse. Roberts refers to the nonverbal horse behaviors as “Equus language.” Equus is based on horse dominance and submission cues, position in the herd hierarchy, and the horse’s need for social acceptance. With the knowledge of Equus, the human trainer can work with an untrained horse in a more humane way when compared to the traditional method of “breaking a horse.”

In the horse whisperer method, the horse trainer begins by signaling dominance (e.g., waving their hands high in the air) and then listening for submissive cues from the horse (e.g., the horse turning their ears, biting and licking the mouth, and lowering the head). If submissive cues are present, the trainer turns away from the horse, inviting the horse to engage in social nudging. If the horse accepts the invitation and engages in social nudging, then the trainer reinforces the horse’s behavior positively through grooming.

This simplified description of the core training process requires knowledge of the horse’s language to listen and appropriately respond to the horse’s nonverbal cues. The “horse whispering” process has been used to train thousands of horses over the decades. From a listening perspective, the premise that humans need to learn and adapt to the horse’s language seems to be the key to connecting, listening, and communicating with the horse. I advocate applying this principle more generally. Humans could reflectively observe animals in their natural habitat, learn their language, and then listen to connect and appropriately respond to them.
Human-Horse Listening Practice

If you have access to horses (e.g., a stable, pasture, ranch, or farm), consider listening with your eyes to the horses, especially when they are moving. I encourage you to listen to the horses using the three listening perspectives of observational-emotional, symbolic imagining-meaning making, and mystical-spiritual.

Keenly observe the horses. Look for details.

What emotions in your body are elicited by the movement of the horses?

Reflect on what you see and feel.

What kind of meanings can you draw from your experience of listening to the horses?

Are there any mystical-spiritual aspects of your experience that the horses reveal?

To further illustrate listening to horses, I narrate the following story.

There is a fenced pasture across from our neighborhood frequented by three horses. My past experience with horses is not amiable. At age seven, I trained Shetland ponies on my uncle’s ranch in California. I would climb on the horse, and they would buck me off. On and off, over and over . . . miserable. In my early teens, on family vacations in North Dakota, I lost control of the horse I was riding on more than one occasion and fell. In my early twenties, while working at a summer camp, one of my morning duties was bringing five horses down from the hill to saddle them. The horses didn’t want to come down the hill, and they didn’t want to be saddled. A battle of wills ensued every morning that summer.

With this kind of background, it took some courage for me to perch my
body against the fencing of the horse pasture across from our neighbor-
hood with my head above the top railing. I watched and listened atten-
tively to the three horses, wondering what would happen next. One large
black horse meandered over, and after gently stroking its forehead, I felt
the weight of its head leaning on my left shoulder and nuzzling against
the side of my ear. The horse stayed in this position, motionless, for bout
ten full seconds. I felt a warm sensation spread in an instant throughout
my upper torso. I also felt accepted, loved, and healed. In a slightly ironic
twist, the horse lifted its head and gently (maybe playfully) nipped my
ear before it trotted off. I interpreted this as I should not take myself
too seriously. Overall, my efforts to listen to the horses in the pasture,
and this encounter with the black horse, helped heal my phobia of horses.
While your experience listening to horses may not be as dramatic, unex-
pected pleasures and insights can be revealed through attentive listening
to horses.

Human-Ape Listening

Anthropologist Jane Goodall’s systematic and detailed accounts of her life
listening to chimpanzees for over thirty years resulted in the discovery of
a kind of chimpanzee language that we can listen for and, to some degree,
interpret. Goodall is conservative in her claims, suggesting that we have
only begun to know the chimpanzee’s mind.

Unlike Goodall’s attempts at learning the chimpanzee language to bet-
ter listen to them, there are attempts to teach ASL (American Sign Lan-
guage) to apes. Two famous examples of apes learning sign language are
Nim, the chimpanzee who was raised in captivity and learned thirty signs
by age three, and Koko the gorilla, who learned two hundred and forty-
three signs after fifty months of training. The advantage of animals
learning sign language is that humans can listen and talk with animals.
However, something is also lost in training animals to conform to human
signing. We miss the opportunity to listen deeply enough to adapt to the
animal’s language. There is also something lost in our ability to accept,
appreciate, and respect our HAI interactions when we limit our animal
communication to human sign language.
Human-Dolphin-Whale Interaction

Naturalistic research with humans and dolphins show many positive themes of well-being from participant descriptions of their interactions with wild dolphins, “. . . connectedness, relationships, and reciprocity; emotion and aliveness; meaning and making sense; accomplishment and intention; and harmony and engagement.” These positive themes parallel Seligman’s PERMA model of human flourishing. Overall, it appears that human interaction with wild dolphins involves various kinds of listening (e.g., perception, observation, interpretation, understanding, and meaning-making) that support human flourishing and well-being.

In Jack Kassewitz’s research with marine and land animals for over fifty years, he narrates a turning point in his life while working with a dying pilot whale. Notice how his deep listening ends with an epiphany:

. . . hours in the water gently cradling him [the male pilot whale] in my arms, he rolled over until his left eye looked deeply into mine. At that moment, something palpable and profound shifted inside me. . . I experienced the depth of our connection across species, and it was beautiful, humbling, and profound . . . In that moment I was forever changed.

Kassewitz’s story highlights the transformational power of a dying whale connecting with a human who was willing to listen with love. Kassewitz’s story also suggests that we all potentially have this power to listen, connect, and deepen our relationships with many kinds of animals. How many kinds of animals?

**How Many Other Kinds of Animals Can We Listen To?**

In addition to marine mammals like dolphins and whales and land animals like horses, dogs, cats, and apes, we might be able to listen to many other kinds of animals. I wonder if each animal embodies a unique language. According to the *World Atlas*, scientists have documented “. . . 14% of living species. The remaining 86% of species that are estimated to exist
have yet to be discovered . . . It is estimated that planet Earth has approximately 8.7 million species.” Based on these estimates of the number of animals worldwide, I suggest that systematic, reflective, and patient listening to animals in their natural habitats to discover their unique languages remains relatively untapped.

For manageability, I limited the focus of inquiry of the previous sections of this chapter to listening to plants and animals as representations of the natural world. The object of our listening could be expanded to include all living organisms on earth, from the single-celled amoeba to the emperor dragonfly and honeybees of the insect world, to blue-bellied lizards, and black rat snakes of the reptile world, and to the crabs, octopus, and fish of the oceans. I invite you to explore listening to the many life forms that make up the nature component of listening to the SONG of life in the local habitats wherever you live.

The next section on listening to nature develops listening to the elementals, the non-plant-animal-human parts of the natural world. Listening to elementals is even more controversial than listening to plants and animals. However, wisdom from Indigenous peoples worldwide suggests that listening to rocks, boulders, mountains, and, more broadly, the earth, sky, and beyond is possible.

Notes


2. I use the term animal broadly, referring to both mammals and animals.


4. Ibid., 6

5. Ibid., 2,10.

6. Ibid.

7. While we cannot know with certainty, we hope that HAI’s also benefit the animals.

9. Ibid. A comparison of “breaking a horse” and the use of “horse whispering” is described by Farmer-Dougan and Dougan, “The Man Who Listens to Behavior,” 141-143. From my perspective as an animal lover and animal advocate, these traditional methods of “horse breaking” are cruel and barbaric. The alternative nonviolent “horse whisperer” approach to training a horse is more aligned with the ethics of listening to the SONG of life.


15. PERMA is an acronym that stands for positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationship (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). Martin E. P. Seligman, Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being (New York: Atria, 2012).


19. It is probably unrealistic to hope that humans will attempt to listen with appreciation, care, and respect to all the animal languages in the world. I am not suggesting that humans attempt to codify animal communications in a formal linguistic system like human language. But I am suggesting that we
attempt to understand how animals communicate with each other, their environment, and humans through attentive and respectful listening. Even if we only discover some of the ways animals communicate, it is a worthy endeavor because the intention to listen with reverence to the animals can only enrich our experience in listening to the greater SONG of life.

20. I provide many sources to support this claim in the next section.
5.7 Listening to Elementals

Listening to the Stars

The stars saved his life. Ecological philosopher Derrick Jensen experienced repeated childhood abuse and pointedly says, “I did not die because they [the stars] spoke to me.”¹ He describes going outside at night, laying on the grass, looking up, and giving his emotions to the stars, “In return the stars gave me understanding. They said to me . . . This is not your fault. You will survive. We love you. You are good.”² Listening to the hopeful message of the stars provided Jensen with the fortitude and courage to continue living.

A psychological materialist might say that Jensen’s listening to the stars is a personal projection brought on by trauma. That is one possibility, but there are other interpretations of his experience. Alternatively, listening to the SONG of life acknowledges many perspectives of listening. These perspectives include fifty-four sensory capacities of humans in addition to the five senses, thinking processes of interpretation and understanding, the faculty of intuition, and the mystical and transcendental dimensions of experience as well as scientific materialism. Jensen’s star message can be interpreted through the lens of all of these listening perspectives.

Stars are one type of element found in the natural world and are composed of mostly hydrogen and helium that produce light and heat. There are many other elements ³ found in nature that we can listen to.
Periodic Table of Elements

As of this writing, the modern periodic table, managed by the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry, contains one hundred and eighteen elements. Each element is defined by its own atomic mass, state, electron configuration, electronegativity, atomic radius, density, and so forth. I will not be discussing listening to all one-hundred and eighteen individual chemical elements of the periodic table. Rather, my focus is on listening to four major elements (combinations of elements from the periodic table) found in most cultures in the world since ancient times. These are the elements of earth, air, water, and fire.

Elementals in Wisdom Systems

Elements of earth, air, water, and fire appear in many wisdom systems throughout history. The quartet of elementals appears in ancient India, Hellenistic Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Middle Ages. To illustrate, I briefly describe several examples of how these four elements are configured in different wisdom systems. The four directions of the medicine wheel of many North American Indigenous tribes are often associated with the four elements. There are three astrological signs for each element in the modern astrology system, and other astrological systems include Hindu, Mayan, Aztec, Tibetan, Arab, Hebrew, Egyptian, and Chinese. The spiritual Wiccan system includes a pentad with four elements (plus an additional fifth element of spirit or space). Finally, the Chinese system of Feng Shui employs four elements (plus metal as a fifth element) as a way of, “. . . selecting and designing the most conducive and healthy environment to live and work to enhance good health and longevity.” Given the pervasiveness of elements in nature and the multiple cultural meanings of these elements, how do we understand listening to the elements of earth, air, water, and fire?

Elements as Separate and Holistic

In the upcoming sections, I describe listening to the four elements of
earth, air, fire, and water separately for the sake of clarity. However, it is imperative to be mindful of the lived experience of listening to these elements as a holistic system. The elements in nature do not exist as separate things. Each element exists in a complex system of interrelationships within its ecosystem.

For instance, a simple rock (earth element) may contain part of many other minerals and living things like lichen which, “. . . mine minerals from the rock . . . they [the lichen] physically break up the surface by the force of their growth . . . [and] they deploy . . . powerful acids and mineral-binding compounds to dissolve and digest the rock.”\textsuperscript{10} When a rock is being weathered by a lichen, it is difficult to say “this part is rock” and “this part is lichen.” The rock and lichen exist together in an intimate dance as a holistic system. They are also part of a larger system of soil, air, plants, and animals in their immediate locale.

As humans, we arbitrarily demark the boundaries of natural objects and their ecosystems, but the larger reality is that everything in nature is one gigantic system.\textsuperscript{11} It appears, at least on a quantum level, that everything in nature is interconnected in one undivided whole.\textsuperscript{12}

A second example of illustrating the interrelated nature of the elements is to imagine a sunset at the beach. How might we listen to a sunset? Consider . . . feet sink into the sand and are caressed by the waves. A fiery sky mixes with air particles to create a grand visual display across the horizon. The airy breeze sweeps across naked skin. All elements contribute to a sensorial holistic experience of “being on the beach at sunset.” The elements are not separate from each other, even though we may talk about them as different things for the sake of clarity. The naturalist John Muir captured this principle of the interrelatedness of the natural world when he wrote, “When we try to pick out anything [any single object in nature] by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”\textsuperscript{13}

To better understand the idea of elements as separate and whole, I describe the principle of the “figure-ground” relationship from Gestalt psychology.\textsuperscript{14} Gestalt is a German word with an approximate English translation of “complete pattern-configuration.”\textsuperscript{15} The whole or gestalt comprises three perceptual phenomena. These three perceptions are the thing (figure), the context (ground), and the relationship between the fig-

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ure and ground that gives rise to the perception of a gestalt. The elements of earth, air, wind, and fire are the things or figures, and the context in which the elements exist in the natural world is the ground. In listening, we discover the gestalt relationship between the elements and their ecosystem.

To illustrate the figure-ground gestalt relationship I quote from the Russian novelist Dostoevsky:

Love all of God’s creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love.\(^\text{16}\)

In this passage, there is movement from the whole (“all of God’s creation,” which includes all the elements) as a gestalt to the micro (the “grain of sand”). There is a return from loving each thing in nature (each figure in the ground of creation) to the mystery of God in all things, moving from the micro thing to the macro gestalt. When I add the word “listening” to the word “love” in the passage, and I re-read the passage, I find that Dostoevsky beautifully captures the essence of listening to the SONG of life as gestalt. As I proceed into the section on listening to the elements in a linear fashion (due to the constraints of the written form), let us be mindful that listening involves our whole being and that the gestalt experience is an essential part of listening to the SONG of life.

Indigenous and Cosmological Perspectives on Listening to the Elementals

Derrick Jensen’s *Listening to the Land* consists of twenty-four interviews exploring what it means to listen to the land.\(^\text{17}\) I extract portions of these interviews to highlight listening to the elements and conclude with a holistic orientation of listening to nature.
Navaho and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams provides insight into listening to the land, “It may be our task now, as it has always been, is to listen. Simply that. If we really listen, the land will tell us what it wants and tell us how we can live more responsibly.” For many modern-day individuals, the advice to “listen to the land” sounds unscientific, but for Indigenous peoples worldwide, it is probable and realistic.

Jeannette Armstrong is a traditional Okanagan who writes, teaches, and works for Indigenous sovereignty and land rights. Armstrong says that listening to the land is not a metaphor, “It’s how the world is . . . [we need to be] listening to the other [the land] as it has its say, reveals its intents, expresses its experience, and does all this on its own terms.” Armstrong believes that humans need to learn how to enter into a relationship with the land by listening to the land and not treating the land solely as an object for economic or political purposes. The following ethnography explores the idea of Indigenous listening to the land in further detail.

Donal Carbaugh’s ethnographic account of the North American Montan tribe called the Nizitapi (“the real people” or Blackfeet) describes a unique way of listening to the land. For the Nizitapi, listening is a way to, “DWELL-in-the-World” of interconnected things animated by spirits. Listening is a practice, a “Way of DOING something . . . people can become attuned to this world . . . feel (and see) the interconnectedness of things . . .” Listening is also a “Way of BEING . . . a way of dwelling, doing, and feeling that are activated in, and by those very places.” Listening to the land is a common, normal, and accepted part of Nizitapi culture. Moving beyond the Indigenous tribes of Navaho, Okanagan, and Nizitapi, what might a cosmological view of listening to the land and, more broadly, all the elements look like?

Thomas Berry is a Catholic priest, historian, and scholar of world religions who self-identifies as a “Geologian.” Berry’s cosmological understanding of the universe describes the ending of the Cenozoic era and the beginning of the Ecozoic era in which the universe is viewed as:

... subjects to be communed with, not objects to be exploited. Everything has
its own voice . . . [there is] a celebratory aspect; the sun shines, the flowers bloom, the birds sing, the trees blossom, the fish swim . . . [and humans respond with] a sense of awe and wonder at the majesty of it all . . .”

Berry’s cosmological view of the universe suggests that we can listen to the voices of the elements.

Environmental social activists Joanna Macy and Molly Brown echo Berry’s cosmological perspective when calling our time the “Great Turning” of a global transition from ego to soul-centric awareness. Similarly, Professor David Korten characterizes the “Great Turning” as a time of global transition from empire to earth community. All three perspectives, Berry, Macy and Molly, and Korten, and the previous Indigenous perspectives on listening to the land, point to a renewed understanding of nature as alive, soulful, and earthy. This understanding affirms humanity’s natural ability to listen to nature because of our inherent interconnectedness with the natural world.

Interconnected Listening to the Life of the Elements

Poet, teacher, and storyteller Mark Nepo reminds us that, “We are so close to the Earth that we often forget—it is alive. And the language of its aliveness is what we call nature. When we listen to nature, we are listening to the Earth.” Not only is the earth alive according to Charles Eisenstein, all of nature, the elements, animals, plants, planets, galaxies, and cosmos are “sentient beings.” Eisenstein writes, “We are not separate from nature; that what we do to the world, we do to ourselves . . .” This worldview highlights the interrelated nature of all existence, and that “. . . purpose, consciousness, and intelligence are innate properties of matter and the universe.”

Eisenstein’s worldview is readily verifiable according to theologian Catherine Keller. In an interview with Derrick Jensen, Keller says, by looking at, “. . . the permeability of your personal boundaries . . . Everything that takes part in your experience is part of you.” Also in an interview with Jensen, Peter Berg, activist, writer, and ecologist, echoes the same
idea, “Wherever you live, the place where you live is alive, and you are part of the life of that place.” Berg originated the word “bioregion,” describing the interdependence of nature (plants, animals, elements, and humans) in a given geographical locale.

Essentially, all of the elements are part of us. Elementals are not the whole of us since we also have, for example, memories, thoughts, and feelings. However, our listening brings an awareness of the elements into our lives in a way that we can sense, feel, and understand. In indigenous cultures, “… everything that exists is alive and has a spirit. We have the capacity to tap into our spiritual nature and communicate with ‘the spirit that lives in all things’ in nature [including the elementals].”

Our relatedness to the elemental world is beautifully and poetically expressed by Anwar Fazal’s poem-prayer:

We all drink from one water/We all breathe from one air/We rise from one ocean/And we live under one sky… We are all brothers and sisters/Only one family, only one earth/Together we live/And together we die/Remember/We are one…

Given that we are interconnected with the elemental world of nature, however one wants to name it (e.g., spirit, energy, electromagnetic forces, quantum entanglement), how are we to listen and relate to the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water? In the next sections, I develop ideas and practices for listening to the elements of earth, air, wind, and fire.

Notes

2. Ibid., 7.
3. I use the word “elementals” interchangeably with the word “elements.” Generally, “element” is the more scientific term whereas “elemental” is more often associated with the esoteric, mythic, or alchemic.


11. Lovelock calls this "one gigantic system" Gaia, "The entire surface of the Earth, including life, is a self-regulating entity, and this is what I mean by Gaia." James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ix (italics author). Interestingly, Lovelock's neighbor suggested that he use the term Gaia (the Greek Goddess of the Earth) to describe the idea of the Earth as "one gigantic system."

12. Physicist David Bohm speaks of the "undivided whole" in the following quote, "... relativity and quantum theory agree, in that they both imply the need to look on the world as an undivided whole, in which all parts of the universe, including the observer and his instruments, merge and unite in one totality." David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge Classics, 2005), 13 (italics author).


15. Ibid., 1.

16. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 405. To highlight the connection of Dostoevsky's passage to listening, I invite the reader to re-read the passage and add the word "listen" each time the word "love" is mentioned. For example, the first phrase would read, "Love and listen to all of God's creation."


18. Ibid., 315.


21. Ibid., 263.


25. David Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2007). "Empire" is based on hierarchy, domination, unhealthy power, consumerism, and materialism, while "Earth Community" is based on egalitarian relationships, democracy, partnership, material sufficiency, and the power of life and love.


27. Charles Eisenstein is an author, public speaker, and activist on the environment, economics, spirituality, and philosophy.


29. Ibid., 15-16.


31. Ibid., 198.


5.8 Listening to the Earth

To See the World in a Grain of Sand

Consider part of William Blake’s mystical poem *Auguries of Innocence*, “To see the World in a Grain of Sand/And Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour…”¹ Perhaps the “sand” Blake refers to is ordinary beach sand found along the sea coasts of the earth, or maybe it is the sand in deserts, mountain ranges, marshes, or river beds. If we use our full listening capacities, we may notice the world within a grain of sand microscopically dissolving into infinity as suggested by the poem’s line, “…hold infinity in the palm of your hand…”²

Blake’s poetry, written in the nineteenth century, aligns well with quantum physics. The human body (or any part of the earth—be that plant, rock, or animal) can be described in terms of smaller and smaller parts, from cells to molecules to atoms with electrons orbiting a nucleus, and ultimately to what appears to be mostly “empty space.” According to quantum physicist Amit Goswami, this space is filled with consciousness, and consciousness is infinite.³

One can verify the infinite nature of consciousness by time-traveling to any place at any time. It is possible to shift consciousness from the place and time you are reading this now to a place and time in the past or future. By way of illustration, prolific researcher Stephen Schwartz presents compelling evidence-based research on remote viewing (time traveling with consciousness) to past, current, and future places.⁴

I introduce grains of sand to my listening class by sprinkling bits of
sand from the Whitehurst beach near campus into the palms of students’ hands at the beginning of class. I ask them to silently observe (listen to) the sand for a few minutes. Afterward, I invite students to share their experiences. Students notice the colors, the watery smell, the grittiness, the smallness, and the multitude of particles. I write Blake’s quote on the board and invite students to connect their experience with Blake’s words. They respond with insights about the micro containing the macro, and the ideas of fractals and holograms. These simple grains of sand invite students to begin listening to the earth.

Earthing-Grounding as a Listening Practice

Grains of sand are part of the earth. The soil is the container that nourishes and supports plant life. Without plant life rooted in the earth, all insect, animal, and human life would eventually perish. Researchers suggest that the earth is like an energy battery emitting a continual supply of free electrons. When a person’s skin touches the earth, the body absorbs the earth’s electrons, balancing the human electric field and yielding a myriad of health benefits. This process is called “grounding” or “earthing”:

... electrons ... give the Earth's surface a natural, negative charge ... fed by natural phenomena [like solar winds, rain, and lightning strikes] ... maintaining contact with the ground allows your body to ... become charged with these electrons ... which in turn reduces electrical imbalances in the body and the oxidative free radicals involved in chronic inflammation and multiple diseases.

Grounding to the earth is good for your health. Thirteen empirical studies on the earthing phenomena are reported by researchers in peer-reviewed journals. This body of research demonstrates the positive effects of earthing on (for example) cardiovascular disease, emotional stress, autonomic tone, muscle soreness, inflammation, and blood oxygenation. Particularly compelling are the pre-post experiments that show, via colored infrared imaging, reduction of inflammation in muscles after earthing, and pre-
post microscopic photos of the thinning and decoupling of red blood cells after earthing.⁹

The theory and research evidence on “earthing” offers a unique way to listen to the earth.

**Grounding Practice for Listening to the Earth**

A simple grounding practice is to take off any footwear and place the soles of bare feet on the earth for twenty to thirty minutes. Some individuals report a tingling sensation beginning in the feet and moving up the legs toward the head. These sensations are electrons moving from the earth into the body and rebalancing the body's electrical system.¹⁰ Listening to the feeling of the earth sharing its electrons while earthing is one of our fifty-four natural senses that Cohen calls the “electromagnetic sense” (part of the nine senses of radiation).¹¹ Individuals who listen to the sensations in their body when connecting with the earth also report feeling better, more energized, and clearer.¹²

When I ground to the earth in the morning sunshine, I feel immediate “delicious and invigorating sensations” at the bottoms of my feet. Knowing that these feelings and impressions I experience when listening to the earth are not only imaginal, but also based on science, makes my practice more potent and profound.

There are many other earthing possibilities.¹³ For those confined indoors, earthing pads connect to the ground receptacle in indoor outlets that, in turn, lead to the grounding rod of the building connected to the earth. Other grounding possibilities are touching any plant or tree that is growing in the earth with the bare skin. This physical contact immediately connects the person to the earth via the tree or plant’s trunk, stems, and roots.

For those with a scientific proclivity, a multimeter device¹⁴ can verify the impact of earthing by assessing the body’s voltage before and after grounding. My experience shows a dramatic change in the multimeter readings from being indoors near a computer or other electrical device to earthing outside or on a grounding pad.¹⁵
Listening to the Air

The Feel of Air

Soft summer breezes tickle the cheeks and caress the hair . . . a stronger fall breeze energies the skin and tousles the hair . . . an aggressive winter wind bites clothing and dishevels the hair. These experiences suggest how the seasons can influence our listening to the air or wind element.

Thomas Berry in an interview with Derrick Jensen describes how the wind speaks and how we can listen:

A biting wind on a winter’s day tells the person of harshness and the challenge of existence . . . And the softness of a summer breeze tells us of the compassionate dimension of the universe . . . People say, ‘Oh, that’s poetic. That’s romantic.’ But it’s the most scientific thing there is . . . The wind tells us a lot of things, if we have the capacity to respond to it, to reflect on it.16

While Berry does not use the word “listen” in his description of the wind, the quote implies many elements of listening. Listening is apparent in the sensory perceptions of the “biting wind” and “softness of a breeze.” There is listening in the interpretation of the two kinds of wind, one harsh and challenging and the other compassionate. And there is listening in the knowledge that the wind can tell us many things, that we can make meaning by listening to the wind.

Needing Air and Practicing Pranayama

Royal Navy Chief survival instructor Colin Towell reminds us of the survival rule of three. We can survive three weeks without food, three days without drinkable water, and three hours in a harsh environment (e.g., extreme heat or cold), but only three minutes without breathable air before we become unconscious.17 Air is the element we need most for our
survival, and air is the most plentiful planetary element. Feeling air enter, fill, and exit the body with each inhalation and exhalation is a meditative listening practice found in many religious and spiritual traditions.\textsuperscript{18} In the Hindu Yogic tradition, the breath “... is symbolic of prana [breath], and pranayama [breath control] is understood as a method to extend and expand vital life force energy through the deliberate control of respiration.”\textsuperscript{19}

Pranayama is a breathing system for meditation and health. A review of eighteen controlled clinical trials on the impact of pranayama shows physiological and psychological health benefits.\textsuperscript{20}

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**Listening to the Air Practice**

Following is one of many pranayama methods called *bellows breath*,\textsuperscript{21} or in the Sanskrit, it is called *bhastrika*.\textsuperscript{22}

Seated comfortably with loose clothing and no restrictions around the waist, use the thumb of the right hand on the outside of the right nostril and the middle finger on the outside of the left nostril to control the in- and exhalation in the following manner:\textsuperscript{23}

*Exhale through the right nostril, using . . . the finger to close the left nostril . . . inhale through the right nostril . . . [close the right nostril with the thumb and open the left nostril with the finger] exhale through the left nostril followed by inhaling through the left, then [closing the left nostril with the finger and opening the right nostril with the thumb] exhaling through the right.*\textsuperscript{24}

This process of breathing is considered “one cycle.” The general principle on the length of inhaling and exhaling is to exhale twice as long as inhaling. Start slowly. Count to “two” during the inhalation and count to “four” for the exhalation. Repeat for five to ten cycles.\textsuperscript{25}

For the purpose of listening to the breath, my suggestion is to mindfully follow
the breath, feeling the cool air warming as it enters the nostrils on the inhale and gradually filling the lungs. Pause briefly to feel the tension building in the chest area, then exhale slowly and completely. Feel the relief and relaxation when exhaling and the accompanying warm air leaving the body at the end of the nostrils. Pause briefly again and listen to the silence, calm, and eventual body signal to inhale. I also suggest performing this “listening to air” practice by an open window or outdoors in the fresh air for maximum benefit. Ideally, conduct the listening to the breath practice while grounding to the earth.

How does it feel to listen to the air entering, filling, and leaving the body? We breathe in and out about twelve to fifteen times a minute (approximately 17,000 breaths a day), inhaling over 6000 gallons of air a day according to the American Lung Association. How many of those breaths are we consciously listening to? How deeply are we listening to our lungs working to oxygenate the body and export the carbon dioxide over the 1500 miles of airways in our lungs? While we don’t need to obsessively listen to our breathing, we can intentionally listen to our breathing during breaks from the routine of the day and appreciate the air, the gift of life.

Air Interconnections

Listening to the air can also heighten a sense of interconnection with “others.” Indoors, we often breathe in part of the air exhaled by others. What was inside of them literally becomes part of our physiology. As their breath metabolizes in our lungs, their physical life force flows into our bloodstream and eventually becomes part of our cells. In this sense, we are physically connected with individuals who share indoor spaces with us through the common air we breathe. So too, outside in nature, we breathe in the oxygen from the air that plants and trees provide, and we return carbon dioxide to the plants and trees that they absorb in a continuous cycle of life.

Awareness of the breath of air through attentive listening deepens our interconnection with self (inhaling air into our lungs and feeling the
effects of oxygenation), others and nature (sharing the air with other beings, including humans, plants, and animals), and the Divine (the spiritual sense of air as the gift of life). Air is one of three requirements for creating fire (the other two being fuel and heat). I consider listening to the element of fire next.

Listening to Fire

Functions of Fire and Engagement with Fire

Fire cooks food, heats our homes, provides light, and is capable of destruction as in a house fire or an uncontrollable forest fire. These different functions of fire influence how we listen to fire.

I see a tiny reddish coal, made from working hard at a bow drill for several minutes, drop into a nest of kindling. Soft breaths on the coal in the kindling spark the coal into a flame. I place the flaming kindling beneath thin twigs and dry grass. The kindling slowly enflames the tepee of larger sticks I collected into a growing campfire. Hours later, after sunset, red, orange, and yellow embers glow in the fire pit. All my listening senses activate in this memory of creating fire. I relive the feeling of power in creating a hot lump of coal, the breath giving life to flame, the smell of pine burning, the taste of smoke, the crackling of the campfire, and the dancing flames and pulsing embers of the afterglow.

My memories of fire are not all positive. I also see our campervan engine aflame in the driveway as I stand helpless in the street, waiting for the firefighters to arrive. Here too, all my listening senses are active. But, the underlying feelings and interpretations are different. Dread replaces joyful relaxation, the disgusting smell of metal and electrical wires burning instead of the fragrant smell of pine, the sight of flames brings terror instead of happiness, and the sound of the blaze saddens my heart instead of the lively and joyful crackle and pop of the campfire.

By engaging all our listening capacities, fire provides a rich source of interpretations and meaning making. In my two short stories, happiness is associated with creating the campfire and grief corresponds to the loss of our campervan in the engine fire.
One simple activity for “listening to fire” is to create a controlled fire, anything from a candle flame to a campfire,\(^{28}\) and then listen. When listening to the fire, use all the senses, keenly observe, and generously interpret, reflect, and create meaning. What life lessons are symbolically contained in the fire?

**Listening to the Sun**

Turning from earthbound fires and looking up to the sky during a clear day, we observe the ultimate fire—the sun. All life on earth would cease were it not for the sun’s nourishing rays. A certain amount of sunshine is healthy for humans, but too much ultraviolet light from the sun can damage the body.\(^{29}\) Knowing the right amount of sunlight for our bodies is an exercise in listening discernment. Perhaps, if we are listening with attention, we can develop the capacity to know when enough sunshine and vitamin D are absorbed into our system.

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake describes the belief held by diverse cultures throughout history that the sun is a conscious being. Sheldrake notes that the sun’s pattern of electromagnetic activity is:

> . . . vaster and more complex than the electromagnetic activity in our brains. Most scientists believe that the electromagnetic activity within our brains is the interface between body and mind. Likewise, the complex electromagnetic patterns of activity in and around the sun could be the interface between its body and mind.\(^{30}\)

Sheldrake’s hypothesis that both our brains and the sun share an electromagnetic interface between body and mind is intriguing. Further, changes in solar activity affect the, “. . . ionosphere and radio transmissions, and they modulate the frequency of lightning.”\(^{31}\) Given these solar effects, is it possible to sense, to listen to, these electromagnetic modulations from the sun? The question remains open to debate.
Listening to the Sun Practice: the Sun Salutation

I encourage the practice of listening to the sun with our senses in a series of yogic movements called the sun salutation.32

Yoga teacher Lilias Folan, television host of Lilias Yoga and You from 1970 to 1999 and author of four books on yoga, maintains that the twelve-part sun salutation sequence “...improves overall body circulation, increases stamina and energy, and makes the spine supple and healthy.”33 Folan suggests visualizing the, “...sun as the symbol of glowing health and vital energy ... visualize yourself basking in its life-giving vibration no matter what the weather is outside your window.”34

I suggest, weather permitting, performing the sun salutation outside in the sunshine, imagining the big sun inside your body as a little sun. Listen to everything in nature as you also listen to the movements and feelings stimulated by the sun salutation.

In practicing the sun salutation, we discover fire knowledge: the sun burns with passion (energizing sunlight), the sun purifies and cleanses (heat from the fire of the sun), and the sun enlightens (illumination of sunlight, leading to understanding and wisdom).

Given sufficient time, the sun evaporates most smaller bodies of water, including puddles, ponds, and lakes. Listening to the water is the next element I explore.

Listening to Water

Water can change form. Water can be gas, solid, or liquid, depending on temperature. Liquid water conforms to the shape of its container whether a lotus petal, teacup, iron pot, oak barrel, concrete swimming pool, mountain lake, or vast ocean. Water is ever-changing and adapting.

The ancient Tao Te Ching manuscript in chapter eight records, “...
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive. It flows in places people reject, and so is like the Tao . . .” According to the Chinese sage Lao Tsu, the qualities of water number “ten thousand things.” All plant, animal, and human life needs water to survive. Humans are composed of sixty percent water by volume, varying between forty-five and seventy-five percent, depending on age, sex, weight, and height. Dehydration, from mild to severe, occurs when “. . . your body loses more fluid than it takes in and can no longer perform normal functions.” Mild dehydration includes symptoms like thirst, dark urine, dry skin, headaches, and muscle cramps while severe symptoms include very dry skin, rapid heartbeat and breathing, and dizziness and fainting.

Listening to our body’s water signals is body wisdom. Are you thirsty? Give yourself the gift of pure, clean, cool water. Is your urine dark? Drink sips of water over time until the color begins to clear. Do your muscles ache or you have a slight headache? You may need more water. These are simple and fundamental ways to listen to water. There are other more symbolic ways to listen to water.

Near the end of Herman Hesse’s novel Siddhartha, the main character Siddhartha settles into a way of life with a ferryman by a river. At one point, Siddhartha looks deeply into the river near the hut where they live:

The river looked at him with a thousand eyes . . . How he loved the river, how it charmed him, how grateful he was to it . . . he wanted to learn from it, to listen to it . . . whoever could understand this river . . . would also understand many other things . . .

**Listening to Flowing Water Practice**

You may not have access to a river to engage in this listening practice, but any flowing water will do. For instance, a stream, a creek, an indoor fountain in a mall or hotel, or even the flowing water from a tub or sink will do.

- Observe the flow of the water. Attend to the dynamics of the flowing water, ever-
• Listen to the sound of the flowing water. Can you hear an underlying pattern beneath the changing dynamics?
• Notice the quality of light interacting with the water. Are there translucent qualities, a shimmering, a sparkle, perhaps bubbles that play against each other before popping?
• As Lao Tzu wrote in the Tao Te Ching, “Water gives life to the ten thousand things...”
• How many of the ten thousand things can you sense when you listen with full attention to the flow of water?
• Reflecting further, what symbolic messages does the water convey?

When I sit beside our backyard koi pond with its small rock fountain, I listen to many of the “ten thousand things.” When approaching the pond, the sound of its fountain draws my attention as a focal point in the scenery. I find it mesmerizing to watch the sparkling stream of water bubbling out of the rocks, tumbling into the pond, and creating concentric rings on its surface. Sometimes, I am aware of the wet and dank smell of algae growing on the sides of the pond. Other times, the water interacts with the floating plants to create a more pleasing fragrance. But most often, the visual spectacle of dancing water absorbs my attention and inspires me with gratitude for water as a gift of life.

Notes

2. Ibid., 490.
4. Stephan A. Schwartz, *Opening to the Infinite* (Virginia Beach: Nemoseen Media, 2007). This fascinating research area is beyond the scope of this book to elucidate.


6. Ibid., 9. I use the terms "earthing" and "grounding" interchangeably.

7. Sample titles of these journals include *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, and *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. Ober et al. describe the details of these studies in their book *Earthing*.

8. Ober et al., *Earthing*, 81-84.

9. Ibid., 125.

10. Ibid.


12. Ober et al., *Earthing*.

13. Ibid.

14. Multimeters can be purchased at most hardware stores, or one can search the internet for a "multimeter" to purchase on various commercial sites.

15. For the mechanics and procedure of using a multimeter to conduct earthing experiments, perform an internet search for "How to measure the effect of earthing on body voltage." Also, see Ober et al. *Earthing* for additional earthing ideas, or perform an internet search for "earthing" or "grounding."


23. These instructions are based on passages from, Slater, *Raja Yoga*, and Iyengar, *Light on Pranayama*.


25. There are contraindications for individuals with heart issues when practicing pranayama. Please consult your health professional before undertaking any pranayamic breathing practice. As for healthy individuals, the advice is to proceed slowly. Some yogis, such as Bharat Thankur, recommend thirty-day cycle increments, beginning with a 2-4 count before moving to a 3-6 count for the next thirty days, working up to a final 10-20 count. For more on pranayama by Bharat Thakur, see Bharat Thakur's Artistic Yoga website, or watch the following video, “The Art of Breathing | Bharat Thakur,” YouTube, January 10, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch.


32. In Sanskrit, the sun salutation is called *surya namaskar*.

33. Lilas M. Folan, *Yoga, and Your Life* (New York: MacMillian, 1981), 76. Folan describes the details of the sun salutation sequence on pages 76-79. There are also numerous videos on the internet that demonstrate the flowing movements of the sun salutation. For instance, Anita Bokepalli’s video provides helpful do’s and don’ts for the sun salutation or surya namaskar, Anita Bokepalli, "DON'T Do Surya Namaskars Like THIS | Anita Bokepalli,"
34. Folan, *Yoga and Your Life*, 76.


40. Ibid., 106 (italics author). The quote ending with the phrase "understand many things" echoes the *Tao Te Ching* phrase "water gives life to ten thousand things."

5.9 All the Elements in the Desert

I lived for four years surrounded by the desert in Arizona. When my partner and I moved from San Jose, California to Tuscon, Arizona we were struck by what at first glance appeared to be a stark and empty desert. Where is the green, the grass, the bushes, and the trees that we grew up with in California? In the beginning, I did not know how to listen to the elements in the desert.

Over time I learned to listen to the desert. Nature writer Idah Strobridge captures my later experience of listening to the desert:

If you go to the Desert, and live there, you learn to love it. If you go away, you will never forget it... it will be with you in memory forever... And always will you hear the still voice that lures one, calling—and calling.¹

In time, I began to listen more attentively to the desert. I saw the beauty of the palo verde trees, the majesty of the trident saguaro cacti, the sunrise over the mountain near our home, and the thunder and lightning in the summer evenings. The desert contained other surprises. There was the discovery of a small scorpion near the entrance of our apartment, the encounter with a large diamondback rattlesnake on a path we walked near our home, and the regular mid-afternoon storms that flooded the streets making mechanical-powered transportation nearly impossible.

In the desert, all the elements are present in their majesty. The earth rises as plateaus and mountain ranges. There is endless sand. The air is dry and penetrating. Water periodically pours like a river from the sky momentarily flooding the land. Fire from the sun scorches everything but
the plants and creatures that have adapted to the heat. One of the greatest lessons I learned from listening to the desert is that by adapting to (rather than trying to control) the elements, we not only survive but also flourish.

Notes

5.10 Questions for Reflection and Practices to Consider

Nature Images and Emotions

• How would you characterize your relationship with nature?
• What images come to mind when you reflect on the word “nature” (e.g., Earth Mother, Gaia, Sky Father, Creator, elements of earth, air, fire, and water)?
• What emotions do you associate with nature (e.g., fear, uncertainty, and/or comfort, relaxation)?
• Consider where the nature images and emotions originate for you, and if there are anything you desire to change.

Biophilia

• How much do you love nature?
• What would you be willing to do for Her?
• Is there a particular environmental cause you resonate with?
• If so, how might you begin, renew, or continue to express your love for nature through this group or organization?
Supersensory Modalities

Revisit Cohen’s fifty-four sensory modalities on his website for a few minutes.

- Which sensory modalities resonate with you, and which seem more difficult to engage with?
- Are there any practices you might like to explore to develop your listening capacities in one or more of these new sensory modalities?
- If so, choose one, and arrange a time in the next twenty-four hours to explore listening in this new sensory modality.

Forest Bathing

- Have you ever considered bathing in a forest?
- This Japanese method of connecting and listening to nature may sound strange at first, but a similar practice of “strolling through the woods” is not uncommon.
- Can you identify a place in your locale that has a grove of trees (or other kinds of plants in a natural setting) that you could visit for an hour?
- Imagine what listening experiences might unfold as you “forest bathe” in such a place.

Perspectives on Listening to Nature

- How would you describe your knowledge and skills in listening to nature on a continuum—novice, intermediate, expert?
- Recall that listening to nature begins with keen observation of the landscape and the emotions elicited in the body.
- Farther on the continuum of listening to nature is reflecting on the symbolism of your experiences in nature and deriving personal
meaning from them.

• Further still on the listening to nature continuum is listening for the mystical-spiritual dimensions of nature which typically arise from spending extended time contemplating nature.

• The next time you visit a nature setting (e.g., an area around the place you live, a playground, park, pond, beach, or a forested area), see how far you can expand your listening perspective by purposefully listening with each of the three listening perspectives in mind.

• What new insights come from intentionally engaging all three listening perspectives?

Plants

• Do you have a favorite plant?

• Perhaps it is a flower, or maybe something to eat?

• What is the history of your relationship with this plant?

• What other kinds of plants are kin to this one?

• How might you learn more about the properties of this plant?

• If you are not already cultivating this plant in your home or garden, is it possible to do so?

• What would you need to create the ideal environment for your favorite plant?

• How might you listen more deeply to the wisdom of this plant?

• Consider cultivating and tending to this plant throughout the seasons for one year.

• I find it particularly gratifying to watch leaves sprout on a berry bush, flower in spring, fruit in summer, and die back in fall . . . only to be pleasantly surprised by its rebirth the following spring.
Animals

- Do you have a companion animal that you take care of, or other living companion that you care for like a reptile, amphibian, fish, bird, spider, or insect?
- If so, what is the story of how this being came into your life?
- What is your relationship like?
- How might you practice listening more lovingly to this companion so that you can better meet its needs?
- What could the companion teach you?
- If you don’t have a companion, and you had the resources and time to care for it, what kind of companion would you want to take care of and why?

Elementals

- There are many practices that one can engage in to cultivate the ability to better listen to nature through the elementals.
- Looking back over the listening practices for the elementals (e.g., grounding, pranayama, fire starter, sun salutation, and water meditation), which of these would you like to explore further?
- Choose one of the practices and review some of the resources in the footnotes to learn more about the practice and then, if you feel comfortable, experiment with the practice, and note your listening observations, emotions, learnings, and mystical-spiritual insights.
5.11 Chapter Summary

Listening to Nature Summary and Transition

This chapter on listening to nature summarizes research on the physiological, cognitive, and psychological benefits of nature for humans. Several theoretical possibilities suggest why nature is beneficial to humans including biophilia, stress reduction, and attention restoration. I suggest how we can expand our listening capacities to leverage these nature benefits by describing listening ideas and practices related to listening to plants, animals, and the four elements of earth, air, wind, and fire.

In the next chapter, I turn to the last verse of listening to the SONG of life, listening to the Goddess-God-the Divine. The following quote from the late Communication theorist and ethnographer Budd Goodall, Jr. serves as a transition from listening to nature to listening to the Divine by identifying “communication” as the primary link to both nature and the realm of spirit, “...communication is the primary experiential source of all lived and imagined connections to all life forms and forces, as well as to how, why, and what we know about them.”1 Listening to nature is part of this communication, and it connects us to “all life forms and forces,” including plants, animals, and the elements as described in this chapter. “Life forms and forces” also include the realm of the spirit. “How, why, and what we know” about the spirit through listening is the subject of the next chapter.

Notes

1. H. L. Goodall, Jr. Divine Signs: Connecting Spirit to Community (Carbondale:
CHAPTER VI

Listening to Goddess-God-the Divine

welcome to mystery

luminous and numinous

listen to Divine

The nomenclature “Goddess-God-the Divine” has been through several iterations over the ten years I taught the Listening to the SONG of Life course. As described previously, I retain the letter “G” in SONG to repre-
sent the words “Goddess” and “God,” but I prefer the term “Divine” since it is more neutral and less subject to cultural conditioning. I capitalize the word “Divine” because I view it as a personal pronoun, the name of an individual's highest value, ethic, or philosophy. This can be an idea, energy, force, being, entity, and so forth.
6.0 Introduction to Listening to Goddess-God-the Divine

Why I Teach Listening to the Divine Song:
Death and Life

Tasting Death

Have you ever felt like you were dying? Not a fleeting fearful moment, but an extended time when you knew, “I’m going to die.” When I woke up suddenly at four in the morning several summers ago, my journal records, “I feel weird. . . like I’m losing consciousness . . . oh my God, my body is shutting down, I’m going to die!”

The feeling of dying is not entirely foreign to me. For readers that have lived over a half-century like me, you probably have encountered a brush with death. But this experience does not feel like a brush with death that passes. Instead, it feels more like permanently losing consciousness. Perhaps you are acquainted with the uncomfortable tingling sensation creeping over the top of your head when giving blood on an empty stomach? When this happened to me, the Red Cross phlebotomist asked, “Are you okay? Your face is turning blue.” Am I turning blue now? I’m terrified. I face the question . . . Am I dying?

Eventually, I found myself in bed at the hospital’s emergency room, hooked up to an intravenous fluid device. I look at my partner sitting across the foot of the bed and whisper, “I don’t want to leave you . . . I want to live.” She smiles with quiet confidence and whispers, “It’s okay, you can let go . . . I love you.” My face is wet with tears. I mumble a short prayer,
“Okay, if this is my time . . . I’m letting go.” A few minutes later, I realize, “I’m still here. I’m feeling a little better.” Was it the intravenous fluids? The prayer? Maybe both of them have me hoping. I tasted death and am gifted with another chance at life.

Clinging to Life

Since that time, I sometimes experience milder fading-out episodes. During these times, I cling to a rosary given to me by my great-grandmother Elizabeth Snell-Fleck. I fell asleep fingering the maroon-colored beads while audibly mouthing the prayers I’ve repeated since childhood, “Hail Mary full of grace . . . Our Father who art in heaven . . . Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit . . .” When I awoke some hours later, I felt better . . . I was not dead, but alive!

My Mother and I visited great Grandma Fleck in the nursing home once a year during our annual family summer vacation trips to North Dakota. At that time, she was a woman in her late eighties, spry and filled with Divine energy. I felt loved when she hugged me tight. Did she know she was dying when, in her nineties, she placed that precious, maroon-colored rosary in my hands and clutched both her hands around mine? She looked intently into my eyes, perhaps hoping that I, a middle-aged teenager, would begin to understand the spiritual significance of such a gift.

I treasure my great-grandmother’s memory by gazing at a black and white photo near my writing desk. In the photo, I sit comfortably in the lap of my Great Grandma. My mother stands behind me on my right side with one hand on my shoulder as if to guide me, and my grandmother stands next to my mother as another support figure. When I gaze at the photo, I intuitively know that the Divine maternal love from these three women flowed into, nurtured, and protected me as I grew up. Looking at the photo as I write these words, I feel this Divine flow of love and am ever so grateful.

I pray great Grandma’s rosary every time someone in my close circle of personal relationships dies. And I pray the rosary for myself when I feel like I’m dying. I cling to the rosary as a lifeline to the Divine, a way to lis-
ten to the Divine speak through the prayers as I make my way around the
circle of beads. It is a life rosary, a death rosary, and a resurrection rosary.

Connecting Death, Life, and Teaching

Tasting death and praying the rosary when I feel like I’m dying realigns
my priorities and inspires positive change. This vitality of death is some-
thing I intellectually understood over thirty years ago from a college
course in Existentialism taught by Peter Koestenbaum.\(^1\) The personal
experience of approaching death gives heart to my intellectual under-
standing and renews my life. It is from this place of the heart that authen-
tic and life-enhancing changes take root. These changes include my
academic life, specifically what and how I teach.

Death tells me that life is a precious gift and that what I teach should
be life-enhancing. Teaching and learning about listening to the Divine is
not an academic exercise for me. It is a matter of life and death. As a
teacher and person of faith, listening to the Divine through experiential
activities can be moments of grace for both the student and the teacher.
Such Divine experiences cannot be standardized into a set of vocabulary
words to memorize for a test. Instead, such experiences are to be cher-
ished, affirmed, and explored through journal writing and dialogue. Death
led me to invest my remaining life energy in teaching students how to lis-
ten to the Divine song within the greater SONG of life.

For Reflection

Consider a spiritual object that connects you with the Divine. Ric Masten
narrates a poem about a blacksmith who, in his final days, is taken to the
hospital and struggles with the nurses over a hammer that he clutches
with both big hands.\(^2\) The nurses finally give up and let him keep it. He
dies with the hammer in his hands resting upon his heart. The black-
smith’s hammer, and my story of the rosary, raise profound questions
about listening to the Divine. What do we cling to in life? What will we
cling to in death?
Notes

1. One of the most important things I learned in Koestenbaum's course in Existentialism is that contemplating our personal death can inspire and bring meaning to life. Peter Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1971).

6.1 Listening to the Divine Song in the Classroom

In this section, I give readers a sense of what it means to be in the classroom with the students listening to the Divine song. I reconstruct student voices in the class by paraphrasing their words based on my class notes and memories of conversations with students in and outside of class. These student recreations are necessarily biased because they represent only one viewpoint (my view as the professor) in the classroom. That viewpoint is embodied in my personal and professional values as the course instructor. While my attempts to recreate student voices may not accurately represent all the students’ viewpoints in the class, I hope they convey a sense of what it means to be in the classroom listening to the Divine song with the students.

I want to inspire teachers to incorporate some of these ideas in their own listening course, and to encourage instructors and students to cultivate a greater capacity to listen to the Divine song in their academic and personal lives. To accomplish these goals, I organize each section as follows. First, I introduce a class activity with a personal story. Next, I describe the class activity from the viewpoint of students in the classroom (an amalgam of several students’ views). I provide additional information about the activity for instructors considering adapting it into their listening course. Finally, I conclude with reflection questions about how the activity deepens our understanding of listening to the Divine song of life.
Meditation

As a nineteen-year-old college student living with my parents in San Jose, California, in the late 1970s, I withdrew my savings of five hundred dollars to travel across the country in a Toyota with a Dominican Sister to a Benedictine monastery in Wisconsin. We ate dried figs and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and slept in the open air at campsites (or in the car when it rained) to save money on the trek. We arrived for this one-week national gathering of young adult ministers to learn how to better serve our respective young adult communities. The monastery was an ancient structure surrounded by woodlands teeming with various flora and fauna in the summertime. On the second day, after our evening session ended, I wandered the monastery halls and discovered a private library. I felt a strong Divine presence walking among the authors who had written these spiritual books. Perusing the shelves, I discovered one book that profoundly influenced my ideas about meditation called *The Open Way*.\(^3\) The book lit the lamp of meditation within me, leading to a lifelong interest and practice in meditation. I used parts of the book to develop a method to teach meditation in the classroom.\(^4\) Before learning the open way of meditation, my ideas of the Divine were strongly influenced by my images of the Divine Father, Mother, and Son.

**Divine Father, Mother, and Son**

Every Sunday morning as a young child, I kneeled in church and gazed at the life-size crucifix above the center of the altar with statues of Saint Joseph and Mother Mary in alcoves on either side of the main altar. Below the crucifix, centered and at the heart level with the priest standing behind the altar, is a golden-colored tabernacle that houses the holy hosts. These images of the Divine are etched in my memory. The images of the Divine Son suffering, the Divine Father providing, the Divine Mother giving life, and the Divine intermingling with humans through the consummation of the holy hosts.

As I grew up, I came to know and experience the Divine in other ways. I feel a Divine connection through ancestors and saints, and through the
poor, homeless, and sick I feel Divine compassion. Through family interactions, I experience Divine love. I also experience the Divine through the natural world of climbing trees, petting animals, feeling sunshine, breathing fresh air, smelling the sea, and gazing at stars. What experiences shape your understanding of the Divine?

In the following sections, I describe how I facilitate reflecting on the many faces of the Divine in the major world religions. I assist students in naming the Divine based on their life experiences. I also describe how to connect with and listen to the Divine using the *Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale* developed by Lynn Underwood.5

The instructions for the *Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale* ask individuals to rate how often they have different kinds of spiritual experiences each day on a scale of “1” (never) through “6” (many times a day). Examples of some of the items for the scale are:

I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation . . . I experience a connection to all life . . . I feel God’s love for me directly . . . [the instructions make it clear that if the term “God” is uncomfortable for some individuals, then they can, “substitute another word that calls to mind the Divine or holy for you.”], [and] I feel thankful for my blessings.6

The Many Faces of the Divine

In class, I notice that a few students seem a bit nervous about this part of the course. Perhaps they aren’t sure if they believe in God or any other form of organized religion. My hope is that, by the time we finish this section on listening to the Divine, most of them will have started (reaffirmed or changed) to formulate their own unique understanding of the Divine that connects them with meaning, value, and purpose. Our mediation word for today is Divine.

After the meditation, some students share their ideas about the Divine, and then I suggest, “Let’s take some time to consider what other religions and spiritualities name as Divine.” Students suggest various names that I record on the whiteboard: God, Goddess, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Allah,
Shakti, Creator, Spirit, Adoni, Jehovah, and Yahweh. I continue. “So we see that different religions have many ways to name the Divine.

What about people who do not affiliate with organized religion but still consider themselves spiritual? What names might they have for the Divine?” The class identifies other associations with the word “Divine,” like Divine Light, the Force, Energy, Higher Self, and Mother Nature.

These names seem closer to what some students identify as Divine, but other students are still having difficulty identifying with any of these labels for the Divine. So I add: “Some of you may not consider yourselves religious or spiritual. Yet, even agnostics and atheists have ideals in life, values, ethics, and/or a philosophy that they live by. One of these ideals might be sacred, holy, or what I’m calling Divine. For example, the ultimate values of Love, Truth, Beauty, and Harmony might be other ways to name the Divine.” This provides more options for students who were uncertain about the Divine.

I remind students that the name they choose for the Divine serves as a symbol, a placeholder, reminding us of the highest possible ideal(s) we can imagine. The reality behind the name is what we are attempting to listen to and connect with. At this point, I suggest we consider a few questions about our idea of the Divine based on Underwood’s Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale.

After students complete Underwood’s scale and have an opportunity to discuss it collectively, they conclude that the Divine can be experienced in themselves, in others, and nature. The Divine is experienced through the SONG of life!

Religious, Spiritual, Both or Neither

Scholars attempt to differentiate between “religious” and “spiritual” by defining religion in terms of formality, structure, institutional theology and rituals, whereas spirituality is defined as individual beliefs and practices that give meaning and purpose to life. These definitions are supported by research on folk definitions for religion and spirituality, with over 1500 participants concluding, “… religion can best be defined as spe-
cific organized beliefs whereas spirituality can be defined as relating to personal world and life.”

Some research includes an evaluative component in defining religion and spirituality. For instance, religion has “... become a narrowband institutional construct that restricts and inhibits human potential ...” while spirituality is “... differentiated from religion as an individual expression that speaks to the greatest of human capacities.” The consensus in current scholarship is to integrate the two perspectives of religion and spirituality by logically deriving four possibilities. An individual may self-identify as “religious but not spiritual,” “spiritual but not religious,” “both religious and spiritual,” or “neither religious or spiritual.” As of 2017, forty-eight percent of Americans view themselves as “religious and spiritual,” and twenty-seven percent as “spiritual but not religious.” In teaching about listening to the Divine, I use the nomenclature “religious-spiritual” to be inclusive and embrace both religious and spiritual perspectives.

Connecting with the Divine Name

By introducing the term Divine as the highest ideal an individual can conceive of, a sense of diversity and inclusiveness pervades the class. I want to respect and embrace those who self-identify as religious, spiritual, agnostic, atheist, and other. As each student begins to name their idea of the Divine, I remind them that it is okay to keep their naming of the Divine confidential. They can share their name for the Divine or not, as they see fit. I do not ask students to share their Divine name in class, although some choose to do so in our discussions. In over a decade of teaching the listening course, I have yet to meet a student who could not name at least one thing that they value in life, something that is sacred or holy for them—their Divine.

For Reflection

- Travel back in time to your childhood and teenage years: what kinds of images and names for the Divine did you experience?
• Consider what you inherited about the Divine from parents, caregivers, relatives, teachers, friends, books, television, radio, movies, social media, art, music, dance, concerts, and religious-spiritual services. How have these experiences of the Divine influenced your present ideas about the Divine?

• How do you currently name the Divine as the highest ideal that you can conceive of?

• What methods do you use daily, weekly, or otherwise to listen to and connect with your idea of the Divine?

• What other methods might assist you in developing your ability to connect with and listen to the Divine?

Notes


2. These intentions also apply to other individuals outside of the academic context. Many of the ideas and activities about listening to the Divine can be applied in business organizations, religious-spiritual communities, health care and therapeutic settings, and the home environment.


4. E. James Baesler, "Meditation in the Classroom: Cultivating Attention and Insight," Listening Education 6, no. 1, (2015a): 8-15. I discuss this meditation process in-depth in Chapter Three on "Listening to Self." I begin every listening class with this type of listening meditation.


7. Other examples of naming the Divine are Goddess, God, the Sacred, Ultimate Reality, Divine Light, Higher Self, Ground of Being, Nature, or any of the
names of Goddess or God associated with world religions—spiritualities, or humanistic-philosophical values of the highest sense like Truth, Love, and Beauty. Several of these ideas are from Thomas Keating "An Experience of Interreligious Dialogue," in A Sourcebook for the Community of Religions, ed. Joel Beversluis (Novato: New World Library, 1993), 106-108.


11. Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual but not Religious," *Pew Research Center* (website) (September 2017). https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/. The remaining percentages for American views on religion and spirituality are eighteen percent "neither religious nor spiritual," and six percent "religious but not spiritual." For the class, I emphasize that not everyone is "religious," but everyone can be spiritual by having ideals and values that provide meaning and purpose for their life. The name for this spirituality (or religion) I call Divine in the context of listening to the SONG of life.
6.2 Methods of Listening to the Divine

Once students name their ideal for the Divine, I introduce methods to connect with and listen to the Divine. In the following sections, I cover three methods of listening to the Divine. First, I explore reflecting on consolations and desolations. Second, I facilitate learning and practicing passage meditation. And third, I explore praying in color. In the Listening to the SONG of Life course, I cover several more methods of connecting with and listening to the Divine.¹

I also introduce students to spiritual writer Kay Lindahl’s forty “listening to the Sacred” (the Divine) practices.² In a second book, Lindahl covers all four contexts in listening to the SONG of life.³ Listening to self is discussed as reflective listening, “... listening inward, listening to our self–our True Self ...”⁴ There are several examples of listening to others, including interpersonal dialogue and group circles. For listening to nature, Lindahl suggests, “... breathing in the scent of a flower, the air of the ocean, the richness of earth ... go for a walk ... notice everything ...”⁵ One practice of listening to the Divine is presented as a form of contemplative listening called centering prayer. For Lindahl, listening is a choice, a gift we give and receive, an art (more than a technique), and a sense of something spiritual, holy, and sacred.
Discerning a Vocation

I struggled to discern the voice of the Divine in my early twenties, feeling the pull toward both marriage and priesthood. You could not embrace both vocations simultaneously in the spiritual tradition I grew up in. I sought counsel with the parish priest, who suggested a thirty-day discernment process known as an Ignatian retreat. I did not have the time or funds for such an endeavor, so he asked if I would consider a six-month version of the retreat where we meet once a week for spiritual direction. The price was right—free—and I was willing to invest extended time in prayer and reflection every day for six months, along with weekly one-hour meetings to discern a vocation. At the end of six months, we discerned the Divine was calling me to the vocation of marriage, and two years later, he presided at our wedding.

Spiritual Direction and Companionship

Spiritual direction or spiritual companionship is a process by which one individual journeys with another to help them listen to the voice of the Divine.6 In the spiritual direction-companionship relationship, both parties listen through prayer and dialogue to interpret Divine signs in the individual’s life for some particular purpose. For instance, the individual seeking guidance may need assistance discerning the appropriate course of action for a particular situation, or (as in my case) they may need assistance discerning a general vocation.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the Spiritual Exercises: Consolations and Desolations

Saint Ignatius of Loyola originally developed what is now known as the “spiritual exercises” of St. Ignatius. These spiritual exercises have been taught by the Jesuit religious order in the Catholic Church for hundreds
of years. I used Fleming’s, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, for my six-month discernment process. Part of the Ignatian discernment process is learning to listen to the movement of the Divine Spirit, especially during moments of consolation and desolation. *Consolations* are moments of sensing the positive (behavior, emotions, situations) in one’s life, whereas *desolations* are moments of sensing the seemingly negative aspects of one’s life. Moments of consolation and desolation may be associated with nearly anything in life, such as specific events, relationships, feelings, thoughts, dreams, or intuitions. To introduce students to listening to the Divine through moments of consolation and desolation, I recount a story about Saint Ignatius.

Ignatius of Loyola is a saint of Catholic tradition who lived during the Middle Ages. He was a soldier when his leg was permanently injured by a cannonball in battle. During his long convalescence, Ignatius read a book on the lives of the saints. Inspired by their lives, he gave up the life of a soldier and dedicated his life to God. After many years of soul searching and traveling, a vision for his life became apparent. Ignatius eventually founded a religious order called the Society of Jesus (or Jesuits) with a small company of friends. He would write ideas from humble beginnings that were later collected into *The Spiritual Exercises*.

One cornerstone of the spiritual exercises is cultivating the capacity to listen to the Divine or, in Ignatius’ language, the ability to *discern* the movement of the Spirit. For students in class this means listening to the Divine through moments of consolation and desolation. I draw on this tradition to invite students to listen to the Divine in their life, to sense how the experiences in everyday life might be sources of consolation (e.g., blessings, thanksgivings, gratitudes) and desolation (e.g., difficulties, hardships, disappointments, sufferings).

As the listening class meets once a week in the evening, I invite students to review their day, considering the morning, afternoon, and evening periods. I ask them to identify at least one thing they are grateful for (a consolation) and at least one thing they wish they could have done differently or improved upon (a desolation) for each of the three time periods.

After reviewing their day for five minutes, I asked everyone to meet in
small groups, share one consolation and one desolation, and then discuss how they felt about the process. After another fifteen minutes, each group shared one learning with the class.

Most groups talk about their consolations, especially things they are grateful for. Some students grew up with the practice of “counting their blessings” before bedtime and have continued this practice by recounting what they are grateful for at the end of the day. I affirm their insight and point to substantial evidence supporting the mental and physiological benefits of daily recounting gratitudes. In brief, by recounting situations and feelings that we are thankful for, we develop a positive mindset (cognitive frame of reference). We begin to observe and experience more gratitude each day through this gratitude lens.

One of the student groups asks a hard question, “What do you do when you have discerned an upsetting desolation? How is that part of the Divine?” Sometimes, even upsetting desolations that have a negative emotional charge can be framed as growth opportunities, and growth can be challenging and painful. We can also look at desolations through psychologist Carl Jung’s idea of making friends with our shadow.

When advising students to integrate their shadow (based on their desolations) into their personality, some caution must be communicated. I’m not a trained therapist, so the advice I provide for shadow work mainly references credible sources for working with the shadow side of their personality. For students experiencing particularly troubling thoughts, images, or sensations as a result of listening to the Divine speak through their shadow (e.g., traumatic life events, terrifying emotions, or existential crisis), I suggest that they follow up with campus counseling services, or a religious-spiritual elder in their faith tradition.
The Practice of Listening to the Divine through Consolations and Desolations

There are several ways to ritualize listening to the Divine by discerning consolations and desolations.

For instance, at the end of the day before sleep, one might reflect on and name one consolation and one desolation for each of the three main periods of the day (morning, afternoon, and evening), as suggested in the previous student activity. Alternatively, one could divide the day into three-hour increments (e.g., six to nine in the morning, nine to twelve, twelve to three in the afternoon, and so forth). Or, if a more intensive discernment experience is desired, one could perform an hour-by-hour review of the day in the evening before retiring.

In addition to ritualizing the practice of listening for the movement of the Divine in one’s life, one can record the specific behaviors that elicit feelings of consolation and desolation in a journal. To process these journal writings, I recommend reviewing the journal entries at the end of each week. During this review time, one can focus on a particular consolation or desolation, exploring it with further meditation and journaling.13

For Reflection

• What method do you use to listen and discern the positive and the negative, the true and the false, the consolations and the desolations in your life?

• How does your image and naming of the Divine influence your ability to clearly observe consolations and desolations?

• Do you regularly “count your blessings-gratitudes-consolations”? If not, what small action could you take to begin exploring such a practice in your life?

• What current desolation represents a shadow in your life, and how might you begin the process of integrating this shadow into your
personality in a healthy way?

Notes


4. Ibid., 29.

5. Ibid., 102.


8. Labeling consolations as positive and desolations as negative can be misleading. As one develops the ability to listen and discern the voice of the Divine, with the aid of a spiritual director, one may discover that what was a desolation morphs into a consolation and vice versa. For instance, an apparent desolation of a short-term illness may become a consolation by having more time to contemplate the meaning of life. In contrast, an apparent consolation, winning the lottery, may, in time, become a desolation (more stressful than anticipated).


A regular habit of reviewing consolations and desolations is sometimes called a “spiritual discipline.” Alternatively, spiritual “disciplines” might be renamed “practices” or “rhythms.” The term discipline is sometimes associated with negative conditioning, such as punishment. Discipline is also associated with controlling and forcing, such as disciplining our body to conform to a yoga pose. Hence, there is a preference for the alternative terms “practice” (as in something we are growing or cultivating) and “rhythm” (as in a routine we are experimenting with). I will use the more traditional phrase “spiritual discipline” as it is often used in religious-spiritual literature, and the adjective “spiritual” somewhat softens the noun “discipline.” There are many kinds of spiritual disciplines. Quaker theologian Richard Foster divides Christian disciplines into inward, outward, and corporate categories, covering a total of twelve spiritual disciplines. I develop two of Foster’s inward disciplines called mediation and prayer. I describe these disciplines from the broader perspective of listening to the Divine within the context of the Listening to the SONG of Life course. For meditation, I introduce Eknath Easwaran’s passage meditation, and for prayer, I introduce Sybil MacBeth’s creative practice of praying in color.
Passage Meditation as Listening to the Divine

_Eknath Easwaran_

Eknath Easwaran was an English professor from India who traveled to the United States in the 1950s on a Fulbright Scholarship and briefly taught meditation at the University of California Berkeley before founding the _Blue Mountain Center of Meditation_. Easwaran’s perspective embraces many religious and spiritual faiths and traditions, providing a diverse and inclusive understanding of meditation within his eight-fold path of spiritual disciplines.

**Principles**

Easwaran’s passage meditation is based on the psychological principle that “we become what we think about.” Alternatively, this principle could be phrased as, “what we give our attention to grows,” or “what we sow, we reap,” or “neurons that fire together, wire together.” The main idea in passage meditation is to repeat silently and listen to an inspirational passage with complete attention. The silent repetition of the passage should be slow enough to allow the words of the passage to sink deep into the mind. Over time, this repetition and reinforcement of the passage’s meaning aligns the meditator’s attitude and behavior with the spirit of the passage.

**The Practice**

Easwaran recommends choosing an inspirational passage from sacred scripture since many of our highest ideals are expressed in scripture, and by repeating the passage, we move closer to those ideals in thought and deed. The passage should be positive and uplifting. I am more liberal than Easwaran in allowing students to choose an inspirational passage. Poetry and literature, if they are inspiring and promote positive values, can also be used as an inspirational passage for meditation.

After choosing an inspirational passage, the next step in passage meditation is to memorize the passage. I find it easiest to take one line at a
time, repeating it while looking away from the text. Then I add a second line to the first, repeating and periodically checking for accuracy. I continue this process until I can repeat the entire passage accurately and easily. The process of memorizing a passage may take several days, depending on the length of the passage. I suggest beginning with a meaningful short passage of a few lines.

The initial mechanics of the practice of passage meditation follow. Choose a place for meditation that is relatively private and quiet, with ample air circulation. Ensure that you can return to the same place at the same time every day. The ideal time of day for meditation is in the morning or at the end of the day before retiring. Sit comfortably in loose-fitted clothing with the spine relatively straight.

If your religious-spiritual faith tradition has a ritual for beginning meditation, then invoke the ritual at this time after taking a few slow, even, relaxed breaths. With eyes closed, silently repeat the words of the passage at a pace comfortable with your breathing, naturally pausing between phrases. The timing of the length of the pause between phrases is a matter of individual discretion. If one pauses too long, extraneous thoughts will fill the gap, and we are distracted. If the pause is not long enough, then the words of the passage cannot penetrate deep into consciousness. On reaching the end of the passage, one continues to repeat the prayer from the beginning.

**Distractions**

Easwaran recommends one hard rule when silently reciting the inspirational passage. If attention strays from the passage, one returns to the beginning of the passage and starts over. However, if some degree of attention is still on the passage, one need not start over. For instance, a common experience is having both the words of the passage and some distraction competing for our attention. In this case, we refocus attention on the words of the passage. We turn up the volume for the passage with our attention, which automatically turns down the volume for the distraction. However, if our attention has left the passage and we mentally find ourselves elsewhere (e.g., in front of the refrigerator asking, “Something
sweet or something salty?”), then we invoke the rule and start over at the beginning of the passage.

How long should one meditate? In the beginning, Easwaran recommends meditating with the inspirational passage for thirty minutes—no more or less. Any more than thirty minutes and we risk entering states of consciousness that we may not be ready for. Any less, and we do not reap the full benefits of slowing our minds and relaxing our bodies. If we want to meditate more, a second meditation session of thirty minutes at the end of the day is recommended.

### Meditation Practice for Listening to the Divine

- Choose an inspirational passage.
- Memorize the inspirational passage.
- Meditate on the inspirational passage.
  - Silently and slowly repeat the passage.
  - If one is distracted, then begin at the start of the passage.
  - When one has reached the end of the passage, begin again.
- Continue for thirty minutes one or two times a day.

### Passage Meditation and Listening

As the meditator repeats the words of the inspirational passage, they are listening to the words of the Divine speaking through the passage. By listening silently, slowly, and with full attention to the words of the inspirational passage, the meditator develops their capacity to listen to the Divine.

There are many benefits to listening to the Divine through passage meditation. First, the meditator transforms their thinking and behavior to align with the inspirational words. Second, the meditator learns to relax and destress the body by focusing on the passage. Third, the meditator is
training their general attentional capacities, increasing their ability to listen to the entire SONG of life.

I rotate through over twenty inspirational passages for use in passage meditation. Some students ask if repeating the same passage over weeks or months becomes tiresome or boring. Quite the opposite. There is no end to the depth I experience when repeating these inspirational passages. If my concentration is deep enough, the light of consciousness shines on the words as they drop as illumined pearls in a clear pool. For me, passage meditation is like feasting on fare at some great celebration, except that this cuisine is ever fresh, does not decay, and rejuvenates my mind, body, and spirit. I have yet to tire of this feasting during my thirty-some years of listening to the Divine through meditating on inspirational passages.

For Reflection

Is there a favorite inspirational passage you already know by heart that you could use for passage meditation?

If not, perhaps there are favorite poems or passages in literature that inspire you and enhance your connection with the Divine that you could use in passage meditation?

Given that you can find at least one inspirational passage to memorize for meditation, how might you (if you haven’t already done so) carve out a place and time in your day that is accessible, private, and relatively quiet?

What would it take to motivate you internally to experiment with passage meditation?

Is it possible to see the process of learning passage meditation as an adventure, something fun that might bring more inner joy?

If you decide to try passage meditation, commit to try it for at least one week, preferably one month or more. There may be some initial hurdles to overcome in the beginning of passage meditation. It takes time to develop the discipline of sitting and meditating no matter how you feel or what outer events call for your attention (short of genuine emergencies). But over time, there is a certain satisfaction in overcoming these obstacles. From personal experience, I can tes-
tify that the long-term benefits of listening to the Divine through passage meditation far outweigh the initial inconveniences. I turn now from passage meditation to explore a more playful way of listening to the Divine called praying in color.

Praying in Color and Drawing Om

Many years ago, I was blessed to have an Indian student named Malik in my Introduction to Public Speaking course. For his demonstration speech, Malik taught the class how to meditate by drawing the Sanskrit letter for Om while silently chanting the sound of Om.

Malik’s presentation of Om began with soothing instrumental Indian music, harmonium drones, sitar, and taal beats playing in the background while he passed out white sheets of paper. He demonstrated how to draw the beautiful Sanskrit pattern representing the sound of Om on the whiteboard (see image below). Then he instructed us to silently chant Om while slowly drawing the Om pattern on paper. When our drawing was complete, he suggested we visually retrace the Om form with our eyes while continuing the silent chant. After about three minutes, he explained the meaning of Om and concluded his speech by challenging us to meditate by chanting and drawing a colored image of Om outside of class.

Colored Mandalas

Malik’s presentation inspired me to develop a devotional practice of listening to the Divine by drawing colorful mandalas. In Tibetan Buddhism, creating and meditating on a mandala is a method for “...gaining wisdom and compassion and generally [the mandala] is depicted as a tightly bal-
anced, geometric composition wherein deities reside.” In my mandala practice, I set a prayerful intention by imagining I am listening and co-creating with the Divine. Then, I let go and allow the colored markers to flow into a mandala pattern. “Praying in Color” is similar to the colored mandala practice inspired by my Indian student’s drawing of Om. In the hundreds of mandalas I have co-created, no two are identical. In the next section, I describe how to listen to the Divine by praying in color.

Notes

1. Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998). Foster’s twelve spiritual disciplines are meditation, prayer, fasting, and study (inward disciplines), simplicity, solitude, submission, and service (outward disciplines), and confession, worship, guidance, and celebration (corporate disciplines).
5. Easwaran teaches the eight spiritual disciplines of mediation, mantra, one-pointed attention, slowing down, training the senses, spiritual reading, and spiritual companionship. Easwaran, Meditation.
6. The phrase “what we give our attention to grows,” is based on mindfulness meditation, the "sowing and reaping" phrase is from the Bible, and neurons "firing and wiring together" is a phrase found in neuroscience. Sources for each of these phrases are as follows. For mindfulness, see Daniel J. Siegel, IntraConnected (New York: W.W. Norton 2023); for the Bible, the scripture quote, "... for whatever a man [or woman] soweth, that he [or she] shall also reap" is from Galatians 6:7 (King James Version); and, the neuroscience phrase was first proposed by Donald Hebb in 1949. Donald O. Hebb, The Organization of Behavior: A Neuropsychological Theory (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).
7. Generally, sacred scripture refers to "holy or sacred books" in religious and spiritual traditions. A sampling of "holy and sacred" books from some of the world religions are, the Hindu Vedas, the Buddhist Dhammapada, the Jewish Talmud, the Taoist Tao Te Ching, the Muslim Quran, the Confucian Analects, and the Christian Bible. The internet has free versions of these texts to peruse for discovering inspirational passages suited to the needs of the individual.

9. It is helpful to have a dedicated space for meditation (even if it is only a chair in the corner of the room or a tiny space in a closet). Meditating in the same place at the same time every day for several weeks creates a habit such that the body, on entering the space dedicated to meditation, will automatically begin to relax and enter a meditative state.

10. Ideally, Easwaran recommends two meditation periods per day, one period before six in the morning and another in the evening before retiring. If there is only time for one meditation, it is an individual choice to meditate in the morning or evening. Some individuals prefer a morning meditation to set their intention for the day, while others prefer an evening meditation to reflect, slow down, and transition into sleep. My meditation practice includes one period in the morning, a second period in the late afternoon before my last meal, and a third shorter meditation before retiring at night. The details for the time and place of meditation for each individual will vary depending on a number of personal factors. The critical point is to find a time and space that works for you and begin (or continue) meditating.

11. For example, the first line of Saint Francis of Assisi’s prayer for peace reads, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” In silently repeating the phrase, one might pause as follows (the ellipses indicate a slight pause). “Lord…make me…an instrument…of your peace…” The actual “peace prayer” is of unknown authorship. The prayer is attributed to St. Francis because it first appeared on a holy card with St. Francis’ image during the First World War. The Franciscan Archive, “The Story Behind the Peace Prayer of St. Francis” (website) (n.d.). https://franciscan-archive.org/index2.html.

12. Monk and theologian Thomas Keating describes the process of “unloading” undigested unconscious material when reaching ultra-relaxed states in centering prayer. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2009). This can be disconcerting and, in some cases, require therapy for support. The same principle applies to unloading unconscious material during relaxed states during passage meditation. That is, if the distractions during meditation become too much to handle (e.g., images from a past trauma), we should refrain from meditation and seek support from a therapist, trusted friend, or other health professional. In addition, it is helpful to remember the differences between healthy spiritual
changes resulting from meditation and unhealthy changes in the psychic structure of the personality that can result from excessive meditation. For a complete discussion of these differences, see Michael Washburn, *Transpersonal Psychology in Psychoanalytic Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994). Another example of unhealthy changes resulting from excessive meditation is premature kundalini awakenings. See Philip Saint Romain, *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2010).

13. Medical doctor Herbert Benson’s research on the "relaxation response" is similar in many aspects to Easwaran’s passage meditation, except that in Benson’s relaxation response method of meditation, one repeats a word or short phrase like a mantra. Based on Benson’s research, the benefits of this kind of meditation are legion, including clinically controlled experiments demonstrating positive changes in gene activation (epigenetics). Herbert Benson, *Relaxation Revolution: The Science and Genetics of Mind Body Healing* (New York: Scriber, 2011).

14. Several of these inspirational passages are from Eknath Easwaran, *God Makes the Rivers to Flow: An Anthology of the World’s Sacred Poetry and Prose* (Tomales: Nilgiri Press, 2009). Some of my favorite passages from this anthology include: Saint Francis of Assisi’s *Prayer for Peace* (p.29), The Rig Veda’s *Prayers* (pp. 40-41), Kabir’s *Simple Union* (p.78), Cardinal Newman’s *Shine Through Us* (p.101), Tukaram’s *The One Thing Needed* (p.107), Lao Tzu’s *The Best* (p.132), Psalm 23 *The Lord is My Shepherd* (p. 158), Chief Yellow Lark’s (Lakota) *Let Me Walk in Beauty* (p. 162-164), and Saint Theresa of Avila’s *Let Nothing Disturb Thee* (p. 174).

15. Many individuals are acquainted with the phrase, "It takes thirty days to form a habit," but neuroscience research by Caroline Leaf suggests that it may take as long as sixty-three days to form a habit. Caroline Leaf, “Why it Takes Sixty-three Days of Neurocycling to Form a Habit," *Cleaning up Your Mental Mess: 5 Simple, Scientifically Proven Steps to Reduce Anxiety, Stress, and Toxic Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 207-224.

16. Not his real name.

17. The Sanskrit drawing of *Om* is complex, harmonious, and beautiful. Perform an internet search for “Om Mantra and Symbol” to view renditions other than the public domain image of the Sanskrit symbol for OM included in the text: https://publicdomainvectors.org/de/kostenlose-vektorgrafiken/OM-symbol/53529.html.


19. As a practice, I remain prayerfully open to whatever form is developing on the page. I do not have a pre-determined image I am trying to create. I allow the image to unfold on its own terms. At some point, there may be an "ah-ha"
moment when I recognize the image as it comes to life, but often this does not happen until near the end of the creative process.

6.4 Praying in Color as a Contemplative Practice

To introduce the practice of praying in color, I invite students to meditate on the phrase “Tree of Life.” In sharing their reflections, students note the tree’s yearly life cycle. Collectively, they describe how the trunk, limbs, branches, and leaves are all part of a living system and how the tree stretches up toward the heavens while still rooted in the earth. Afterward, I show the “Contemplative Tree of Life” and describe some of the branches representing different ways to listen to the Divine through contemplative practices.¹

As we move into the last hour of our three-hour class, I pass out card stock paper and crayons and sense the energy level of the class perk up. I begin narrating. Tonight, we introduce one more way to listen to the Divine called praying in color. First, let’s watch a short video clip from Sybil Mac Beth to introduce the idea of praying in color.² Notice in the video that she doesn’t like to pray formally but enjoys doodling.³ While doodling one day, she wrote the name of a sick friend inside of her doodle and then continued making doodles and coloring around the name. Afterward, she realized she was praying for the person as she doodled. She was praying in color! When we finished watching the video, I grin and invite, “Let’s have some fun and ‘doodle around’ while listening to the Divine.”

To begin praying in color,⁴ I instruct students to write their symbol for the Divine in the center of the page and draw a circle around it. I suggest they add their name and the names of anyone else they would like to connect with. After writing the names, I recommend that they listen to the Divine for inspiration, adding whatever artwork they feel is appro-
appropriate (e.g., shapes, landscapes, animals, other symbols, and colors). After about five minutes, I ask the students to wrap up their drawings, but they protest, “We need more time to doodle!” I provide another five minutes for them to doodle with the Divine. Then, we share our pictures in small groups. Those who want to share their artwork with the larger class. Their designs are so beautiful. Hearing the stories behind the designs, I could see how they were listening to the Divine as they doodled and prayed in color.

Praying in Color Practice

- First, gather the materials—a blank paper and crayons or other colorful drawing instruments (e.g., colored pencils, markers, or pens).
- Next, provide a comfortable and relatively quiet environment where you can invoke a sense of Divine presence (e.g., light a candle, burn incense, take a few deep breaths . . . ).
- Write a word or symbol to represent your meaning of the Divine in the center of the page.
- Write another word or symbol to represent yourself.
- Visually connect the symbol for the Divine with the symbol for yourself.
- Add other people you want to pray for to the picture with words, symbols, and connections.
- Finally, add creative elements to the picture, such as colors, shapes, lines, patterns, symbols of things you love, and so forth.

The process of drawing IS listening to the Divine by praying in color. Optionally, you can spend some time gently gazing and meditating on your creation, and journaling about what you have learned.

Students genuinely enjoy listening to the Divine when praying in color. They become like children in a free school, creating spontaneously whatever emerges from within. Some of their pictures look like artwork that could be in a gallery. Other pictures, like mine, are more modest but still beautiful. When we discuss the process of praying in color, students gen-
erally report that they don’t feel like they are praying formally but still feel like the experience is prayerful. This suggests that listening to the Divine in prayer is not limited to traditional formal prayers like petition, thanksgiving, or praise but that prayer as listening to the Divine is a much broader practice.\(^6\) Prayer, as listening to the Divine, can be expressed in a variety of art forms such as coloring, drawing, painting, sculpting, whittling, pottery, dancing, singing, Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement), writing, poetry, and doodling!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What kinds of creative art(^7) do you enjoy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If you do not regularly engage in any type of artwork, please review the list of art forms for listening to the Divine and consider making space to experiment with one of them for at least twenty minutes sometime this week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• For those engaged in creative art, what kind of intention might you add (if you do not already do so), before or during your creative artistic expression, that frames the activity as listening to the Divine? How does adding a listening intention influence your experience of creating art? Perhaps you may feel a closer connection and a sense of co-creating with the Divine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If you are a teacher of listening, how might you translate your personal experience of listening to the Divine through creating art into the classroom context of listening to the Divine?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1. Contemplative Mind in Society, "Tree of Contemplative Practices," (website) Maia Duerr (2016). http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree. The seven branches of the tree of contemplative practices are stillness (e.g., meditation, centering), generative (e.g., beholding, loving-kindness), creative (e.g., music, journaling), active (e.g., pilgrimage, social justice), relational (e.g., council, storytelling), movement (e.g., labyrinth walking, dance), and ritual-cyclical (e.g., retreats, ceremonies). The video on the website describes the research supporting the tree of contemplative practices. An additional resource for spiritual-contemplative practices is Thomas G. Plante, *Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Meditation, and Health* (Santa Barbara:

3. Doodling, according to Sunni Brown is, "... making spontaneous marks (with your mind and body) to help yourself think." Doodling is a kind of "visual thinking" linked to creative problem-solving. Sunni Brown, The Doodle Revolution: Unlock the Power to Think Differently (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015), 11. Brown's doodling process aligns with the playful, contemplative spirit of "praying in color."


7. My sense of art aligns with entrepreneur and creative genius Seth Godin's definition of art as, "The human act of doing something that might not work, something generous, something that will make a difference. The emotional act of doing personal, self-directed work to make a change we can be proud of." Seth Godin, The Practice: Shipping Creative Work (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2020).
A Prayer for Listening to the Divine

May this chapter of stories, resources, and activities about listening to the Divine song of life provide teachers with ideas for how to incorporate listening activities into their classes. May these ideas inspire students to explore the many ways to listen and connect with the Divine. I hope that these pathways of listening to the Divine inspire teachers to develop a greater capacity to listen to the Divine song in their own life so that they can teach from a Divine center, igniting and enkindling the Divine flame in the lives of their students.

And, for everyone, in and outside of academia, may our ability to listen to the Divine song of life provide a greater sense of purpose in listening to ourselves, a more compassionate and caring listening disposition toward others, a wondrous and respectful listening to the natural world of earth, plants, and animals, and a renewed sense of our connection and understanding of what it means to be part of the Divine mystery of life.

This chapter concludes the four key chapters of listening to the SONG of life. We have explored listening to self, listening to others, listening to nature, and listening to God-Goddess-the Divine. The next chapter operationalizes listening to the SONG of life from a social scientific perspective by developing and testing a measure called L-SONG (Listening-SONG).
CHAPTER VII

Assessing Listening to the SONG of Life

cultivating growth

mark the beginning and end

assessing listening

This chapter draws on the following journal article (used with permission). E. James Baesler, “The SONG of life: Listening to Self, Others,
7.0 Introduction to Assessing Listening to the SONG of Life

Listening to the SONG of Life is a pedagogical framework that conceptualizes listening as a multi-sensory experience in the four SONG contexts of self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. Listening-SONG (L-SONG) is a new instrument developed using a pre and post-test design to measure student learning in the four SONG contexts during a listening course. Results demonstrate that all four L-SONG contexts predict positive gains in student learning using statistical tests at the .01 probability level. Results also show acceptable internal reliability for the four SONG contexts, ranging from .71 to .91. Finally, all four SONG contexts have a degree of expert validity. As this study represents the first stage in the process of creating a valid and reliable L-SONG instrument, several ideas for future research are outlined, including adding controls, additional validity testing, and creating a standardized behavioral metric.

Assessment Issues

It took twenty-four years before I developed the Listening to the SONG of Life course in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at my home institution. The story of how and why the course was developed is narrated in two autoethnographies. To assess student learning in the Listening to the SONG of Life course, and to legitimize the continued teaching of the course, qualitative evidence is described in the form of instructor observations and student journals and poems. Yet to be assessed is quantitative evidence of student learning. The present research
fills this need for quantitative evidence of student learning by developing and testing the reliability, and expert and predictive validity, of an instrument called Listening-SONG (L-SONG). Pedagogically, L-SONG is designed to provide feedback to students about their listening competencies in the four SONG contexts as a non-graded, self-report assessment and not as a means of testing students for a grade.

Notes

1. "Listening to the SONG of Life" (capitalized) is the title of a listening course, and it also represents a pedagogical worldview about listening that I depict as "listening to the SONG of life" (lowercase letters).

2. For those unfamiliar with statistical probability, a result from a statistical test that is “statistically significant” at the .01 probability level means that the result could only be attributable to chance one time out of one hundred. Or said differently, the researcher is ninety-nine percent confident that the result is statistically significant. Note that a finding can be statistically significant but not practically significant. Interpreting the results is just as important as obtaining statistical significance.

3. Typically, internal reliability for a set of items representing some construct must meet the criterion of .60 or greater to be considered reliable or internally consistent. I discuss this further in the results section.


5. Ibid.

6. For a complete rationale of why I believe L-SONG should be a first-person phenomenological student self-assessment (a non-graded form of student feedback), and why L-SONG should not be used as a form of testing associated with student grading, consult the following sources. For the role of listening in education, see Jane Vella, Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). For issues regarding first-person phenomenological reports as evidence in higher education, see Daniel P. Barbazat and Mirabai Bush, Contemplative Practices in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014). For justifying meditation as a form of contemplative inquiry, see Arthur Zajonc, Meditation
as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love (Northumberland: Lindisfarne, 2008). For issues related to standardized student testing, motivation, achievement, and grades, see Alfie Kohn, Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999), and Alfie Kohn, Schooling Beyond Measure and Other Unorthodox Essays About Education (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2015). A thorough discussion of all of these issues is beyond the scope of the present chapter.
7.1 Reviewing the SONG of Life Contexts

The Listening to the SONG of Life course represents four interrelated contexts in the lifeworld. The acronym SONG stands for the first letter in each of the following words, Self, Others, Nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. The four listening contexts of SONG are interpreted as interrelated ways of being in the world. Before discussing the development and testing of L-SONG, I briefly review the four listening contexts.

I provide a short description of each listening SONG context, and a sample of sources consulted for the development of items representing each of the four listening contexts in L-SONG. Listening to self (“S” in SONG) involves being centered, open and aware of one’s thoughts, emotions, and needs. Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness and LeClaire’s ideas about solitude and silence inform the development of items for listening to self (see items 1 through 4 for L-SONG in Appendix B). Listening to others (“O” in SONG) means listening to their verbal and nonverbal messages and listening to their emotions and needs with compassionate empathy. Rosenberg’s empathy, Janusik’s listening pedagogy, and Pecchioni and Halone’s relational listening are sources that support the development of items for the listening to other’s context (see items 5 through 7 in Appendix B). Our awareness of the lifeworld that includes non-humans in the natural world is listening to nature (“N” in SONG). Cohen’s multi-sensory view of nature, Beversluis’ description of Indigenous peoples, and Cornell’s flow learning support the items developed for listening to nature (see items 8 through 11 in Appendix B). An awareness of the supernatural or supraempirical I call listening to the Divine (“G” for Goddess-God in
the SONG). Sources consulted for the development of items for listening to the Divine are Keating’s diverse and inclusive conceptualization of the Divine,⁹ Peterson and Seligman’s humanistic-philosophical values,¹⁰ Lindahl’s sacred art of listening,¹¹ and Easwaran’s passage meditation¹² (see items 12 through 15 in Appendix B). Next, I discuss how the four listening contexts in the SONG of life are operationalized and empirically tested.

Notes

7.2 Method

L-SONG Instrument

Likert-type statements were generated from sources used in teaching the course to create an empirical measure of student learning in the Listening to the SONG of Life course.\(^1\) Fifteen items representing the four contexts in the SONG of Life are represented in the L-SONG instrument. Three to four items for each context are included for assessing internal reliability. The same six-point Likert-type scale\(^2\) is used for all fifteen items. Items are grouped\(^3\) by the four SONG contexts of self (see items 1 through 4 in Appendix B), others (5 through 7), nature (8 through 11), and Goddess-God-the Divine (12 through 15).\(^4\)

Expert Validity of L-SONG

Expertise in an academic field is partly determined by credibility. McCroskey and Young's three-decade summary of research on credibility finds competence (education and experience) the most important credibility factor. Accordingly, a credible expert evaluator for this study must have earned their PhD in Communication (educational competence) and published at least one academic journal article or book on a listening topic (experiential competence). Four experts in the field of listening were contacted through e-mail and asked to rate the appropriateness of the fifteen L-SONG items for inclusion in each of the SONG contexts.\(^5\)

All experts agreed to participate. Experts used a six-point Likert scale\(^6\) to rate each item on “appropriateness for inclusion” in a given listening context. Average mean scores for each SONG context are 5.0 for the listen-
ing to self context, 4.2 for other, 5.5 for nature, and 4.9 for the listening to Goddess-God-the Divine context. An average mean score of “4” or greater indicates experts agree that the items are appropriate for inclusion in a given listening context. All four contexts show average mean scores greater than “4,” indicating that experts agree that the items are appropriate for inclusion. In sum, the four SONG contexts demonstrate a degree of expert validity.

Design and Procedures

Using a pre-test and post-test design, the L-SONG instrument was made available to students in the Author’s Listening to the SONG of Life courses. Students were informed that the L-SONG instrument was not part of their academic grade and that the data would be used for student feedback and research. There was an option for students to opt out of including their data for research purposes and still receive feedback. The College of Arts and Letters Human Subject’s Committee at the Author’s home institution approved the research.

Students completed L-SONG on the first day of class before any instruction as a pre-test, and then a second time on the last day of regular class as a post-test. In principle, potential student learning would be indicated by positive gain scores, measured from pre- to post-test. The instructor left the room while students completed the L-SONG instrument, and a graduate student collected the surveys and turned them in to the department administrative staff, who returned them to the instructor after grades were posted at the end of the term.

Students identified themselves on the surveys with self-selected code names. In addition, students wrote their code names on a separate page which the graduate student forwarded to the instructor. This sheet of code names was provided to students during the post-test to ensure accurate matching of pre-test and post-test codenames. For pedagogical purposes, all students were e-mailed a summary of the results of pre-post data organized by code name as feedback after posting semester grades.

Students enrolled in the Listening to SONG of Life courses completed pre-test and post-test measures for the L-SONG instrument for five con-
secutive fall semesters taught by the Author using a similar curriculum. The Listening to the SONG of Life class is cross-listed as an upper-level undergraduate and lower-level graduate course with two to four graduate students and fifteen to twenty undergraduate students enrolled each fall semester. In total, there are sixty-nine matched pairs (pre and post-test) of student responses over five years and twenty-four unmatched surveys (missing either the pre-test or post-test). The high attrition rate of twenty-six percent could be due to many factors. Possible attrition factors are, students adding the class after the pre-testing, students withdrawing from the class before the post-test, and student absenteeism on the first or last day of class.

Notes

1. Some of the key sources are included in the previous section on "Reviewing the SONG of Life Contexts."

2. In this Likert type scale, the number "1" denotes "very strongly disagree" through "6," meaning "very strongly agree" (refer to Appendix B).

3. While grouping items may artificially increase the estimate of inter-item reliability, I deem it more important for students to easily assess their listening competency by grouping common items as opposed to the psychometric ideal of randomly positioning each item within L-SONG.

4. See Appendix B for a copy of the L-SONG instrument and instructions for completing the instrument.


6. The Experts used a Likert scale that ranged from "1" denoting "very strongly disagree," through "6" denoting "very strongly agree."

7. Code names were used to provide some measure of confidentiality for students. Since students selected their own code names, the instructor could not identify who completed the surveys.
7.3 Results

Data analysis is based on sixty-nine matched pairs of students who completed the pre-test and post-test L-SONG instrument. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS software. The results section reports the reliability for each of the four contexts (sub-scales) of L-SONG and the predictive validity of each sub-scale by comparing pre-test and post-test mean scores.

Reliability of L-SONG

Reliability for each of the four sub-scales of L-SONG was computed using Cronbach’s inter-item alpha reliability coefficient. Reliabilities are .71 for the self sub-scale (items 1 through 4 in Appendix B), .76 for others (items 5 through 7), .81 for nature (items 8 through 11), and .91 for Goddess-God-the Divine sub-scale (items 12 through 15). All reliabilities for each of the four subscales of L-SONG exceed the .70 criterion for “respectable” Cronbach alpha reliability” according to standards set forth by Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, and McCroskey. None of the items were deleted from the subscales to improve reliability.

Predictive Validity of L-SONG

Four paired sample statistical \( t \)-tests between pre-test and post-test mean scores for each L-SONG subscale were computed to determine if the presumed positive gains in student learning are statistically significant at the probability level of less than or equal to .01. See Table 1 for subscale aver-
age mean scores for each listening context, individual item means within each subscale, t-values, and Cohen’s d effect sizes.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-test Means, Gain Scores, t-values, and Effect Sizes for Listening-Song (L-SONG) Subscales, and Pretest and Post-test Means for Individual Items Within Each Subscale.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Gain Score Mean (Post – Pre)</th>
<th>t-value (Cohen's d)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1 (.93)</td>
<td>4.5 (.86)</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>11.35^* (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.8 (1.3)</td>
<td>5.1 (1.1)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.1 (1.4)</td>
<td>4.7 (1.2)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0 (1.6)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.3)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5 (1.2)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.0)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.5 (.95)</td>
<td>5.1 (.80)</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>5.49^* (.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2 (1.2)</td>
<td>4.8 (1.2)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5 (1.2)</td>
<td>5.1 (0.8)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.9 (1.2)</td>
<td>5.4 (0.9)</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>3.74 (1.06)</td>
<td>4.60 (.79)</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>8.25* (.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.2 (1.6)</td>
<td>4.9 (1.0)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.7 (1.2)</td>
<td>3.7 (1.1)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.1 (1.4)</td>
<td>4.8 (1.0)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.8 (1.4)</td>
<td>4.9 (1.0)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goddess-God-The Divine</th>
<th>3.2 (1.28)</th>
<th>4.2 (1.0)</th>
<th>1.07</th>
<th>9.82* (1.18)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.1 (1.4)</td>
<td>4.2 (1.3)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.7 (1.5)</td>
<td>3.9 (1.3)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.5 (1.5)</td>
<td>4.2 (1.2)</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.3 (1.4)</td>
<td>4.5 (0.7)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Probability level is less than or equal to .01.

Note. The sample size is sixty-nine matched pairs of participants. Individual items are measured on Likert scales (1 is “Very Strongly Disagree” through 6 is “Very Strongly Agree”). SD represents the standard deviation.
The *t*-values are based on paired sample *t*-tests. Cohen’s *d* is the effect size of the *t*-value. Subscales represent the four contexts in listening to the SONG of life (self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine), and the numbered items are individual statements in the L-SONG measure (see Appendix B for the content of individual items).

Results demonstrate that all four subscales predict gains in student learning from pre-test to post-test. Statistically significant *t*-values ranged from 5.49 to 11.35 at the .01 probability level. Average positive gains in student learning as measured by the L-SONG subscales were .56 for listening to others, .86 for listening to nature, 1.07 for listening to Goddess-God-the Divine, and a high of 1.38 for listening to self. The magnitude of these gains is calculated using Cohen’s *d* for effect size and ranged from .66 to 1.36. Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, and McCroskey interpret these effect sizes as medium to large in magnitude. Overall, all four L-SONG subscales show acceptable predictive validity.

Notes

1. SPSS is an abbreviation for "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences."
2. Jason S. Wrench, Candice Thomas-Maddox, Virginia P. Richmond, and James C. McCroskey, *Quantitative Research Methods for Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195. Reliability standards are as follows. A range of .65 through .70 is "minimally acceptable," .70 through .80 is "respectable," and a range of .80 through .90 is considered "good."
3. As an exploratory study with four paired *t*-tests, a stricter (more conservative) alpha level of .01 was used instead of the standard probability level of .05 to reduce the possible number of false positives.
4. Jason S. Wrench, et al., *Quantitative Research Methods for Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 349. The standards for the magnitude of effect size are as follows. An effect size of 0.2 is considered small, 0.5 is a medium effect, and over 0.9 is a large effect size.
The fifteen-item L-SONG instrument assesses non-graded student learning in the four interrelated listening contexts of self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. The four subscales of L-SONG demonstrate acceptable internal reliability ranging from .71 to .91, and each subscale demonstrates predictive validity via statistically significant gain scores in student learning from pre-test to post-test. Moreover, all fifteen items in L-SONG were judged by four listening experts to be appropriate for each subscale. The reliability and predictive and expert validity of L-SONG indicates that the instrument is useful for assessing non-graded self-report student learning about listening in the self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine contexts.

The novel conceptualization of listening as a multi-sensory experience in the four SONG contexts challenges the conventional academic teaching of listening as primarily listening to other humans. The inclusion of listening to self, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine in L-SONG is a departure from the normative measures of listening to other humans reported by Fontana, Cohen, and Wolvin.\(^1\)

The Listening to the SONG of Life course is a broad and magnanimous view of listening. I invite those teaching a listening course at the undergraduate level in higher education to consider incorporating one or more of the new L-SONG contexts (listening to self, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine) into their courses.

The perspective of listening to the SONG of life is an evolving system of ideas that parallels developments in (for example) positive psychology.\(^2\)
consciousness studies, Quantum physics, and the perennial wisdom traditions. One major challenge is transitioning from the normative perspective of listening to others to the new perspective of listening to the entire SONG of Life, including self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. Ideally, instructors will teach students how to listen to the full spectrum of the SONG of life. I hope instructors will consider using L-SONG to assess student learning and incorporate student feedback in the refinement, conceptualization, and measurement of L-SONG.

This study represents the first in a series of studies that are needed to further explore, validate, and refine the L-SONG instrument. Several ideas for future research follow.

Different kinds of validation for L-SONG are needed beyond the expert and pre-test post-test predictive validity employed in the current study. Specifically, known measures could be compared to the subscales of L-SONG to test for concurrent validity. For example, mindfulness should correlate positively with self-listening while narcissism should correlate negatively with listening to others.

Future research might also develop different versions of L-SONG to further test the reliability and validity of alternative forms of the instrument. For example, some of the current study’s experts observed that the unit of analysis varies by L-SONG item. To create better uniformity across items, another version of L-SONG was created to measure listening behavior in everyday life with a revised scale that ranges from “never or almost never” to “many times a day.” The efficacy of the new behavioral measure of L-SONG awaits future research.

Several limitations of the current study point to additional directions for future research. One limitation is the need for a control or comparison group of students not enrolled in the listening course. The control group of students would complete the pre-test and post-test measures of L-SONG without the benefit of taking the listening course. A comparison could then be conducted between the pre-test and post-test scores of those enrolled in the listening course and those not. One would expect no differences in scores between the two groups at the time of the pre-test and a difference in scores at the time of the post-test such that those in the listening class would score higher than those in the non-listening course.
These kinds of controls also assist in ruling out rival hypotheses like history and maturation.\textsuperscript{10}

In addition, the generalizability of the current study could be more robust given the relatively small sample size and the same instructor teaching all five of the listening courses in the same academic unit. As one example of this challenge, the mono-bias of the same instructor confounds the results with the characteristics of the instructor.\textsuperscript{11} Future research could enlist several instructors who teach a course similar to Listening to the SONG of Life to determine if the current findings are generalizable across instructors. It may be that instructors with different philosophical or spiritual perspectives may have different views of listening to the SONG of life that might impact the results. Another issue related to a single instructor teaching all five courses is the possibility of an experimenter expectancy effect.\textsuperscript{12} The instructor may have inadvertently signaled students (verbally and nonverbally) to perform better on the L-SONG post-test. This could partly explain the medium to large effect sizes in the pre-test to post-test gain scores. Multiple instructors using L-SONG could confirm or refute the plausibility of this expectancy effect.

Finally, given a larger sample size, a factor analysis\textsuperscript{13} could explore the relationship between the subscales in L-SONG. Currently, the subscales are conceptualized as four interrelated factors, but empirical research may show otherwise. For example, alternative factor structures include one underlying listening factor or four independent listening factors.

Notes


7. Joshua D. Miller, Mitja D. Back, Donald R. Lynam, and Aidan G. C. Wright, "Narcissism Today: What We Know and What We Need to Learn," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30, no. 6 (October 2021): 519-525.

8. For instance, item thirteen in Appendix B is a time-based behavioral measure, whereas item fifteen is an attitudinal assessment of "sense of presence."

9. Refer to Appendix C.


11. By confound, I mean that the characteristics of the instructor (e.g., age, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and so forth) are possible alternative explanations for the study's results.


7.5 Chapter Summary

L-SONG is a fifteen-item student assessment of listening in the four contexts of self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine. The multi-sensory conceptualization of listening in L-SONG significantly broadens the scope of what is traditionally taught as listening to others by including the additional contexts of listening to self, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine.

The primary purpose of L-SONG is to assess non-graded student learning in the Listening to the Song of Life course. Pedagogically, the goal of L-SONG is to provide feedback to students about their competencies in listening to the Song of life.

In this initial study, L-SONG’s psychometric properties show good reliability and predictive and expert validity. Several limitations of the current study include limited sample size, mono-instructor bias, the lack of a control group, and different units of measurement across items. Suggestions for addressing these limitations are included in future research in addition to proposing testing the concurrent validity of the scale. Finally, L-SONG provides teachers and students with a more creative, provocative, and magnanimous view of listening to the SONG of life.
CHAPTER VIII

Exploring the Future of Listening

being and doing

experiential learning

possibilities
8.0 Introduction to Future Research on Listening to the SONG of Life

Research, Experience, and Creativity

In this section, I briefly introduce exploring the future of listening to the SONG of life as scholarly research, experiential learning activities, and stimulating creativity. Note that the book’s print edition does not include most of these ideas for exploring future research, especially the experiential learning activities, due to the page constraints of on-demand printing. Interested readers can view an online version of the complete book on the Pressbook’s website at, http://pressbooks.pub/songoflife, or download the complete version of the digital book (PDF or EPUB) from Old Dominion University’s Digital Commons, http://digitalcommons.odu.edu/communication_books/31/.

First, I describe different types of academic research and scholarship that can be utilized to explore listening to the SONG of life. I conceptualize social scientific research as deriving and testing hypotheses from theory. Social science uses standardized methods to collect and statistically analyze empirical data to create generalized knowledge. Research also includes other ways of knowing. Some of these other ways of knowing use interpretive-critical methods like case studies, rhetorical analysis of texts, and autoethnography. In addition, other kinds of scholarship may not be classified as “scientific research” but have their own scholarly standards
and academic rigor. Among these forms of scholarship are traditional and modern forms of art.³

Second, the future of exploring listening to the SONG of life embraces experiential learning activities. These experiential activities are not generally appropriate for the research purposes of experimental manipulation, control, and generalizability of knowledge.⁴ Students tend to behave differently when they know they are being evaluated in a research context. This sense of being evaluated focuses student attention on earning a good grade by “correctly” completing the research activity for some reward like extra credit rather than focusing on the quality of their subjective learning experience.⁵

The critical point of an experiential learning activity is the “research” conducted on oneself, not on how closely the personal experience conforms to published research knowledge.⁶ Teaching students to conduct an experimental case study on themselves as a sample size of “1” is a vital skill that can be utilized throughout the lifespan. I believe part of our evolving purpose in life is to create and conduct as many of these learning experiments as possible.

Experiential learning activities are more important to me than generating knowledge of social scientific research. In my experience of teaching at the collegiate level for over thirty years, experiential learning activities engage, motivate, and connect the student with ideas that are often more transferable and memorable than memorizing the results of a research study for a test. In short, my preferred way to internally motivate students to listen to the SONG of life is to invite them into experiential learning activities.⁷

Third, I explore some ideas about the future of listening to the SONG of life without knowing how the ideas connect with a research method or an experiential activity. World-renowned consultant and President of Creative Think, Roger Von Oech considers idea generation part of the creative process.⁸ Exploring ideas about listening to the SONG of Life is creative and heuristic. I hope to stimulate new thinking about listening to the SONG of life in ways that generate ideas leading to creative research and meaningful experiential learning activities.

For each of the three areas, research, experiential activities, and creative
idea generation, I explore several possibilities for teachers, students, and others interested in listening. I hope the reader will discover something to explore that speaks to their unique life circumstances. Not all of the ideas will appeal to everyone. Still, hopefully, everyone will find something to resonate with, something intriguing to explore, test, sample, engage with, improve on, and ultimately make their life more wonderful. May these ideas for future explorations in listening to the SONG of life bring you into a place of enrichment, satisfaction, happiness, and fulfillment.

Notes

1. The specific sections missing in the on-demand print version of the book are 8.1 Academic Research and Scholarship, 8.2 Autoethnographic Research, 8.3 Experiential Activities, 8.4 Experiential Learning Activities for Listening to Self, 8.5 Experiential Learning Activities for Listening to Others, 8.6 Experiential Learning Activities for Listening to Nature, and 8.7 Experiential Learning Activities for Listening to the Divine.

2. Standardized methods of social science include drawing samples from populations, experimental design, valid and reliable measurement, ecologically valid operationalization of variables, and so forth. For standard methods of quantitative social science research in the discipline of Communication, refer to Jason S. Wrench, Candice Thomas-Maddox, Virginia P. Richmond, and James C. McCroskey, J., Quantitative Research Methods for Communication (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

3. Traditional and modern art forms include (for example) drawing, painting, pottery, sculpture, photography, graphic design, script writing, comics, novels, poetry, music and video production, dance, and theatre.

4. There are exceptions to this guideline, such as testing the efficacy of different versions of an activity to determine which version is best suited to a given population of students.

5. Research conducted on students in the classroom creates an external motivation that is antithetical to the kind of internal motivation I’m attempting to facilitate in the listening course. For a discussion of the impact of internal and external motivation on student learning, see Alfie Kohn, Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999).

6. Knowledge claims based on statistical analysis in research are probabilistic in nature. The probabilistic knowledge claims may or may not apply to a given individual in a particular life circumstance.
7. These experiential learning activities ideally should not be required or forced upon students. The teacher (workshop leader, manager, parent...) needs to invite, cajole, or persuade the individual to explore the learning activity. In the rare cases of students who would rather not participate in a given experiential activity, I propose (or let them create) an alternative activity.

8.1 Exploring Future Academic Research and Scholarship

Chapter Seven describes creating and testing the Listening-SONG (L-SONG) measure for assessing student learning in the Listening in the SONG of Life course. I summarize the ideas for future research on L-SONG here. Future research should add concurrent validation, test the validity and reliability of an alternate behavioral form of L-SONG, retest L-SONG using a comparison (control) group to rule out confounding variables, use multiple instructors to increase generalizability and rule out demand characteristics, and collect additional data for factor analyses to determine the dimensional structure of the scale. These ideas for future research represent traditional social scientific research in listening to the SONG of life.

Additional ideas for future academic research using L-SONG include obtaining feedback on student listening competency from an outside observer. The outside observer evaluates the student by completing the L-SONG instrument based on their observations and personal knowledge of the student. This provides the student with additional feedback on their listening competencies across the four listening to the SONG of life contexts. To determine the degree of correspondence, the outside observer’s L-SONG ratings could be statistically correlated with the student’s L-SONG ratings.

Another study might correlate specific contexts of listening to the SONG of life with existing measures of listening like the Listening Styles Profile and the Echo Listening Profile to further assess the predictive validity of L-SONG. Finally, the types of listening skills associated with
each context of the SONG of life could be systematically mapped into “. . . process components, descriptors, and listening behaviors . . .” and then organized into skill levels as exemplified in Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, and Witkowski’s listening criteria matrix in their Integrative Listening Model.3

Notes

1. Ideally, the outside observer is someone not taking the listening class and someone the student has a personal relationship with who knows them well, like a family member, roommate, friend, or co-worker.


When I include personal stories in this book, I am engaging in a kind of autoethnography. This is the “auto” (self) part of autoethnography. When I, as an author, invite the reader to explore learning activities and pose reflection questions for them to consider based on the autoethnography, I am emphasizing the “ethnic” (others) part of autoethnography. As I write the stories, activities, and questions, I engage in the “graphy” (writing) part of autoethnography. Together, the autoethnographic stories about listening to the SONG of life integrate pieces of my life into a holistic picture that brings me joy and pleasure in recalling and writing the stories.

When I share my story of listening to the SONG of life with others (students, colleagues, and friends), I highlight autoethnography’s consciousness-raising purpose. For example, anecdotal feedback from a professional convention indicates that several academics are interested in incorporating ideas from listening to the SONG of life into their listening courses. To extend the potential impact of listening to the SONG of life beyond the scope of the conference, I consider autoethnographic validity and assessment issues in the next section.

There are several options for validating the veracity of autoethnographic stories that emphasize the teaching and learning of listening to the SONG of life in the classroom. One option involves students (instead of the teacher as author or reviewers as critics) judging the accuracy of the autoethnographic stories. For example, in Chapter Two of this book, I surveyed former students’ opinions of reconstructed student excerpts to obtain a partial validation of the story. Additional ideas for future research
to bolster the validity of autoethnographic stories include exit interviews, focus groups, and surveys of students after grades for the class are posted. By way of illustration, questions for an interview or survey could include, How well does (or doesn’t) the instructor’s descriptive story resonate with your perceptions as a student in the course? How accurate are the instructor’s paraphrases of student voices? What significant learnings from class are not represented in the stories?

Another option for enhancing the veracity of autoethnographic stories is to employ the narrative paradigm\(^1\) as an evaluative lens. Walter Fisher’s *Narrative Paradigm* provides two criteria for evaluating the rhetorical persuasiveness of a story. The criteria are narrative coherence (does the story hang together?) and narrative fidelity (does the story ring true with everyday life?). To test the rhetorical efficacy of an autoethnography, students, upon completing the course, could read an autoethnography and complete survey items to measure the coherence and fidelity of the story.\(^2\)

Finally, instructor and students can co-author an autoethnography of their learning experiences throughout the term. Co-authoring increases the validity of the story through the dialogue of multiple voices.\(^3\) Ideally, integrating instructor and student perspectives allows for a living document to emerge over time through, for example, an online anonymous and ungraded Wiki. The Wiki could include student and instructor weekly learning summaries, reactions to experiential activities, questions for reflection, and a mid and end-of-term assessment of the course.

Notes


2. Baesler translates Fisher’s theoretical ideas into an empirical measure for narrative coherence and fidelity called COFIDEL which could be used for this purpose. E. James Baesler, “Construction and Test of an Empirical Measure for Narrative Coherence and Fidelity,” *Communication Reports* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 1-5.

3. There is an ethical issue of the instructor and student working together on such a research project as part of the course even if the research is voluntary.
and no grade is attached to the assignment. The power differential between student and instructor makes this proposition ethically questionable. Alternatively, a graduate teaching assistant collaborating with the instructor on an autoethnography might be more appropriate.
8.3 Exploring Future Experiential Activities

Each of the four chapters representing the SONG of life includes experiential learning activities to engage students in first-person contemplative-mindful learning. I use the four verses of the SONG of life (self, others, nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine) as an organizational framework to describe possibilities for future experiential learning activities. These suggestions provide a broader and more in-depth understanding of listening to the SONG of life.

The following sections present many variations of experiential learning activities for each listening context in the SONG of life. Some instructors may need clarification about how to assess these activities. I recommend student journals if one needs some assessment associated with experiential learning activities. Students can journal about their intentions, plan, describe the actual activity, and reflect on what they learned.

Other alternative methods of student assessment for experiential activities are poetry, collages, paintings, posters, slide shows, comics, three-act scripts, original songs, music videos, interviews, and surveys of friends (or family, roommates, co-workers), and podcasts. Allowing students to demonstrate their learning in the form that best matches their learning style is ideal for their enjoyment, motivation, and learning experience. Currently, I use these types of alternative methods for assessing student learning, and I no longer use standardized testing (e.g., multiple-choice questions and timed short-answer or essay-type questions).

2. For arguments against standardized testing, see Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999), and Alfie Kohn, *Schooling Beyond Measure and Other Unorthodox Essays About Education* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2015).
I chose five experiential activities from the chapter on Listening to Self as starting points for expanding and developing additional experiential learning activities.

Les Femi’s “open focus” concept can be expanded to include a “heart-centered” open focus for listening. The import of the heart in receiving emotional information while listening is profound:

Emotional information sent from the heart to the brain profoundly affects higher brain functions, influencing our perceptions, thought processes, health, learning abilities, and . . . our ability to feel compassion and empathy.

A heart-centered, open-focus mediation activity is described by Femi. With regular practice, this activity should enhance the ability to listen to self and also enhance the ability to listen to others, nature, and the Divine.

In another listening activity, Pierau’s advice to “check in” with ourselves to ensure we have enough energy to listen can be extended to include basic self-care to improve energy levels and the ability to listen. Dave Asprey’s Head Strong is a guide to bulletproofing our bodies and minds through unusual types of self-care. A sample of these unusual forms of self-care that can enhance our ability to listen are:

- Intermittent fasting for “. . . mitochondria make energy more
efficiently with ketones than they do with glucose. . .”

○ Sweating in a sauna to remove “. . . lead, cadmium, arsenic, and mercury . . .”

○ Consuming bulletproof coffee “rich in polyphenols and contains over a thousand different compounds that improved the function of your cells.”

○ I invite readers to experiment with these intriguing ideas and assess how they impact their energy levels and listening ability. For example, does drinking one cup of bulletproof coffee daily for five days in a row result in increased energy and higher levels of alertness for listening to others?

In addition to monitoring our short-term energy levels, we can attend to long-term issues related to the self that impact our listening. Ken Wilber et al.’s lines of human development suggest multiple ways of assessing cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual selves. Knowledge of the strengths and shortcomings in our “lines of development” sharpens the ability to adjust our listening to self and others. Wilber et al. also suggest how to translate the way we speak to the other person’s “type (such as sensing or intuitive types), state (e.g., ecstatic versus melancholy), quadrant focus (e.g., We versus It language), lines (e.g., musical and mathematical languages), and levels (e.g., Amber versus Green language . . .).”

Another experiential activity for exploring the self is Mossbridge’s reflection questions to create a portrait of our authentic self. In addition to understanding our authentic self, we need to know the fundamental maintenance requirements of the self. Mossbridge suggests creating a User’s Guide for this purpose. Such a guide assists in optimizing our energy levels to be fully present in our listening.

Lastly, the meditation section on listening to self includes several possible meditation practices to explore as experiential self-listening. Jeff Warren’s Calm meditations and Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness represent some of these meditation practices. Additional meditation resources to explore are Shinzen Young’s Unified Mindfulness online program, Susan Kaiser-Greenland’s mindfulness for children, parents, families, and teachers,
Joseph Goldstein’s practical mindfulness, and Thich Nhat Hanh’s peace-filled mindfulness meditations.  

Notes

2. Ibid., 103.
3. Ibid., 106-112. The precise words for the activity are important and too lengthy to reproduce here.
6. Ibid., 82, 103, 105, 153.
10. Mossbridge, *The Calling*, 124-128. Content for a “user’s guide” varies uniquely by individual, but all user guides meet the bare necessities for operating optimally. For instance, items included in a user’s guide should include optimum hours of sleep, types of movement, exercise, or sports for flexibility and strength, types and time needed for meditation and/or prayer, a variety of breaks (including longer periods of rest and reflection like retreats) needed for rejuvenation, best nutrition choices for one’s current health condition, and so forth.
12. Shinzen Young, *Unified Mindfulness Meditation: CORE Training Program* (web-
8.5 Exploring Future Experiential Learning Activities for Listening to Others

There is an abundance of experiential learning activities in most listening textbooks that could be included in this section. Here, I describe experiential learning activities based on the singular topic of empathy covered in Chapter Four. First, I introduce Miller’s general empathy activities, followed by Sofer’s suggestion to “lead with presence.” Second, I develop Rosenberg’s mediation process focusing on empathic, heartfelt connection. Third, Kline provides instructions for creating a “thinking environment” where listening quality is marked by attention, no interruptions, silence, and encouragement. Finally, I borrow from the art of Aikido and Tai Chi to illustrate embodied empathic experiential activities.

In Chapter Four, several activities highlight the importance of empathy in listening to others. Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry William Miller’s *Listening Well* is one practical guide to empathic listening. The end of each chapter contains experiential empathic listening activities. For instance, the “Speaker and Helper” activity identifies roadblocks to empathic listening in an instructive and enjoyable way. Another activity called “Picture It” stretches our imaginal capacities by listening to the nonverbal behavior of a movie or television show with the sound and captions turned off. A variation of this activity is to listen to movies in a foreign language without captions. This mode of viewing has the advantage of listening to the emotion of the voice via paralinguistics without the additional cognitive effort of processing the literal meaning of the words.
Empathy as Leading with Presence

Meditation teacher Oren Jay Sofer brings Buddhist mindfulness and somatic healing practices to an understanding of nonviolent communication that enhances the ability to listen empathically with others. For instance, Sofer recommends beginning the listening process by “leading with presence.” By this, he means begin listening by sensing your own body. “Right now, as you read, can you be aware of the sensations of your body sitting? Perhaps you feel some heaviness or pressure where your body contacts the chair . . .” We can also listen to our posture (e.g., alert or slouched), breathing (e.g., rapid and shallow or slow and deep), and body position (e.g., direct or angled). All of these suggestions are ways to listen to the self (one’s presence) in preparation for listening to “others” (i.e., other people, nature, and the Divine). Sofer provides additional experiential instructions for cultivating presence, such as slowing down the pace of our “doing” and integrating short periods of “being” into our daily routine.

Empathic Heartfelt Connection

Heartfelt empathy is the starting point for the mediation process sometimes, conflicts between two parties are “mediated” by a third party (the mediator). The mediator organizes, structures, and facilitates communication between both parties, ideally ending with a mutually agreeable outcome. These conflicts can range from serious interpersonal disagreements, organizational labor-management disputes, legal battles, and wars between nation-states. In Rosenberg’s decades of teaching nonviolent communication in classrooms, villages, boardrooms, and workshops, he found that seventy percent of the time, after a heartfelt connection is established between two individuals, a solution to the conflict is discovered within twenty minutes. In one workshop, Rosenberg demonstrates how to mediate heartfelt empathy to resolve an interpersonal disagreement between two individuals. He also recounts a story of applying the same process to resolving a dispute between two warring
tribes in Africa (one Christian and one Muslim). The process is deceptively simple. The mediator (third party) invites one person in the conflict to express one of their needs and then invites the other person to demonstrate their understanding of the need by repeating the need back to the satisfaction of the first party, and vice versa. Once the needs are connected at the heart level (both parties demonstrate an understanding of the other’s needs), the solutions (strategies to meet the needs), in Rosenberg’s experience, are relatively easy to uncover quickly. The world needs mediators (like you) who listen empathically by facilitating heartfelt connections to manage and resolve conflicts.

Creating a Thinking Environment for Empathy

Another factor influencing empathic listening is the listening climate, which includes the quality of the other person’s attentive listening and the immediate environment. President of *Time to Think*, organizational consultant Nancy Kline claims “. . . the quality of a person’s attention determines the quality of other people’s thinking.” That means the listener needs to create a gentle, quiet, unrushed, non-competitive environment for the other person to think through their ideas. This is a challenge for those enculturated in modern industrialized countries. To facilitate a “thinking environment,” Kline recommends the listener adopt a relaxed posture, not interrupt the speaker, and allow the person to search for what they want to say in silence for as long as needed. When the listener thinks the speaker has completed their thoughts, they ask, “What else do you think about this?” and listen again with full attention. Kline’s book is replete with practical, experiential activities like this that challenge us to improve the quality of our empathic listening.

Aikido and Tai Chi as Embodied Empathy

Aikido and Tai Chi are sometimes associated with martial arts (originally, training for war). However, according to Aikido’s founder, Morihei Ueshiba, the spirit of Aikido is a peaceful art. Also, the flowing movements of Tai Chi, which can be accelerated to use for self-defense, suggest
more about harmony and inner peace than direct combat. I describe how two techniques from these martial arts apply to embodied empathic listening. Specifically, I describe how Tai Chi’s “push hands” and Aikido’s “enter and blend” can be practiced as empathic listening to others.

English professor, Aikido student, and practitioner of contemplative pedagogy Barry Kroll developed an *Arguing as an Art of Peace* class. One of the student activities in the course is a sequence of Tai Chi movements called “push hands.” I present an abbreviated form of Kroll’s instructions here.

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**Push Hands as a Listening Practice**

Students begin facing each other (one foot in front, the other in the rear) with opposite hands joined in the space between them.

The goal is a kinesthetic experience of “. . . pushing and receiving energy in a flowing rhythm” and “learn[ing] something about yielding and blending as initial responses to conflict as well as how to guide aggressive energy away . . .”

Push hands is an art form that requires much practice to master, just as empathy is an art that requires practice.

By initially sensing and embodying another person’s energy, the listener adopts a position of empathic sensing and understanding rather than direct confrontation at the outset of a conflict.

Instead of resisting the other person’s energy (analogously, interrupting or arguing) when the other person pushes or pulls our hand, we stay open and kinesthetically listen, redirecting the energy flow as needed to maintain a harmonic balance.

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Another student activity that can be adapted to empathic listening is Kroll’s description of the Aikido sequence “enter and blend.”
The mutual understanding that results from embodied empathic listening is fertile ground for the beginning of dialogue and a mutually beneficial blending of viewpoints.

I trained weekly in Aikido as a novice white belt for just over two years. Embodying the flowing movements of entering an attack, blending, and reframing the energy so that no harm comes to either person is a thrilling and satisfying experience. When executed without effortful thinking, it feels magical. The flow of movements “just happens.” This spontaneous state of being in natural harmony with others and nature is sometimes referred to as Wu Wei. While there is much practice underneath the seemingly effortless flow of energy in these Aikido movements, no previous experience is required for students to begin embodying the experience of “entering and blending” with another person’s energy. The
kinesthetic insight from this process can sometimes occur on the first attempt. Entering a conflict, embodying the other’s energy with empathy, and reframing the situation to encourage mutual understanding are vital to listening with deep empathy.

Notes


2. As discussed in Chapter 4, empathy is one of the most critical skills for developing our ability to listen to others. And for others, the feeling of “being listened to” is one of the most caring and loving gifts we can give them. For a discussion of the experience of “being listened to” see, Elizabeth Moore, “Being Listened To With Empathy: The Experience and Effect for Emerging and Middle-Aged Adults,” Master’s thesis, Old Dominion University, 2020.


4. Ibid., 18.

5. Ibid., 20-21.

6. Paralinguistics or vocalics is the use of the voice to communicate nonverbally. Paralinguistics is not about the meaning of the content of the words (semantics) but rather the quality or manner in which the voice is used to communicate using (for example) pitch, rate, clarity, resonance, and volume. Paralinguistics is one of many nonverbal communication codes. Other nonverbal codes that could be observed during this activity are proxemics (space), chronemics (time), kinesics (body movement, including gestures), haptics (touch), olfactics (reactions to smell), physical appearance, and artifacts. The original conceptualization of nonverbal behavior as "codes" is attributed to Judee Burgoon. Judee K. Burgoon, Valerie Manusov, and Laura K. Guerrero, *Nonverbal Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2022).


8. Ibid., 27.
9. Ibid.

10. Generally, "doing" is associated with active outward activity like driving a car or washing the dishes, whereas "being" is associated with inward, less active states like sitting in a relaxed position while enjoying the beauty of a sunset or the feeling of cool air entering the lungs.


15. In the beginning, the periods of extended pauses while listening can be disconcerting for both parties. However, if one follows Kline's protocol in preparation for the listening encounter, the other person being listened to often delights in the experience of having unrushed time to compose their thoughts and will often "think through" their own issues without our input as the listener. Kline, *Time to Think*.


19. Ibid. See Chapter Two and Appendix One for details.

20. Ibid., 35.


22. Kroll, *The Open Hand*. Knoll uses the phrase "enter and reframe." I use the more traditional Aikido phrase "enter and blend." By blending with the other,
the listener reframes the conflict.

23. Ibid., See Appendix One of Kroll’s book for photos and a description of the entire sequence.

24. Ibid., p. 82


Chapter Five describes an abundance of experiential learning activities for listening to nature. I highlight some of these specific listening to nature activities and point to other resources for further practice. This smorgasbord approach provides a variety of tasty listening activities to satisfy and savor.

Nature Stories

For lovers of reading, there are few better nature authors than David Henry Thoreau and John Muir for narrating the sensorial experience of being in nature. I recommend beginning with Thoreau’s *Walden,*¹ and Muir’s *Yosemite.*² For snippets of nature stories fit for campfire reading, I enjoy Amy Hoitsma’s *Inspired by Nature.*³ For reflective short stories about insects, plants, and animals, see Anthony De Mello’s *Song of the Bird.*⁴
Short stories and passages about nature can be read often with increasing enjoyment, satisfaction, and insight if read with a meditative listening attitude.

I paraphrase De Mello’s method of meditative reading.⁵

If you read a story once, you are entertained and move on to the next story for another dopamine hit.

If you read a story twice, reflect on it, and apply the story to your life, you will have a taste of “theology” that you can share with others.

If, after reflecting and applying the story to your life, you return to reread the story (maybe several more times), carrying it, “...around all day and allow its fragrance, its melody to haunt you. Let it speak to your heart... [this could] make something of a mystic out of you...”⁶ And it could be the beginning of learning nature’s wisdom through meditative reading and listening.

Engaging with Nature

Reading stories about nature is one way to appreciate listening to nature. But reading alone cannot substitute for the actual experience of being in nature and listening attentively to nature. In addition to stories about the natural world, Sandra Ingerman and Lynn Roberts’ Speaking with Nature also contains meditations and experiential nature activities at the end of each chapter.⁷ The stories, meditations, and activities represent the spectrum of the natural world, including elemental glacial sand, artesian springs, blackberries, wild roses, banana slugs, earthworms, black bears, and elk.

Other general resources for listening to nature are Joseph Cornell’s fifty-four activities in Sharing Nature and Michael Cohen’s eighteen nature
activities in *Reconnecting with Nature*. Both Cornell and Cohen include activities for listening to the natural world of elements, plants, and animals.

Notes


5. Ibid., xv.

6. Ibid., (italics author).


I build on selected parts of Chapter Six on listening to the Divine to explore additional experiential learning activities.

Holy Listening

Reflecting on consolations at the end of the day is part of the Ignatian method of listening to the Divine described in Chapter Six. Some of these consolations are framed by researchers as expressions of gratitude. I narrate a particular type of gratitude practice from Rachael Naomi Remen’s talk to health professionals on the *Art of Living*. We can sometimes become so distracted and numbed by the pace and intensity of modern technological life in industrialized countries that we lose sight of life’s larger significance and meaning. Spirituality provides a portal to view and appreciate the significance and meaning of life. Remen’s gratitude practice focuses on the meaning and importance of our lives through a holy listening practice. Remen describes this spiritual listening practice as “looking for holy moments.”
Practicing Holy Listening

I paraphrase Remen’s instructions for holy listening.³

- Before bedtime, review the day backward from the present moment to the morning rising time.
- Ask three questions.
- For each question, begin with the present moment and review the day backward until some experience answers the question.
- Briefly describe the answer in a journal, then move to the next question.
- Again, review the day backward until an answer is found.
- The asking, reviewing, finding, and writing occurs three times, one for each question.

The three questions are:

- What surprised me today?
- What touched my heart today?
- What inspired me today?⁴

Remen has used this “listening to holy moments” as a gratitude practice in her workshops with medical doctors for many years. Medical students who practice holy listening often discover Divine refreshment among the hard realities of medical school. She finds that for seasoned doctors, the practice of holy listening develops capacities to see the sacred, the mystery, and the beauties of life as they unfold in ordinary moments of their daily practice. I invite you to discover greater meaning and purpose through holy listening to the everyday moments in your life.

Meditation as Listening to the Divine

There are many resources on meditation that could be used to inform our listening. An Amazon book search on March 27, 2023, using the keyword
“meditation,” shows 60,000 results that could potentially be harvested for listening insights. I do not attempt to do so here, but perhaps someone else might. Instead, I write from what I’ve read and have been taught by my teachers on meditation. I hope these mediation resources serve as entry points into listening to the Divine.

Marcia Nelson’s *Come and Sit* describes meditation from the perspective of several well-established meditation traditions: Christian Centering, Zen Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist meditation, and Hindu, Sufi, and Judaic forms of meditation. I recommend Goleman and Davidson’s *Altered Traits* for those who desire a more scientific view of meditation, and Stephan Schwartz’s audio *Meditation for Modern Minds*.

**Additional Resources for Listening to the Divine**

In addition to the methods of listening to the Divine covered in Chapter Six, there are many other methods for listening to the Divine that I introduce in the Listening to the SONG of Life course through home study resources, and through class activities and discussions. Some of these additional ways to listen to the Divine are as follows. Gabrielle Roth provides instructions for embodied listening to the Divine as a dance that she calls “dancing the five rhythms” of flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and silence. Robert Gass and Kathleen Brehony provide another embodied way of listening to the Divine through chanting from the world’s religious and spiritual traditions and faiths. Another way to listen to the Divine is to practice chanting an elongated hum (like a bee buzzing) while exhaling with closed lips.

I find two other resources helpful in learning how to listen to the Divine. Medical doctor and psychologist Robert Walsh spent a lifetime studying the world’s religious and spiritual traditions and faiths. He brings together what he considers the essential spirituality practices in *Essential Spirituality*. Matthew Fox explores spirituality’s delightful, playful, and mystical side in his classic, *WHEE! We, Wee All the Way Home*.

I end this section on listening to the Divine by recommending Kay Lindahl’s *The Sacred Art of Listening*. Lindahl founded the *Alliance for Spiritual Community* and the *Listening Center* before the turn of the millennium.
She is still active in these spirit-filled organizations over twenty years later. Lindahl’s creative writing process provides a model of the sacred art of listening. She describes her writing process as “. . . inspiration, reflection, and meditation.” Posing a question before her daily practice of centering prayer and then again before her daily run, she allows ideas to percolate during the day. Sitting at the computer the next day, she lets the ideas flow. On the third day, she reviews the work to see if any changes are needed. In this creative writing process, Lindahl embodies the sacred art of listening. Her descriptions and reflections on the sacred art of listening evolve from this creative writing process of listening to the Divine.

Lindahl’s book holds forty reflections about the sacred art of listening. Each reflection is accompanied by beautiful mandala-like artwork by Amy Schnapper as a visual meditation alongside the text. Some of the forty reflection topics are qualities of deep listening, using silence, developing communion, enacting rituals, cultivating presence, creating harmony, slowing down, and contemplative prayer. These reflections, when viewed as listening to the Divine, have the potential to “. . . create more peace, harmony, and love in your life and the world.” For those who desire an extended immersion into listening to the Divine, I recommend meditating on one reflection per week, allowing the practice to organically permeate one’s life before moving to the next listening reflection.

Notes

4. Ibid.
5. My point is that there are many resources available on the topic of meditation, and a perusal of your own Amazon search (or AI, or Google Scholar search) for “meditation” or “how to meditate” will show that some of these titles are related to listening to the Divine.


8. Schwartz’s audio contains four parts, an introduction, the why and how of meditation, a guided track, and a drone track, https://www.nemoseen.com/meditation-for-modern-minds/.

9. I prefer "home study" to "homework" due to the often negative conditioning associated with the term homework in the U.S. public education system.

10. Gabrielle Roth, *Sweat Your Prayers: The Five Rhythms of the Soul--Movement as Spiritual Practice,* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee, 1998). These five movements form a "wave" that begins with the slow rhythmic movement of flowing, then builds to staccato, becomes the wild abandon of chaos, settles into a playful lyrical rhythm, and finally ends in silence and stillness. Roth compares this wave of motion to many aspects of daily life. I emphasize that the five rhythms are bodily expressions of the Divine. We can discover which mode we embody in any given moment through listening and transform our lives from one rhythm to another through conscious choice.


14. Matthew Fox, *WHEE! We, wee All the Way Home* (Minneapolis: Consortium, 1976). The play on words in the tile can be translated as "WHEE," the exciting and fun part of spirituality, "We," the interrelational part of spirituality, and "wee," the dragons or obstacles that inhibit spiritual growth and development. I appreciate his distinction between the quick-fix techniques that provide a short-term feeling of being "high" and the more stable and reliable kinds of spiritual practices that lead to an abiding sense of awe, wonder, joy, and peace.


16. Lindahl describes the *Alliance for Spiritual Community* as "... a grassroots
interfaith organization . . . to promote mutual understanding and respect among people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds" and the Listening Center as a place, "where people learn the sacred art that is listening . . . [through] workshops, retreats, and classes around the world . . . to provide men and women with an experience of the value and importance of deep listening . . . [that] cultivates a spiritual practice."

8.8 Exploring Future Disciplinary Perspectives on Listening to the SONG of Life

Listening to the SONG of life is a magnanimous and inclusive listening perspective that embraces multiple academic disciplines.¹ I illustrate how different disciplines can creatively approach exploring listening to the SONG of life in the future. This is a sample of academic disciplines and not an exhaustive compendium of all disciplines. The ideas are suggestive, heuristic, and meant to be modified, edited, and changed. Refer to Table 2 for a sample of academic disciplines and their associated listening topics.
Table 2

A Sample of Creative Disciplinary Contributions to Listening to the SONG of Life: Listening to Self, Others, Nature, and Goddess-God-the Divine

Academic Listening As...Discipline
| **Accounting** | Discovering credits that add to, and debits that detract from, the ability to listen for each SONG context. |
| **Botany** | Exploring the possibilities of humans listening to plants. |
| **Communication** | Investigating the impact of using different mediums or channels of communication when listening, e.g., Face-to-face, Facetime, Discord, Zoom, Podcasts, Twitter, and YouTube. |
| **Consciousness Studies** | Describing how listening with conscious awareness, attention, and intuition provide information for decision-making and problem-solving. |
| **Counseling** | Therapeutic insights into how the family of origin creates perceptual filters when listening to others in and outside the family system. |
| **Creative Writing** | Exploring the self-healing efficacy of journaling, poetry, short stories, novels, and blogs about listening experiences in the SONG contexts. |
| **Education** | Creating and testing the value of listening activities for each of the SONG contexts at different grade levels. |
| **Geography** | Identifying the characteristics of soundscapes in different environments describing the qualities of places that create calm and reduce stress, and considering how these qualities might become part of the architecture of schools, homes, and offices. |
Music
Discovering the musical rhythms of thinking, listening to others, nature sounds, and the silent music of the Divine.

Psychology

Sociology
Examining the influence of sociodemographic variables such as age, education, income, political affiliation, ethnicity, and religion-spirituality on listening to the SONG of Life.

Theology
Cultivating spiritual listening to the Divine in contemplative meditation and prayer.

Zoology
Exploring the dynamics of human listening with insects, reptiles, fish, birds, and animals.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Listening to the SONG of Life

The preceding disciplines and listening topics illustrate the multidisciplinary nature of listening to the SONG of life. Yet to be explored are the interdisciplinary aspects of listening to the SONG of life. One term that conveys the interdisciplinary nature of listening to the SONG life is biopsychosocial-spiritual. This term suggests potential interdisciplinary connections between biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual aspects of listening to the SONG of life.

There are some disadvantages to adopting this term in conjunction with the interdisciplinary study of listening to the SONG of life. First, biopsychosocial-spiritual is not inclusive of many other disciplines. Second, the term does not specify the relationships between the disciplines
other than suggesting a primacy for the biological and mental phenomenon by positioning bio (Biology) and psycho (Psychology) at the beginning of the term. Third, the term is cumbersome when writing and in conversational discourse. Unfortunately, I do not have a better linguistic term to indicate the comprehensive interdisciplinary nature of listening to the SONG of life.

While interdisciplinary research is highly desirable, there are several reasons why interdisciplinary research is challenging. First, there are few professional forums where scholars from different disciplines intentionally meet to collaborate on a given academic topic. I wonder if many scholars will collaborate with other scholars from different disciplines to engage in interdisciplinary research about listening to the SONG of life. I cannot think of a professional convention I attended in the last thirty-seven years in the discipline of Communication that is devoted to creating interdisciplinary collaboration around a single topic like listening to the SONG of life. Even on my college campus, individuals from different departments rarely meet to collaborate on an interdisciplinary project. Many of our disciplinary and departmental academic units are still in protected silos with thick walls. I envision a day when we leave our silos, meet under a big tent in a natural setting, dialogue about listening to the SONG of life, forming friendships and collaborative teaching and research projects.

Second, the institutional academic regulations and privileges fueling the tenure and promotion process place tremendous pressure on young scholars to publish sole-author pieces to prove their competence and credibility. Thus, interdisciplinary research between multiple authors in different disciplines is often a low priority for those pursuing tenure and promotion.

But I do have hope. I suspect that scholars who engage in interdisciplinary listening research will be personally and professionally immersed in listening to the SONG of life. That is, interdisciplinary listening research will gain momentum from scholars’ lived experience in listening to the SONG of life. Another factor influencing scholars’ engagement with interdisciplinary listening research is their willingness to relax their discipline-specific assumptions. It will be challenging to temporarily disengage from the ego-conditioned years of education, training, and research.
in a specific discipline. I invite scholars to see with open eyes of curiosity and wonder. These eyes are child-like, playful, and appreciative of listening to the entire SONG of life. The eyes of curiosity present a view of listening beyond the normative view of listening to other humans and envision a broader view of listening to self, nature, and the Divine.

Further, the new interdisciplinary listening agenda requires genuine dialogue with others from different disciplines. The talking part of a dialogue is relatively easy for most academics as they are interested in promoting their own research agenda. The difficult part of dialoguing with others from different academic disciplines is listening with empathy. This will take effort and courage because it may mean that scholars will need to change their beliefs, and teaching and research agendas and practices, based on the dialogue.

I hypothesize that scholars who experientially live the SONG of life will contribute to making the lives of others more wonderful by transcending their personal research agenda for the sake of a common vision. That vision acknowledges and moves toward collaborating among multiple disciplinary perspectives organized around the contexts of listening to the SONG of life. Time will determine if my hypothesis is prophetic or not.

Notes

1. Worthington and Bodie argue that "Listening" is a field of study and not a discipline (e.g., there is no academic department of listening). Moreover, they suggest that listening research and theory is multidisciplinary and not, for the most part, interdisciplinary. They provide examples of multidisciplinary perspectives on listening in architecture, audiology, interpersonal communication, language learning, linguistics, management and leadership, media studies, musicology, philosophy, psychology, and sound studies. Debra Worthington and Graham Bodie, *The Handbook of Listening* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).


3. For instance, listening to others in the Communication discipline is not represented in Sperry and Shafranske's term. There is also a need to represent
additional disciplines. For example, refer to Table 2 for other disciplines not represented in the term biopsychosociospiritual.

4. There is a dynamic tension between representation and ease of use. By “better term,” I mean more representative and inclusive of academic disciplines and less cumbersome to use in writing and discourse. As more disciplines are added to the term, the usage of the term becomes more cumbersome, but in the process of subtracting (omitting) disciplines from the term, the term becomes less inclusive. For instance, the term biopsychosociocommunio- sicopoliticalspiritual is more inclusive by representing additional disciplines. However, the term is still cumbersome and does not include all of the disciplines relevant to the study of listening to the SONG of life.

5. For a rationale on the importance of interdisciplinary research, refer to E. James Baesler, "Exploring Interdisciplinary Prayer Research in a Health Context," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 31, no. 1 (March 2008): 24-53. While this article is about interdisciplinary prayer in a health context, the primary arguments for interdisciplinary research also apply to interdisciplinary listening research.

6. Interdisciplinary research on listening to the SONG of life may be catalyzed by the 2025 International Listening Association’s (ILA) convention. Thanks to colleagues at the ILA, the proposed theme for the 2025 International Listening Association (ILA) convention is "Listening to the SONG of life."

Theory: Listening to Broaden and Build

Fredrickson’s *Broad and Build Theory of Positivity*\(^1\) provides theoretical insights for developing theory relevant to listening to the SONG of life. Fredrickson’s theory is about positive emotions. Her research demonstrates that:

. . . broadening and building . . . [ideas facilitate:] opening our awareness to a broader range of thoughts and actions . . . open[s] our hearts and minds, making us more receptive and more creative, expands our sense of self, and connects us to something larger than ourselves.\(^2\)

Fredrickson’s idea of “broadening and building” can be applied to listening to the SONG of life. Specifically, each SONG context broadens and builds our repertoire of listening practices. Many of these listening practices foster the positive emotions in Fredrickson’s research, especially those of interest, inspiration, awe, gratitude, love, and serenity.

Anecdotally, my personal experience and stories from my students during the past decade of teaching the listening course verify that listening to the SONG of life yields many positive emotions for students and for
myself as the instructor. These emotions that result from engaging in the SONG of life listening practices are rich, satisfying, enjoyable, and sometimes numinous.

Practice: Exploring Experiential Learning Activities

Throughout this book, I suggest many types of experiential learning activities that individuals can engage in to enhance their capacities to listen to the SONG of life. When practiced with intention and regularity, most of these activities can become a way of “being in the world.”

One way to facilitate a listening way of “being in the world” is to engage in a series of experiential learning activities related to the SONG of life. Any experiential learning activities from this book can be more fully integrated into a way of being through a “practice reflection.” Instructors and students of listening courses, or individuals on their own, can create such a “practice reflection” to solidify their experiential learning. Below are the four parts of a “practice reflection” that I borrow from Jeff Warren’s “practice report”:

- What practice do you do (include the name of the practice)?
- What is the experience of doing this?
- Any noticeable short-term and long-term effects?
- What has your practice taught you, if anything?

Creative Application: Listening to the SONG of Life as Music

Jeff Warren’s thirty-day meditation program on the Calm app provides many entry points for listening to the SONG of life. The mindfulness that Warren teaches applies to cultivating the attention needed for listening to each of the SONG of life contexts. I have listened to and practiced the thirty-day meditation program on the Calm app several times over the last few years. The most recent time, I completed the meditation program with my son each evening for one month. We were so inspired by the experience that we made an album of songs related to these meditations as a
gift for Jeff Warren. The song lyrics and music are available to anyone who wants to learn more about mindfulness meditation.\(^7\)

Notes

2. Ibid., 55-71.
3. A way of “being in the world” is more than a habit. A way of being in the world is a fully integrated belief and behavior system that is a stable part of the personality.
4. I borrow meditation teacher Jeff Warren’s idea of a “practice report” for mindfulness meditation. Jeff Warren, *Practices are the Habits We Choose*, Email from info@jeffwarren.org sent January 16, 2023. I substitute the phrase “practice reflection” instead of “practice report” because the idea of a “report” can have negative connotations associated with work. Instead, I want to facilitate a contemplative approach to listening by using the term “reflection.”
5. Ibid.
7. The entire album of seven songs is about ten minutes long. The lyrics and music can be downloaded for free using the following Google Drive link. We named the album *3M Mind Muscles of Meditation*. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OtZGMYaBKHC0dVgeHMwLVRsQ9BJ3VzePFzSdBQrZKQ/edit.
8.10 Chapter Summary

The future of listening to the SONG of Life addresses research, learning activities, and creativity. <footnote>Note that the print edition of this book does not cover most of the information presented here due to constraints on the page limitations of on-demand printing. For the complete edition of the book, view the online version on the Pressbook’s website at, http://pressbooks.pub/songoflife, or download the complete version of the digital book (PDF or EPUB) from Old Dominion University’s Digital Commons, http://digitalcommons.odu.edu/communication_books/31/.</footnote> For academic research, suggestions for testing the validity and reliability of L-SONG are recommended. Also, I propose ideas for testing the veracity of autoethnographies, including collaborative writing with students.

Several experiential learning activities are suggested for each of the four listening to the SONG of life contexts. Listening to self includes developing open focus, monitoring energy levels, and developing meditation skills. Various types of empathic activities are described for listening to others, including developing heartfelt connections in mediation and creating thinking environments. Listening to nature activities introduces a unique method for reading nature stories. The experiential nature activities found in the Cornell and Cohen books are recommended. Listening to the Divine develops the idea of holy listening, and introduces additional resources covered in the listening class related to dance, chant, and sacred listening.

The section on creativity and listening to the SONG of Life outlines some possibilities and challenges of multi- and interdisciplinary collaborative listening research. I briefly discuss the theory of broadening and
building ideas related to listening to the SONG of life. Finally, I provide a musical invitation to engage in mindful meditation. Mindful meditation is another way to develop our attentional capacities to better listen to the entire SONG of life.

I hope that listening course instructors, the students they teach, and others interested in listening will find something enticing to experiment with in this final chapter on the future of listening to the SONG of life. May your efforts to listen to the SONG of life bring health of mind, body, and spirit, happiness in your relationships with yourself, others, nature, and the Divine, and hope for a better world where everyone can listen, sing, and dance to the SONG of life in “love, peace, and harmony.”

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Appendix A: Bibliography of TED Talks on Listening to Others

(arranged alphabetically by title of talk)


Appendix B: Listening-SONG (L-SONG): Measuring Listening to the SONG of Life

Rate your level of agreement or disagreement by circling a number between 1 and 6 for each of the statements below that reflect your current (within the last month) beliefs and behavior about listening where:

1 = Very Strong Disagree
2 = Strongly Disagree
3 = Disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree
6 = Very Strongly Agree

Note, for questions 12-15, the “Divine” refers to your highest values, ideals, and beliefs that give meaning and purpose to your life.
1. When I think about “listening to myself” during the past month, I have found it challenging to get clarity about my personal needs in life.

2. I often go most of the day without “checking in” on my emotional state, that is, taking at least a moment of silence to find out how I’m feeling.

3. I take an intentional break or retreat to be in silence and solitude without media for at least an hour once a week.

4. I cultivate a sense of mindfulness at least three times a day.

5. When interacting with strangers during the past month, I generally find it difficult to “focus” on their needs.

6. I try to connect with what my friends/family are feeling by asking them about their feelings.

7. I have given “deep empathy” to someone in the past month.

8. I feel at home in the natural landscapes that I’ve visited this past month.

9. I make it a habit to spend at least a half hour in nature every day—rain or shine.
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I surround myself in my “home” with reminders of nature, such as: flowers, potted plants, shells, open windows, natural light, plants, and images of nature (pictures, photos, posters).</td>
<td>1 : 2 : 3 : 4 : 5 : 6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I listen to plant life (e.g., flowers, plants, and trees).</td>
<td>1 : 2 : 3 : 4 : 5 : 6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I can easily tap into listening to the “Divine” no matter what the circumstance/situation.</td>
<td>1 : 2 : 3 : 4 : 5 : 6</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>I practice prayer and/or meditation for 15 or more minutes daily.</td>
<td>1 : 2 : 3 : 4 : 5 : 6</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>I have a close connection with the “Divine,” which I define in my own terms.</td>
<td>1 : 2 : 3 : 4 : 5 : 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>I have a strong sense of the presence of the Divine in other people.</td>
<td>1 : 2 : 3 : 4 : 5 : 6</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For reference (not for participants completing L-SONG as part of a research study):

- Items 1 – 4 are listening to self
- Items 5 – 8 are listening to others
- Items 9 – 11 are listening to nature
- Items 12 – 15 are listening to the Divine
Appendix C: Revised Behavioral Form of L-SONG

For each of the following statements about listening, rate your actual behavior (within the past month) by circling a number between 1 and 6 for each statement where:

1 = Never or Almost Never
2 = Once in a While
3 = Some Days
4 = Most Days
5 = Everyday
6 = Many times a Day

Note. The term “Divine” in some of the questions refers to your highest values, ideals, and beliefs that give meaning and purpose to your life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I listen to my personal goals.</th>
<th>1:2:3:4:5:6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I listen to my body's emotional state.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I listen to myself in silence and solitude.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I listen to myself by recounting things I'm grateful for.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I listen to the feelings of others.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I listen to the needs of others.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I listen to how I can help others.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I listen to art made by others (e.g., music, movies, novels)</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I listen to the sounds in natural landscapes (e.g., ocean, forest, park).</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I listen to animals.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I listen to plant life (e.g., flowers, plants, and trees).</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I listen to natural elements (e.g., earth, wind, water, fire, rocks, crystals, and celestial bodies like the sun and stars).</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I listen to the Divine.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I listen during prayer and/or meditation.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I listen for the presence of the Divine in nature.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I listen for the presence of the Divine in other people.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I respond and give feedback to everyone I listen to.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I ask questions of everyone I listen to.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Options</td>
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<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I actively use nonverbal behavior (e.g., eye contact, alert posture, facial expressions) when I listen to others.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I pay attention to how my emotions affect my thoughts and behavior.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I sense my body during daily activities (e.g., eating, cooking, cleaning, and talking).</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>I notice how my emotions express themselves through my body.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>I feel a sense of oneness with the natural world.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>I feel a kinship with animals and plants.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>I feel part of the web of life.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>During worship, or at other times when connecting with the Divine, I feel joy, which lifts me from my daily concerns.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>I feel guided by the Divine during my daily activities.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>I feel the Divine’s love for me directly.</td>
<td>1:2:3:4:5:6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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For reference (not for participants completing L-SONG as part of a research study):

- Items 1 – 4 and 20 – 22 are listening to self
- Items 5 – 8 and 17 – 19 are listening to others
- Items 9 – 12 and 23 – 25 are listening to nature
- Items 13 – 16 and 26 – 28 are listening to the Divine

Based on the literature review, additional items were added to the revised behavioral measure to provide better bandwidth for each of the four listening subscales/contexts of L-SONG.
The behavioral anchors for the scale (1 = “never” or “almost never” through 6 = “many times of day”) were modeled after the DESC scale (Lynn Underwood, Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale, https://www.dsescale.org/).
Acknowledgements

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Mary Elizabeth is my beloved partner and best friend of forty years. Her courage and zest for life is inspiring. I value and appreciate her feedback on the listening book. Thank you for sharing your life with me.

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The work ethic, honesty, and loyalty of my Father Earl, who died recently, the wide-open heart of love and caring of my late Mother Juanita, and their steadfast faith and love for each other are role models I value and try to emulate. Thank you both for the love and support over the many years we had together.

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To all of my teachers through the years, those who taught me during my twenty-five years of formal education, and those I have primarily learned from through books, podcasts, and videos. I have thumbnail pictures of
many of those dear teachers (one hundred and forty-four at last count) that hang on a wall next to my writing area. They continue to inspire and guide me. Sometimes, I wonder if it is their voice, my voice, or our voice writing the words in this book. Regardless, I owe a great debt to them and am ever so grateful for all they have shared with me.

I honor and remember with love some of my teachers here . . . my first teachers at Saint Martin’s Elementary–Sister Ann, and Mr. Dwyer, Medley, and Sapone, my college teachers at San Jose State University who first introduced me to communication–Cal Hylton, Ted Balgooyen, Jo Sprague, and Ted Benedict, my social science teachers at the University of Arizona–Michael and Judgee Burgoon, my spiritual and life teachers–Eknath Easwaran, Marshall Rosenberg, Seth Godin, Jeff Warren, Alfie Kohn, Christopher Alexander, Jean Houston, Fred Rogers, Susun Weed, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Editor

I am fortunate to have the advice, wisdom, and benefit of my editor Aditya Desai. The many suggestions make this a more readable, organized, and scholarly book. Thank you for believing in me and investing in this project. May you be blessed in turn.

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I am exceedingly grateful to everyone who said, “YES, I will read and write a short review” for your listening book. Their names are in the front of the book. I am also grateful for the three anonymous reviewers’ supportive and sometimes critical remarks. Your suggestions and insights make this a better quality book.

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I gratefully acknowledge the students who shared the gift of their life experiences with me in the Listening to the SONG of Life courses during the past decade, especially the magic of the first undergraduate listening course at Old Dominion University. We learned and taught each other. May you learn and teach others in turn.

Dear Reader

I acknowledge your desire to learn and grow in listening knowledge and capacities. May you find something to nourish you in these pages. May you be blessed with relationships where you feel “listened to,” understood, and loved. May you be a heartfelt, empathic listener for others, a soothing balm for those who suffer, and a source of comfort, healing, and love for all you encounter. May you find joy, mirth, and celebration in your efforts to listen to the entire SONG of Life!
None of this would be possible without the Great Spirit’s gift of life, nourishment, guidance, and continued sustenance...in humble gratitude for EVERYTHING.
Previous Published Scholarship

I draw on the following publications for various parts of this book. Portions of these sources are used with permission:


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