

Listening

Vocation and Presence: From Technical Research Skill to an Ethical and Transformative Posture

This article explores the act of listening from a pluri-disciplinary perspective at the intersection of qualitative research, theology, and spirituality. Drawing from Gérald Boutin's methodological and ethical insights, the inquiry places listening at the centre of qualitative interviewing, not as a mere technical skill but as an ethical and transformative posture. The discussion is extended to the Christian concept of *vocare*, where listening to God becomes a meaningful act with profound implications for one's life. The inquiry is also enriched by the thinking of Paul Tournier, who sees listening as an act of total presence, both spiritual and therapeutic. The article acknowledges the complexity of listening and the many opportunities it offers for research, as my exploration of vocation among Haitian university students grappling with temporal needs and higher calling suggests. The article proposes positioning listening as an integral part of a vision of research methodology and practical theology that promotes authentic understanding, service, and healing.

Introduction

The call to cultivate the art of listening has echoed through various traditions that emphasise the wisdom of interiority, silence, and attentiveness. In response to the observation that the Western imaginary has long been dominated by discourse and the appropriation of logos as exclusively meaning 'stating' or 'expressing', we are invited to rediscover the *other side* of language. Such a proposal challenges the preoccupation with the need to be listened

to and instead positions listening as an integral part of a larger communicative pattern and path to knowledge. But what is listening? Can it be construed as the mere absence of speaking, or can it reveal something deeper about the human condition and the mystery of existence? How can that self-effacement, a suspension of one's own voice to make room for voices other than one's own, add to the semantic richness of our knowledge and our grasp of life? Interestingly, such questions have shaped inquiries



across a wide range of disciplines, often far removed from one another by methods and concerns, yet converging around a shared intuition: that the exploration of listening may hold powerful insights for knowledge, relationship, and being.

This article seeks to underscore the rich tapestry of approaches to listening emerging from distinct disciplinary contexts. First, it will explore listening as a central dimension of interviewing, a qualitative research method of predilection, with primary attention to the insightful contributions of Gérard Boutin. His incorporation of listening within communication theory and psycho-social dynamics, essential for quality interviewing, will serve as a key foundation for the discussion. This perspective inevitably raises epistemological and ethical questions, particularly concerning the researcher's stance and the human encounter that qualitative inquiry entails. In describing Boutin's ideas, I use a methodological handbook that is only available in French, titled *L'Entretien de recherche qualitatif*. Building on this framework, I will turn to more practical considerations, examining listening as an essential part of the research process itself—especially the interpretive act of reading transcripts through a hermeneutical lens and confronting the voice of the other with our own questions.

The article will then broaden its scope to address the deeper challenge of listening to God, as highlighted in the literature of vocation, listening to the suffering of the world, an issue of particular significance not only for qualitative researchers but also for the field of practical theology. Many pastoral concerns revolve around the need to attend to the pro-

found yearning of the human soul, which often underlies or accompanies more visible forms of suffering.

Finally, it will engage with the perspective of Paul Tournier, whose work presents listening as both a spiritual discipline and a therapeutic act, further enriching the multidimensional understanding of this essential human posture.

Listening in Qualitative Research

In *L'entretien de recherche qualitatif*, Gérard Boutin (2019) sought to highlight and harness the power of the widely used method of 'interviewing' in qualitative research, and in so doing offered some penetrating insights into the nature of qualitative research, on the nature of science, and ultimately, as he suggests himself, on human nature. His approach underscores the contributions of generations of researchers in that area who have, for the most part, insisted on the epistemological, conceptual, and technical issues regarding the use of the interview in research. His contribution aptly recalls this tradition, yet seeks to transcend it by engaging the act of 'interviewing' with communication theories, educational and psychosocial considerations. What emerges is an intriguing demonstration of the potential of interviewing as an 'authentic' expression of individuals' perspectives and of their beings. But, to arrive at the way individuals construct the world around them requires that the researcher develops conceptual and human qualities that go far beyond the mere mastery of technical skills. It puts into focus the importance of *listening*.

Attentiveness and active listening, as part of the research interview, occur within a larger context that celebrates the uniqueness of

individuals who willingly exchange views and representations and much more, especially in questions related to the meaning they ascribe to their lives and to significant events. In this delicate endeavour, the researcher invites the interviewee to disclose the web of meanings they are part of and to convey as best as they can their values, thoughts, and points of reference. Certainly, several threads within the qualitative tradition, naturalistic, ecological, phenomenological approaches, have sought to highlight the importance of listening as part of an overarching goal of attaining depth of knowledge. For instance, in his approach of the 'comprehensive interview' (concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu), Jean-Paul Kaufmann reminds us that the researcher will not necessarily find the best question from the grid, but rather in what the 'informant has just said' (Fugier, 2010, p. 4). Thus, during a comprehensive interview, the researcher constantly moves back and forth 'between understanding, attentive listening, and distancing, critical analysis' (J.-C. Kaufmann cited by Fugier, 2010, p. 4). The clinical sociological approach, as presented by Fabienne Hanique (cited by Fugier, p. 5), suggests that clinical sociology cannot be conceived without acknowledging the active participation of people in the contribution of knowledge. Within the sphere, displacements happen both from the sociologist's side and the subject's side. The researcher's interrogations and suggestions lead the subjects to become aware of the shift from the meaning of lived experiences and the conceptualisation of it.

Gérald Boutin (2019, chapter: 'La communication') makes a particularly noteworthy contribution by highlighting, among other things, the critical need to place relational and com-

municative dimensions of the interview at the heart of methodological and ethical reflection. His insistence on the transformative power of interpersonal relationships in the production of knowledge is nothing short of a proposed reorientation of qualitative research (Boutin, 2019). He strongly critiques the epistemological position—often inherited from positivist traditions—that portrays the interviewer as a neutral observer whose presence is presumed to have little or no impact on the interaction or the data collected. For Boutin (2019, section on 'choix épistémologiques'), such a stance is not only conceptually flawed but methodologically untenable.

From his perspective, the intersubjectivity in the interview process must be acknowledged and embraced with intentionality and responsibility. Factors such as gender, age, socio-cultural background, and power relations can often be ignored in the planning and execution of interviews (Boutin, 2019, chapter: 'Les personnes interrogées et les dimensions éthiques'). Boutin's scholarship urges researchers to identify these factors and carefully design the interview environment intentionally—to foster authenticity, trust, and emotional safety. Accordingly, listening takes on a pivotal role. It is no longer perceived as a passive act or an additional element in a technical and 'objective' transaction, but as an ethically charged and methodologically vital practice. Listening becomes the primary vector and modality through which the interviewer creates a space for genuine expression, through which data gains depth and significance.

Closely tied to this emphasis on relationality is Boutin's distinctive call for integrating communication theory into qualitative re-

search practices. He argues that a nuanced understanding of both verbal and nonverbal communication is indispensable—not only for effective interviewing but for ethical engagement with participants. Communication, in Boutin's view, is not simply a vehicle for data exchange but a dynamic force that shapes the entire research process. He draws attention to the complex web of communicative signals—tone, silence, posture, facial expressions—that mediate understanding and influence the flow of conversation. Within such a framework, listening creates a *cadre relationnel*—a relational framework—in which interviewees can express emotions and vulnerability. Listening coupled with 'emphatic understanding' and subtle communicative acts can prompt further elaboration, signal the interviewer's receptiveness, and deepen the trust required for meaningful disclosure.

Thus, in Boutin's epistemological and ethical vision, listening is not merely a technique for gathering information, but a relational stance that honours the dignity of the participant and the co-creative nature of qualitative inquiry. Listening—deep, empathic, and responsive—does more than record data; it affirms the human being behind the words. In doing so, it creates a space where lived experience is not only shared but recognised, understood, and valued.

When Boutin insists on restoring the 'communicative' and psycho-social aspects of the research interview, it is because, according to him, this dramatises the exchange between two individuals, a living exchange characterised by reciprocity that evokes Buber's 'I-Thou' relationship. The researcher as well as the interviewee orient their thoughts toward the 'Thou',

so that what is created is a 'we', a mutual relationship (Boutin, 2019, section: 'Tenir compte de la dimension personnelle et interpersonnelle dans la relation entre l'intervieweur et l'interviewé'). The researcher will take great care not to portray themselves as a 'specialist in questioning', but rather as a human being. Here again, listening is at the centre of such a relationship, although the objective of gathering data is clearly not obliterated.

Listening in the Theology of Vocation

In a different register, listening plays a significant role within biblical and theological perspectives. More than a communicative act, it is an acknowledgement of a sublime encounter, one in which the primary task and posture of humans is that of attentive reception of God's voice. Within the Christian tradition, *vocare* signifies the voice of God calling—not in abstraction, but into mission through a relationship. Crucially, *vocare* not only implies that there is a voice speaking; it expects a response in the form of a disruption from the ordinary. Listening, therefore, is not peripheral to vocation; it is its essential counterpart. It is through listening that one discerns meaning, significance, and direction. Clarity of vision and discernment of one's path are deeply rooted in this resonance of God's voice in one's life through listening.

Examining how this ancient concept reverberates in the lives of contemporary individuals grappling with the fundamental questions of existence can be both intellectually and spiritually exhilarating. Carrying out qualitative research in this context takes into account the spiritual dynamic, adopting a methodological resonance. The researcher's attentiveness to the

'call' mirrors a deep theological and existential posture. In faith-informed inquiry, God is the one who initiates the encounter, the one who speaks first. The researcher responds not simply by designing a protocol or conducting an interview, but by cultivating a posture of intense, contemplative listening to the context, to the participant, and ultimately to the subtle movements of the Spirit within the research process. This alignment between vocation and listening reframes research not as a project of control or mastery, but as a response to a call, a humble participation in something larger than the self. It encourages the researcher to approach each human encounter as sacred ground, where listening becomes an act of obedience, attentiveness, and ethical presence.

This intersection between theological approach and qualitative research is evident in the research conducted by the author of this article, which explores how university students and young professionals in Haiti seek to shape their lives in response to vocation. In a context marked by danger and uncertainty, it is especially meaningful to hear echoes of how individuals navigate the tension between personal aspirations and a higher calling, between the pursuit of self-fulfilment and commitment to a transcendent purpose. Listening to their life stories and listening well to the reasoning behind their choices, as well as the ambiguities these difficult decisions often carry, reveals a complex moral and existential landscape. In this endeavour, a nuanced and attentive listening to the many layers of their narratives is not only valuable but essential. After all, it has to do with discourse about the present and the future, about their lives which can be lived but once.

Silence: Listening to One's Own Soul

Listening to one's own soul, as practised through disciplined silence, opens a space where the inner voice, often buried beneath layers of social expectation and past trauma, can begin to speak. In this stillness lies the radical promise that attentive listening to one's inner life may unveil both the sources of deep pain and the springs of profound joy.

For the researcher engaged in qualitative inquiry—especially in contexts marked by vulnerability, marginalisation, or existential probing—this inner listening is essential. The qualitative researcher is an emotional being, shaped by personal history, memory, and meaning. Self-reflection creates the conditions in which the researcher may begin to name and hold their own pain—whether it be unhealed wounds from childhood, shattered dreams, unresolved grief, or hidden insecurities. As suggested by Fiumara (2013, p. 99), 'silence allows the apparently inexpressible to emerge.

Rather than shunning their own pain or pretending it does not exist, the researcher is invited to embrace it—not as a weakness, but as a doorway to authenticity and relational depth. In this sense, pain is not merely something to be managed or bracketed during the research process; it becomes a companion that sensitises the researcher to the suffering and complexity of others. This inner work fosters a posture of humility and compassion, qualities that deeply enrich the research process. A researcher who has listened to their own suffering is more likely to listen to the participant with nonjudgmental empathy. They are less tempted to control the narrative or rush to achieve closure. They understand, from the inside, that meaning often arises slowly, in frag-

ments, and through the courageous labour of naming the unspeakable.

In practice, this means that during the act of interviewing or analysis, the researcher carries an active awareness of how their own story intersects with the data. They cultivate a kind of reflexivity that is more than methodological transparency—it is a form of ethical and existential attentiveness, grounded in the belief that every act of listening to the other is also, in some mysterious way, an act of listening to oneself.

When working with interview transcripts, for example, one is confronted with the challenge of honouring the voice of the other—of alterity—in its singularity and ambiguity, while remaining acutely aware of the ever-present tendency to interpret through one's own lens. Engaging with this material inevitably brings the researcher into contact with their own memories, both cognitive and emotional, and the data may resonate within them in deeply personal ways. This is where the challenge of what Paul Ricoeur termed the 'necessary distance' becomes essential. It calls for an ethical hermeneutics: an interpretive stance marked by humility, one that seeks to make meaning without collapsing the other's voice into one's own frame of reference.

Listening to the Suffering of the World

Across spiritual, philosophical, and cultural traditions, a profound value is placed on the openness to the deeper realities of existence, including the sufferings—both visible and hidden—of individuals and communities across time and space. This attentiveness to suffering is not gratuitous, nor is it rooted in morbid fascination. Rather, it carries the potential to

uncover essential truths about what it means to be human. In confronting the pain of others, one is often brought into contact with the fragility of life, the depths of resilience, and, paradoxically, the reasons for gratitude and hope.

The qualitative researcher occupies a unique and sacred position within this framework. Through sustained presence, probing, and documentation, the researcher is given access to the intimate and contextualised experiences of others—experiences often marked by loss, injustice, trauma, or longing. Listening in this context becomes an ethical and spiritual act. The researcher who listens faithfully to the suffering of the world does so not to explain it away, but to honour it, and to bring its complexity to light in respectful and meaningful ways.

Suffering, whatever its apparent sources—economic, psychological, political, environmental—always carries a mental and spiritual dimension. It arrests the person at a particular juncture in their existence and intersects with other existential realities: identity, memory, hope, faith, and loss. The researcher who is aware of this multidimensionality is better equipped to interpret data with depth, nuance, and humility. This awareness reframes research as more than a project of knowledge production; it becomes an act of solidarity and witness.

In this light, listening to suffering is not merely part of the data collection process—it is a response to a moral call. The faithful researcher, grounded in both vocation and compassion, is attentively attuned to the needs of the world. This attentiveness is not abstract. It is reflected in every stage of the research process: in the way questions are formulated, in the patience of the interview,

in the sensitivity of interpretation, and in the ethical responsibility shown in how findings are reported and disseminated.

Ultimately, to listen to suffering is to affirm that the stories of pain and endurance deserve space in the academic and public record. It is to recognise that the brokenness of the world is not outside the scope of scholarly inquiry but at its very centre—particularly in disciplines committed to human understanding and transformation. The faithful researcher, therefore, approaches suffering not as a problem to solve, but as a mystery to approach with reverence, trusting that in this deep listening, something redemptive may unfold—for the participant, for the researcher, and perhaps even for the world.

Listening is both a Spiritual and Therapeutic Act

Many issues in pastoral theology and practical theological research revolve around responding to crisis, trauma, and relationships marked by profound suffering. The complexity of people's testimonies—their questioning, perplexity, and attempts to make sense of their life's events—calls for a corresponding depth of listening. Research increasingly affirms this need. The work of Paul Tournier (1993) invites us to embrace listening as both a spiritual and therapeutic way of being, one that transcends the conventional psychoanalytic stance. The listening Tournier advocates goes beyond the rational or the supposedly objective posture often expected of practitioners. It is an approach that embraces the full personhood of the other, fostering the sharing of emotions, a sense of communion, and the possibility of authentic encounter.

Tournier (1993, p. 32) even suggests that in

such moments of deep interpersonal exchange, a 'third person' is present—the invisible God—whether or not this presence is consciously acknowledged. In these very moments, he writes, God speaks. Often, it is not that others fail to speak, but that we are unable to truly comprehend what is being communicated—even through their silence.

Curiously, Tournier's reflections converge with those of Gérald Boutin in recognising that it is the many layers of barriers we erect—consciously or unconsciously—that prevent others from being fully heard, and us from listening in a meaningful way. The authentic encounter advocated by Tournier is marked by reciprocity and a deep, intentional search for the presence of God at the heart of human relationships.

Conclusion

Reflection on interviewing in qualitative research, prompted by Gérald Boutin's remarkable insights, allows us to uncover the depth and complexity of listening. Far from being a mere technical skill, listening raises important epistemological and ethical questions while opening promising pathways for both research and practice—in education as well as in practical theology. As a conduit to the depths of human experience and an invitation to divine presence, as Paul Tournier suggests, listening bears the potential to offer hope and healing. It stands as a quiet yet powerful counterpoint to the many forms of peril and suffering that threaten to diminish life. As inquiry into the act of listening deepens, we are invited to consider not only how we gather knowledge, but also what it truly means to be human—and how to live that humanity fully, guided by a sense of vocation and the presence of God.

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