

Listening as a Generous Act

Exploring what Matters in Professional Listening Practices

Listening is a key component of pastoral care, yet practitioners often find it a challenge. In this article, we will examine active listening, which engages not only auditory faculties but also has visual, bodily, and affective dimensions. Attentive listening entails an empathetic orientation and an intentional openness to the other. This article argues that active and attentive listening require both deliberate preparation and mindful self-awareness, in addition to technical competencies such as paraphrasing. The discussion further explores various listening preferences and emphasises the significance of 'wholehearted listening', characterised by attentiveness, hospitality, and relational presence. In conclusion, the article considers how discernment, an open-minded stance, and reliance on divine wisdom contribute to the practice of listening as a generous act, fostering personal and spiritual development in others.

Listening is a Challenge

Listening has been studied in detail for more than seven decades (Roger & Farson, 1957; Gordon, 1975; Nichols, 1990; Rosenberg, 1999; Doehring, 2015; Itzchakov, 2022; Brownell, 2024). In an age in which we are bombarded with media and visual images, listening has become increasingly challenging (Wolvin, 2011). Listening seems to be a very simple skill, but many find it difficult (Worthington & Bodie, 2018). In my observation, most people enjoy telling their story, yet only a few can listen intentionally and well.

Specifically, I will explore why aspects of listening are crucial in a pastoral care setting

and similar professional practices. I will focus on the role of the listener from a practical perspective, relying on my own experience and a literature review, to conclude that listening can be considered a generous act, a phrase from one of the authors I studied, and which I found most inspiring.

I will structure my argument in six sections. First, I will refer to my initial listening experience in a mentoring context, the emphasis on trust and an awareness of the speaker's current reality. Second, I will define listening and the term 'active listening'. Third, I will review the insights of various authors on the practice of listening. Fourth, I will describe paraphrasing



skills as a key listening technique. Fifth, I will discuss *'The Listening Coach'*, a newly published book that provides fresh perspectives on listening and different listening styles. Finally, I will highlight the importance of relying on God's wisdom and personal discernment when listening.

Trust and the Current Reality of the Speaker

Through over three decades of experience in pastoral care, I have found that creating time and space to listen reduces the pressure of responding. Concentrating fully on another person opens genuine space for connection. I also discovered that listening together with others broadened my perspective, as their reactions often differed from mine. This showed me that listening is more complex than it first appears.

My passion for listening grew through both pastoral care and fifteen years of mentoring. Still, listening remains an underexplored skill among mentors, despite being a core competency for effective mentoring (Levin, 2011; Phillips-Jones, 2003). Other key skills, besides listening, include building trust, encouragement, and identifying goals and current reality. I find those key skills valuable, also in the pastoral care setting, because listening itself builds trust and fosters openness, allowing people to feel valued and communicate more freely (Burt, 2019). My decade of research in Nepal highlighted how cultural context shapes listening—the relational nature of Nepali culture revealed that listening takes on many forms. What struck me most was the emphasis on the 'current reality' of the speaker. True listening requires setting aside one's own worldview and stepping into the speaker's perspective. In

Nepal, this meant listening deeply to understand a very different reality. To move forward, it is essential to begin with a clear definition of listening.

Define Listening

Ralph Nichols, often mentioned as the 'father of listening research,' defined listening as 'the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or non-verbal messages' (Nichols & Stevens, 1957).

Around the same period, Rogers and Farson (1957) introduced the concept of *'active listening'*, emphasising its role in fostering constructive relationships and empathy (Roger & Farson, 1957). Initially developed in therapeutic contexts, active listening quickly proved applicable more broadly, weighing the importance of presence, understanding, and responsiveness. Rogers' non-directive approach and focus on authenticity significantly shaped contemporary perspectives on listening (Rogers, 1951; McKergow, 2021).

Burt (2019) later expanded this view, describing listening as the process through which a listener becomes aware of and connects with a speaker's lived experience (Burt, 2019). Improving listening skills, therefore, requires intentional awareness of the speaker's reality and active acknowledgement of their perspective. This provides the foundation for more profound levels of listening, which will be further examined through contributions by different authors in the following section.

Insight from Four Key Authors

This section considers four major contributors to the theory and practice of listening—Burt, Buber, Bodie, and Bonhoeffer. Each provides

a distinct framework, which together expands our understanding of listening as more than a technical skill, a relational and reflective discipline.

Burt (2019) highlights the importance of creating an environment where individuals feel genuinely heard (Burt, 2019). He identifies four modes of listening: attention, observation, inquiry, and resonance. In addition, his three-layer model encourages listeners to engage with the speaker's context, behaviours, and identity. This structure is particularly helpful in cross-cultural settings, where empathy and reflection are essential to understanding unspoken meaning and to maintain sensitivity to identity and belonging.

Buber (1923), in *I and Thou*, approaches listening as a dialogical encounter (Buber, 1923). He stresses the necessity of attentiveness, openness, and full acceptance of the other, arguing that such presence enables speakers to discover meaning for themselves (Gorden, 2011). Buber's theological lens positions listening as more than a communicative act—it becomes a way of reassuring the humanity of the other person, of embracing the other.

Bodie (2011) extends this relational perspective by emphasising the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of listening (Bodie, 2011). He challenges the traditional view of listening, i.e., passive reception, insisting that both speaker and listener share responsibility in the process. His focus on empathy highlights how attentive listening can support trust and deepen relationships.

Bonhoeffer (1954), in *Life Together*, adds a spiritual dimension (Bonhoeffer, 1954). He analyses inattentive or impatient listening as contrary to God's own patience, arguing that true listening begins with listening to God. From this foundation, believers are empowered to extend patience, attentiveness, and love in dialogue with others. Moreover, he underscores the importance of communal discernment in listening, highlighting the role of shared reflection in seeking and recognising God's voice in conversation. I will reflect more on this at the end of this article.

Reviewing these four authors, several common insights can be identified:

1. Creating both mental and physical space is essential for authentic listening.
2. Reflection and emotional attunement (Burt, Bodie) help listeners engage with the speaker's deeper reality.
3. Acceptance and mutual responsibility (Buber, Bodie) build trust and enable genuine dialogue.
4. A spiritual dimension (Bonhoeffer) enriches listening as a practice of patience, humility, and shared discernment.

Together, these perspectives suggest that listening is not merely about information transfer but about cultivating presence, empathy, and attentiveness. It is a relational act, demanding both self-awareness and openness to the other, showing hospitality, and, in some traditions, an awareness of God.

I have found keeping a journal to capture key elements of a conversation to be a simple yet effective tool to aid this reflective practice. All the authors refer back to paraphrasing skills. It brings more clarity to a conversation when you

can paraphrase the words. Let us explore this in the following section.

A Key Technique: Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a listening competency that involves restating, in one's own words, what another person has communicated, thereby confirming understanding (Muhammad & Kabir, 2017). It reflects an attitude of staying aligned with the speaker's intent (Pantazi, 2018). It is important to recognise that expressing the meaning of what one hears does not require the insertion of personal opinions; rather, it involves conveying the same content using different words to achieve greater clarity.

Paraphrasing extends beyond the simple substitution of words; it entails grasping the full essence of the speaker's message and communicating it back correctly (Glenn, 2022). Glenn further distinguishes between affiliative paraphrases, which convey empathy and understanding, and disaffiliative paraphrases, which may signal disapproval. In practice, it is often more challenging to maintain full focus on the speaker when the conversation addresses topics with which one disagrees.

Paraphrasing is widely known as a fundamental component of active listening, and several scholars have contributed significantly to understanding its role in communication. One of the most prominent figures in this area is Weger. He examined the impact of paraphrasing on conversational dynamics. Weger and his colleagues (Weger, Castle, Emmett, 2010) demonstrated that message paraphrasing improved the perceived social attractiveness of listeners, even though it did not consistently increase speakers' sense of being understood or conversational satisfaction. Weger further

showed that active listening behaviours, such as paraphrasing, were more effective in fostering feelings of understanding than either simple acknowledgements or unsolicited advice. His contributions position him as a fundamental figure in his study of paraphrasing within relational communication research.

In summary, when individuals hear their own thoughts articulated more clearly through the reflective engagement of another, their sense of being understood and accepted is enhanced. The intentional application of empathy, together with paraphrasing skills, fosters openness and psychological safety, thereby deepening mutual understanding and strengthening relational connections. The art of listening will be further explored in the next section, with particular attention to different listening styles.

Listening Styles

The Listening Styles Profile (LSP) was first developed in the 90's (Watson, Weaver, & Barker, 1996) and subsequently revised (Bodie, Worthington, & Gearhart, 2013). The original LSP consisted of 16 items designed to measure individuals' preferred approaches to listening, with a focus on four dimensions: people, content, action, and time. The 2013 revision introduced an emphasis on the objective of listening, categorising listening into four distinct styles: relational, analytical, task-oriented, and critical. This revision highlighted the existence of diverse listening preferences and provided a more refined framework for understanding individual listening tendencies (Gearhart, Denham, & Bodie, 2014).

Building on these foundational models, Kym Dakin-Neal (Dakin-Neal, 2024) proposed a holistic approach to listening, structured around

the 'Head, Heart, and Hands' framework for listening coaches. Her book, *'Head, Heart, and Hands Listening'*, offers both a comprehensive listening assessment and practical guidance for enhancing listening competencies. The approach emphasises starting with self-awareness, recognising one's own listening tendencies, and then adapting listening strategies to engage more effectively with others. Dakin-Neal's model identifies three primary listener types:

Head Listeners: Head listeners prioritise rational and factual information, focusing on evidence, numbers, and measurable data. Their temporal focus is the past, and they are primarily concerned with understanding what has happened. They inquire about linear progression, factual accuracy, and logistical details, seeking to answer questions of what, where, when, and how.

Heart Listeners: Heart listeners attend to emotional context, relational dynamics, and empathetic engagement. They focus on the present, observing both verbal and non-verbal cues, including body language and facial expressions. Their inquiry centres on understanding how someone feels and the emotional context that shapes the situation, fostering a deeper relational connection.

Hand Listeners: Hand listeners are oriented towards problem-solving, actionable strategies, and future possibilities. Their temporal focus is the future, and they concentrate on identifying what can be done differently or innovatively. They inquire about unexplored options, solutions, and potential strategies to achieve practical outcomes.

In summary, understanding diverse listening styles can significantly enhance one's listening competence. As a self-identified heart-centred listener, engaging in reflective practice considering not only how I listen but also the speaker's communication preferences, has enabled me to shift focus from my own tendencies to the speaker's needs. This awareness cultivates a more responsive and attuned listening posture. Constructing meaning from the speaker's words and experiences is a nuanced skill that can be developed through intentional and sustained practice.

Awareness of diverse listening styles not only improves interpersonal communication but also lays the groundwork for more profound relational engagement. In the concluding section of this article, attention will shift toward listening in a spiritual context, emphasising discernment and reliance on divine wisdom as integral to the listening process.

Full Attentiveness, Discernment, and the Spiritual Dimension

Research has consistently highlighted the significance of listening in human interaction (Kline, 2015; Rogers & Welch, 2009). Active listening requires full attention and concentration on the speaker, allowing for an accurate understanding of the message being communicated. A review of the literature over the past several decades provides deeper insight into the components of effective listening. One essential element is non-verbal communication, which enables mentors and listeners to demonstrate engagement (McNaughten, 2007). Another critical component is suspending judgment, embracing the speaker for who they are, and attending fully to their message (Weger, 2014).

Recent scholarship emphasises the complexity of listening as a multi-dimensional process. Worthington and Bodie identify three inter-related processes: affective, behavioural, and cognitive (Worthington & Bodie, 2018). The affective process, involving a genuine emotional motivation to attend to others, is particularly significant, as it drives the listener's intent to engage meaningfully. The behavioural process entails the observable acts of listening, while the cognitive process encompasses understanding and interpreting the message. Effective listening requires the integration of all three processes, demanding intentional focus and the ability to 'empty oneself' of preoccupations, including the temptation to formulate responses prematurely (Chodavara, 2018).

Developing listening competencies requires reflective practice. For example, as a heart-centred listener, I have found that examining not only how I listen but also who is speaking and their potential communication preferences allows me to shift focus from my own tendencies to the needs of the speaker. This intentional awareness cultivates a more attuned and responsive listening posture. Constructing meaning from the speaker's words is a nuanced skill—a form of art—that can be honed through sustained and deliberate practice.

From a spiritual perspective, listening gains an added dimension in the relationship with God. The Bible emphasises that God listens attentively to His people: *'This is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he listens to us'* (1 John 5:14). Christian believers are invited to engage in reflective dialogue with God, discerning His guidance while simultaneously attending to others. Stott (1992) describes

this dual awareness as 'double listening', the capacity to be attentive both to God and to the speaker, navigating the physical and spiritual realms simultaneously (Stott, 1992). Proverbs 1:5 reinforces the value of a listening attitude: *'Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.'*

Henri Nouwen further underscores the importance of listening within a spiritual and pastoral context. In *From Loneliness to Solitude*, he advocates reflective solitude as a means of deepening the connection with God, which in turn informs and enriches interactions with others (Nouwen, 1981). He emphasises that prayer and attentiveness to God enable pastoral carers to cultivate empathy and to listen more fully to those they serve (Nouwen, 1986).

In pastoral practice, listening is often challenged by the impulse to give advice or judge. Awareness of these tendencies is crucial to maintain focus and presence with the speaker (Pantazi, 2018). Receiving guidance from God enables the pastoral carer to receive from others as well, creating a reflective and enriching environment. By embodying Christ's empathetic listening, the listener can offer presence and understanding to those who are hurting.

Research consistently supports the value of feeling understood in communication. Empathy, and particularly emphatic listening, is central to relational effectiveness (Notarius & Herrick, 1988) (Myers, 2000). Within educational settings, teaching listening skills has been shown to enhance comprehension and relational engagement (Naughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, Schreiner, 2007). Listening is more than a mechanical act; it is a complex, intentional practice. Lewis (2020) describes

listening as a 'generous act done for the advantage of the other.' (Lewis, 2020). Active Emphatic Listening (AEL) exemplifies this approach, emphasising focused attention and empathetic engagement. Contemporary research highlights that effective listening is deeply intertwined with internal cognitive and affective processes (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011).

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore what is crucial in professional listening. An exploration of various listening models reveals that creating both physical and mental space is foundational across all approaches. Reflection and evaluation enable listeners to align more closely with the speaker's perspective, while practices such as journaling can deepen this process. Engaging with the speaker's context fosters a richer understanding of their identity, and genuine acceptance builds trust, allowing for deeper listening. Protecting the conversation from disruptions preserves its integrity, reminding us that communication is a shared responsibility.

In the context of pastoral care, attentive listening also requires grounding in one's identity in Christ and cultivating dependence on God. This raises a vital question: To what extent do we invite God into our preparation and remain attentive to His voice during pastoral encounters? Even simple practices—such as quieting oneself before a conversation—help us remain open to God's guidance as well as to the other person.

From both personal experience and reflection, I have come to see that self-awareness, combined with attentiveness to the speaker's preferred style of communication, plays a key role in meaningful dialogue. The framework of

three listener types—head, heart, and hand—has been particularly helpful in deepening my understanding of myself and others in conversation. With this awareness, we can indeed grow our capacity for listening.

When I prepared myself holistically—physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally—to be fully present with the other, I often witnessed a transformative dynamic unfold. The 'magic' occurred, where individuals felt genuinely heard and seen as they shared their stories. In such moments, listening became more than a skill—it was a generous act, requiring both presence and care.

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