

# Healing Polarization by Listening

*by* Carl Michael Rossi

Why do we listen? Well as animals, we listen to locate – prey, predators or allies. As language-using animals, that continues. “Have you tried the salmon at the new place downtown” “Look out for that guy, he’s turning!” or “Come here and gimme a hug.”

But language allows for all kinds of additional phrases that have nothing to do with eating or being eaten. And yet we listen. Why? Because my experience has been different from yours. Because you don’t think like I do. Because we’re different. Right? Well that certainly can be the result.

But listening can also be a powerful tool for healing, indeed for dissolving polarization. We’ll operate from an assumption that you desire to use listening to heal rather than reinforce polarization. You have to want that as the result or it simply won’t happen no matter what you say or think or do.

So let’s look a bit at how we can listen in order to achieve that goal. Let’s start with a question. When listening to another person, what are you listening for?

Simply a pause (so you can say what’s on your mind)

Agenda items (like essential elements of a claim of defense or diagnostic criteria)

Positional clues (does he agree with me...is she like me...does she like me?)

Listening for any of those things is inherently polarizing. Even if he agrees with you that means there are others who don’t. And that he might not agree with you on other things. They highlight that the world is made up of ME **OR** YOU. The alternative is to listen for insight. For genuine understanding of this person.

Sometimes people will say “I want to understand you” and what they are trying to do is to know what you will do or say in the future. This is basically individual labeling. I develop an “understanding” of Susan let’s say and then I expect her to be a certain way based on the things I have put together into my label “Susan”. It’s not very different from developing an “understanding” of a person as a liberal, or as a republican, or as a man, or as a criminal. That’s not the genuine understanding I’m talking about here.

Genuine understanding and insight give access to a person’s intentions. And even people who display very different behavior can have very similar intentions.

Knowing someone’s intent is the cornerstone of an approach or conflict that is described in my newest favorite titled book Dealing With People You Can’t Stand. Brinkman and Kirchner present an outline of

how to work with people whose intentions you might well support but whose behavior is turning you off to working with much less supporting them.

This requires that you do two things: 1) alter your presumptions and 2) listen for their intentions. So how do you do this listening?

First you need silence. Turn the phone off. Close the door. No interruptions. These are obvious and you probably already do all those.

There are other things too. Like not continuing phone calls you can't actually complete in the "just a minute" that your client is sure it will take.

Instead insist on setting a time when you can give the discussion your genuine attention. Sure it feels awkward, it's hard to say to someone "I'm too busy"; so don't. Say something like "I really want to be able to give your question the attention it needs and that you deserve and I can't do that right now. I will be able to at say 3:00. How's that for you?"

But be sincere. Don't even try that if you're trying to brush off the person. Better to give them an honest "I'm not willing to talk with you about that" than to try to be polite and end up angry because they don't get the 'hint' and keep calling you.

So you've turned off the phone and minimized the other distractions. You've established silence, right? Actually that's only the easy part.

(.....45 second pause)

Did you hear it? All that noise? What noise? The noise up here in your head. You know what I mean. The questions. The new thoughts. The opinions.

It's the inner voice clamoring for your attention. It's most obvious with talk-overs. We've all heard them and plenty of times we've all been them. The ones who don't even listen for a pause before they start talking over the other person with what's on their mind.

But that's just an extreme example; we all do it to some extent. Indeed especially as attorneys we have ourselves convinced that we are supposed to be doing it. That we have to keep interrupting the client to keep him or her "on track" to the things that are important...to us. Usually the "essential elements" of a claim or defense.

It's almost as if we are convinced that if we stop processing the story and just pay attention to it, we'll forget everything we know about the law by the time the story is done! Not likely; and yet we do it anyway.

And in doing it we manage to convey to the other person 1) that we are not paying attention and 2) that what we are interested in is important while what they want to say is not.

These are two of the conversation blocks that Robert Bolton discusses in his book People Skills. And they are the product of that noisy inner voice.

So how do I silence that voice? How do I show another person that I am interested, that I do consider him/her important?

The inner voice is stilled through intention and attention. If your intention is to still the inner voice, the best way is to practice it often. Meditation is a common way to practice this. I'm not talking about contemplation. That is thinking about something; an internal dialogue. It's a great tool of the mind. But it is the opposite of silence.

Meditation in contrast is listening not to your thoughts but to the silence between thoughts. Listening to nothing.

The inner voice is also stilled by your attention. You've likely been at a gathering of people and experienced multiple conversations within earshot. When you focus on one of them, the others fade into the distance. As your focus increases, you may even get to where you genuinely don't "hear" the other conversations. That is the power of attention.

The more you consciously focus your attention on your conversation with the other person, the less you will even hear the conversation your inner voice is wanting to have with you. And if your attention is genuinely on the other person's story as it is being told, s/he will sense it.

Rebecca Zafir in The Zen of Listening refers to this attention as getting into the other person's movie. It isn't very often that you stand up in a theatre and call out to the screen "Hey can we skip this part?! What I really want to know is what happened to the redhead in the first scene!"

Okay, partly that's because you'd be escorted out of the theater by two large ushers...or so I've heard. But primarily it's because when you go to a movie you are expecting to see a story told the way someone else wants to tell it. And it's your intention to allow it to unfold the way that person wants it to.

Carry that same intention into conversations with other people. Give the same attention to their movie.

Yes, even clients. "But they ramble on and on and time is money." To that I say two things. First. It's their money. They'll be much happier paying a bill for time spent on what's important to them than on what you think is important. And also, I have found that it almost always takes less time for a person to say what s/he wants to say than it takes if I keep interrupting them to try to speed it up.

A very effective way of actively demonstrating that you are paying attention is to repeat back to the person what s/he said. Not your interpretation of it. Not your conclusions based on the law. But what was said.

And don't just say "I understand". Instead show that you heard him/her by stating it back to them pretty much the way they said it. For that an occasional interruption is okay in order to say "so what happened was \_\_\_\_\_" and then follow that up with "did I hear you correctly?"

This approach of letting the story flow benefits you as well since you get the whole story before you begin to analyze it. Would you have wanted to work on law school fact patterns one paragraph at a time?

So silence, intention, attention.....basically effective listening...how does all this relate to healing polarization? I see it as tied in to a single word – opinion.

We live in a world awash in opinion masquerading as fact. Voice your choice about a news story. Call in to talk radio. Forward an email "petition" to 20 of your soon to be ex friends.

The truth is that almost all of what you think you know about the universe, politics, your friends/lovers/family, even about yourself is opinion. The nice thing about facts is that everyone sees the same thing. However no two people have exactly the same opinion.

So when opinion is treated like fact, that means one of us has to be wrong. And it's always going to be "you". And once it's established, by that old inner voice, that "you" are wrong, it's usually followed up with you're also a bad person with evil motives: polarization.

The way we've gotten used to addressing that polarization is persuasion. Sometimes direct, sometimes subtle.

One of my favorite subtle ways is the simple question "why". It sounds so innocuous; it even sounds like I'm genuinely concerned. But most of the time 'why' or 'why did you' or 'why didn't you' aren't even really questions. They are statements hiding out as questions and the statement is simply "in my opinion, you are wrong" or stupid or evil or whatever. Usually we're not really interested in the rationale behind the action, only in expressing our disagreement with the action.

But persuasion doesn't heal anything. At best it brings a recruit to my pole. But the poles are definitely still there. Accentuated in fact because of the energy I expended to try to convince you to my way of thinking; not to mention the energy I'll have to expend to make sure you stay there. AND to make sure that I stay there. Because now that I've convinced you that I'm right, I can't possibly be open to hearing or seeing anything that might call that into question.

To truly heal polarization you must find the place at which, the way in which, there are no poles. The way in which you two do agree.

And that place will almost always be at the level of intention. You have to genuinely understand that other person's intention. And you just can't get there if you come from a place of your opinions are right; of treating your opinions as facts. You have to be genuinely curious in this moment with this person and you must be willing to ask and listen to the

answers. In the book Difficult Conversations this is discussed at length as an attitude of curiosity.

An attitude of curiosity might change “why did you do that” to “what was important for you when you did that” or “what were you wanting to accomplish”. This attitude will certainly bring out differences between you. And that could challenge you if you fear that in order for you to be okay, you have to be right. Or if you believe that in order for us all to get along, then we must all be the same.

If you can get comfortable with your own uniqueness, and not need to find your value in correctness, then polarization is no more. Then it will no longer trouble you that someone disagrees with you. Indeed you will welcome the differences that you two have found along the way.

Copyright carlMichaelrossi, MA, JD, LPC  
[cMr@CollaborativePracticeChicago.com](mailto:cMr@CollaborativePracticeChicago.com)  
[www.CollaborativePracticeChicago.com](http://www.CollaborativePracticeChicago.com)

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