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Table of Contents

Editor’s Forward Claire H. Badaracco, Ph.D.

Papers

The Future of the Global Prison Industrial Complex	Mary K. Ryan	1
Homelessness as Nonviolent Resistance	Randall Amster and David Cook	13
Compassionate Listening As a Path to Conflict Resolution	Frida Kerner Furman	24
The Ethics of Non-Violence in Journalistic Terms	Clifford G. Christians	39
World War I and the Mobilization of Maternal Sacrifice: Considerations for Peace Politics	Ana C. Garner and Karen Slattery	46
Commencing the Rationale for War: George W. Bush’s Address at West Point, June 1, 2002.....	Steven R. Goldzwig	53
Forgiveness Education: Urban Youth’s Perceptions and Collective Narratives.....	Sharon M. Chubbuck	77
Building Tangible Peace in the Heart of the South	Reba Parker	89

Poetry

“Sam Cooke”	Josephine Brown	96
“I Have a Dream...”	Tim Gee	97

Book Reviews

Mathijs van Leeuwen, <i>Partners in Peace: Discourses and Practices of Civil-Society Peacebuilding</i>	George Cheney	98
Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis, <i>Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace</i>	Claire H. Badaracco	100
Amal Jamal, <i>The Arab Public Sphere in Israel: Media Space and Cultural Resistance</i>	Mohammed el-Nawawy	102
Ezra Levant, <i>Shakedown: How Our Government is Undermining Democracy in the Name of Human Rights</i>	Chris Chan	104
Melissa Nobles, <i>The Politics of Official Apologies</i>	Steve Dobransky	106

Compassionate Listening As a Path to Conflict Resolution

Frida Kerner Furman*

We live in an impressively verbal culture. As citizens, we evaluate a politician's mettle by his or her capacity to captivate an audience through articulate speech and well-honed debating skills. As teachers, we often measure our students' worth by their capacity for oral expression and their active engagement in class discussions. If we are city dwellers, our senses are bombarded by the unceasing chatter of pedestrians, shoppers, tourists, and even drivers seemingly glued to their cell phones.

Though perhaps to a different degree,¹ the tendency to value talking is nothing new under the sun. Even the God of Judaism and Christianity creates through speech. And the Western philosophical tradition—along with the culture it created—decidedly privileges *logos*, while hardly addressing its corollary, listening. As philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara (1990) suggests, “The illusion that we can speak to others without being able to listen is, perhaps, one that we all share” (p. 29). In a somewhat different key, speech pathologist Rebecca Z. Shafir (2000) writes, “Many of us were conditioned to think that listening is a passive process, that it is the wiser person who does the talking” (p. 16).

These observations might be particularly fitting to the academic world and its tendency to privilege speech; in addition, they do not necessarily reflect the experience of all people, as those with less social power are typically obligated to listen to those with more social power—but not vice versa.

The Roman philosopher Seneca (in Skog, 2001) introduces another factor related to listening, that is, the human need to be understood and supported. He said: “Who is fair in all the world who listens to us? Here I am—this is me in my nakedness, with my wounds, my secret grief, my despair, my betrayal, my pain, which I can't express, my terror, my abandonment. Oh, listen to me for a day, an hour, a moment, lest I expire in my terrible wilderness, my lonely silence. Oh God, is there no one to listen?” (p. 115) And Paul Tournier (in Powell, 1969), a Swiss psychiatrist and author, has noted: “It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood. Listen to all the conversations of the world, between nations as well as those between couples. They are for the most part dialogues of the deaf” (p. 5).

Who in U.S. society has not engaged in the perfunctory greeting, “How are you?” without expecting or welcoming a response? Though perhaps not generalizable to all such encounters, I keenly remember my response to a colleague's such query. “I am not feeling very well,” I said, only to have him go on his way, cheerfully exclaiming, “Good!”

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¹ I imagine that in oral cultures listening is valued more than in our own, given the need to pass on cultural knowledge to future generations without reliance on a written record.

In recent years, increased attention has been directed to the significance of listening in a variety of contexts. The business world has come to recognize that work performance can be significantly enhanced by providing listening workshops for workers and managers alike. The field of communication has, concomitantly, engaged in both research and practical applications pertaining to and enhancing listening. Concerns about effective listening are also evident in educational contexts, one expression of which is the feminist emphasis on student-based learning, which shifts some of the authority typically associated with the teacher and her speaking and invests it in the students. Consequently, everyone in such a class environment is expected both to speak and to listen attentively. It is also seen in such approaches as critical race theory, where the majority is encouraged to listen to those who are marginalized for the sake of giving voice to the silenced and thereby bringing about greater social justice. In medical education, future doctors are being trained to address patients as human beings, not simply as symptoms, by listening to their concerns in the context of their whole lives. Psychotherapists, of course, have been in the business of listening for a good long time, humanistic psychology having paved the way several decades ago with client-centered therapy.² Today, changes are taking place in some of the more traditional therapeutic approaches, such as psychoanalysis, whereby some counsel the practitioner to dispense with theoretical or ideological lenses, which are seen as impediments to truly engaged and empathic listening. The popular area of “spiritual direction” as a subset of pastoral counseling reveals an emphasis on listening and discernment (see, for example, Guenther, 1992). The rapid contemporary growth of the field of mediation—from family struggles to global conflicts—further suggests the importance of listening as a critical tool for using communication to transform discord. And a myriad of efforts labeled “spiritual” by its practitioners—sometimes independent, sometimes embedded in more conventional practices—give listening pride of place. These efforts can be seen in recent publications about listening and in projects involving listening as a central activity (see, for example, Brady, 2003; Lindahl, 2002; and Shafir, 2000).

Last but not least, in recent years conflict resolution scholars and practitioners have highlighted the centrality of listening, with some calling for more research on listening as an important tool of their craft (see, for example, Gopin, 2002, p. 167, and 2004, ch. 4; and Lederach, 1999, ch. 10). Individuals and organizations have advanced several methods that address listening in conflict management and intervention, peacemaking, and reconciliation at the international, organizational, and interpersonal levels; these include Marshall B. Rosenberg’s (2003) nonviolent communication, Jay Rothman’s (1997) ARIA, the Arbinger Institute (2008), and The Compassionate Listening Project, whose emphasis on listening is the most pointed.

In this paper, I describe and analyze the practice of listening advanced by The Compassionate Listening Project (TCLP), which I use as a case study. This is a non-profit organization based near Seattle that teaches “powerful skills for peace-making, starting with peace within ourselves, and with family, community, in the workplace and beyond.... our emphasis is learning to listen and speak from the heart—even in the heat of conflict” (<http://www.compassionatelistening.org>).

² Carl Rogers is still identified by many as the guru of listening.

Using TCLP's publications, website, and actual trainings as sources, as well as my own experience, I apply a phenomenological approach to explore some of its assumptions about the self, human nature, conflict and its resolution. Having been a participant in a listening delegation to Israel and Palestine with this Project, and having participated in its advanced training, I analyze and evaluate the assumptions and methods utilized by this approach. I conclude with the suggestion that compassionate listening might be seen as a moral imperative.

Becoming a Compassionate Listener

As a Jew keenly interested in peace-seeking and justice in the Middle East, I joined a Compassionate Listening delegation of North Americans to Israel and Palestine in November of 2006 as a way to explore my developing interests in interpersonal and group reconciliation. I had done considerable reading in this area and, as is my wont, I had been searching for a concrete venue where I could experience reconciliation work on the ground, so to speak. The trip was described as an opportunity to learn the "craft of listening and speaking from the heart," to "come away with a deepened understanding of Compassionate Listening, a powerful skill set for peace-building in our families, communities, and in all conflict situations" (<http://www.compassionatelistening.org>).

Our delegation work began in Jerusalem with one day of intensive training in the methods of Compassionate Listening; this was followed by ten days of meeting with and listening to a variety of Israelis and Palestinians—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—in various parts of Israel and the West Bank tell their stories of the conflict, stories of pain, suffering, frustration, anger, fear, and sometimes, hopelessness turning to hope. This was no pleasure trip—not that I had expected that; but I also had not anticipated the level of grief and the transformational power of the experience.

A Visit to Beit Ummar with The Compassionate Listening Project

It is a sunny November day as we head south from Bethlehem, towards the West Bank village of Beit Ummar. For the first time since our Compassionate Listening delegation began its work, some five days earlier, I feel a good deal of anticipatory anxiety. Our destination is the mayor's office. We've been told that the mayor we are about to meet is a member of Hamas. I am asking myself: How can I, as a committed Jew who loves Israel and affirms its right to exist, listen compassionately to someone who shares Hamas's commitment to the destruction of the Jewish state? Is my participation in this listening moment an act of disloyalty? Will I be able to suspend judgment and "open my heart" in order to listen to Mayor Farham al-Qaham's story?

With mounting trepidation, I climb the few steps that lead us into the village's whitewashed municipality, resolving to give listening a chance. We are taken to a spacious, inviting meeting room, where we sit around a very large rectangular table. As is by now becoming predictable, the first sign of welcome arrives in the form of refreshments, a prelude, it seems, to any kind of engagement between Palestinians and their visitors. We chat amongst ourselves as we sip our drinks and savor our treats. I am sitting across from the head of the table, where an empty chair presumably awaits the mayor's arrival. Within minutes, a

handsome, bearded man enters the room; he is youngish looking, 42, to be precise, as we soon learn. He is wearing a dark suit, a tie, and a kaffiyeh. Interesting mix of traditional and western attire, I muse, though on second thought the kaffiyeh is likely worn as a political rather than a cultural or sartorial statement. Smiling all around, he extends a warm greeting, speaking to us in Arabic. Maha El-Taji, our Palestinian co-facilitator, becomes the translator for the rest of the meeting.

As is standard in the practice of Compassionate Listening, Maha begins by asking the mayor to tell us his story. The mayor announces his date of birth, then shares his early interest in science and his graduation with a bachelor's degree in "computers" at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. The narrative that follows soon becomes part of a familiar refrain for us, one we hear again and again from the Palestinians we encounter during our days of active listening. It is the story of the Israeli occupation and its impact on village life. "It is natural that I was imprisoned," he reflects. "This is a natural experience for us, typical of young men." An account of multiple incarcerations is followed by a description of his involvement in social activism within the village's city council, intended to improve the condition of the villagers. He segues into the second Intifada and the "complete and total" closure of the town, where the single gate leading to the town is arbitrarily opened and closed at the whim of the single Israeli soldier posted there. We hear of the land confiscations threatened by the construction of the separation wall, and of the consequences of the likely loss of land—the single source of income—for the villagers. We then learn of the obstacles encountered by the village in its efforts to work through the Israeli legal system against this and other land confiscations—some for the use of a nearby Jewish settlement—and against the closure of roads that prevents harvesting and taking produce to market. We are told that Palestinians need people to understand their needs and their suffering, to recognize that they, too, have a truth to tell.

I listen to all of this, my heart open and breaking, just a little bit. The facts are painful enough, and they gain additional poignancy through the mayor's beautifully poetic language—even in translation. But I also recognize this as a well-traveled narrative, one he has delivered repeatedly to one group of visitors or another. It's not that it lacks authenticity; it's just that it is a somewhat canned; it is something of a "spiel."

He ends his prepared remarks—not that he uses notes, mind you. Someone in our group asks him to share something personal about himself and his family, about the personal impact of all this on his own life. This is when the spiel comes to a full stop. He tells us of his most recent arrest, when Israeli soldiers arrived at his home at 2:00 a.m., refusing to let him change his clothes or say goodbye to his young, sleeping children. "I wanted to leave soon; I did not want the children to see the house occupied." When the children went to see him in prison, they were emotionally hurt, he reflects. His 12-year-old son began crying that "bars are for criminals," not for those pursuing good for people (his father had been arrested for his resistance against land appropriations). "These visits were so difficult, I asked my wife not to bring the children anymore." He now fears that his sons will learn to hate.

I might be cautious when the mayor talks about land confiscations, resistance strategies, and the injustices committed by the Israeli military and legal systems. After all, I don't have all the facts. I have not heard the Israeli point of view regarding these precise events. But when I listen to the stories of a father's love and protectiveness toward his children—and of his pain when his children are in pain—I don't need to hear facts, statistics, or pros and cons. I only

need to think of my daughter and of Farham al-Qaham's children. And then my heart cracks wide open and, in the depth of my soul, I affirm this man's conviction that "what unites us—Jews and Palestinians—is greater than what divides us."

A couple of weeks after my return to the States, I receive a pithy e-mail from the mayor, written in broken English and sent to the whole Compassionate Listening delegation. He writes that his meeting with us was unique, the first of its kind. He says that he's telling everyone he knows all about it.

I will return with an interpretation of this encounter following a discussion of the methods and assumptions advanced by The Compassionate Listening Project.

Compassionate Listening: Methods and Assumptions

Compassionate Listening is one of a number of approaches being used in what is known as "Track II" or "citizen diplomacy" in the Middle East and elsewhere. Participants in these efforts concede that while "Track I" or government-level diplomacy is essential for arriving at formal cease-fires and peace treaties, it is insufficient in establishing the infrastructure necessary for peacebuilding. This perspective was supported everywhere our Israel/Palestine delegation visited; people repeatedly told us that they distrusted politicians and governments, that they wanted peace, and that they could not rely on their formal representatives to achieve it. Governments were perceived as working on the basis of power and politicians for their own self interests; ordinary people, by contrast, were seen as having the capacity to understand one another and to connect at the level of one another's humanity. Cognizant of the degree of fear and rage each side feels for the other, people we listened to were skeptical that formal channels could or would engage in efforts of reconciliation deemed essential for sustainable peace. Many of the Track II diplomacy initiatives thus aim to bring about some form of reconciliation, however preliminary, across divides. TCLP believes that compassionate listening is the way to do it.³

Gene Knudsen Hoffman (2003a), the conceptual architect of the Project, advanced a major assumption held by TCLP: "An enemy is one whose story we have not heard" (p. 302). To be more precise, compassionate listening as an approach to conflict intervention is committed to cultivating reconciliation as a necessary step in paving the way for just resolutions to conflicts. Using listening as a main tool, the goal of compassionate listening is "to awaken the hearts of the various conflict participants. If the conflict participants can come to see one another as human and to feel one another's sorrows, we advocates of compassionate listening believe, they will be able to resolve their conflicts. Without such deep, mutual empathy between the parties in conflict, conflict resolution efforts often result only in temporary truces, soon broken" (Hoffman, 2006, p. 15). From the point of view of this approach, the work of peacemaking is "not to take sides but to seek truth"; its conviction is that "there will never be

³ Carol Hwoschinsky (2006) articulates this view when she writes, "Unless peace is generated among the people who live it out, treaties are not really operational on a practical level. It is the plain ordinary person who ultimately lives peace or not." She concludes that peace-makers' responsibility is to "build opportunities in all communities for people to listen to each other" (p. 9). Of course, in my judgment, diplomats working in Track I diplomacy would also benefit from more formal training in active and compassionate listening to their opposite numbers.

peace unless both sides are listened to” (Hoffman, 2003d, p. 281). The assumption underlying this position is that people are changeable and that listening to their concerns can facilitate their transformation (Manousos, 2003, p. 264), which, in turn, can lead to openness to their opponents’ humanity. Carol Hwoschinsky (2006), a lead trainer for TCLP, argues that “Compassionate Listening seeks to establish relationship through deep listening with the heart,” by which she means listening empathically. By contrast, she adds, “politicians work with positions, a mental approach. Both approaches are necessary for peace and a functioning society” (p. 8).

The emphasis on the heart versus the mind as a critical tool in listening and hence reconciliation is particularly intriguing. On our first day in Jerusalem, when our delegation was engaged in an intensive day of training in the methods of compassionate listening, we were taken through the various stages of the process of listening productively, that is, compassionately, to one another. Listening in this manner is seen as a practice, not simply as a technique. It involves concentration, focus, awareness, and attunement with the other. By necessity, it demands displacing one’s own concerns and interests during the period of listening. Obstacles to effective listening include distraction, curiosity and the desire to satisfy it, attending to one’s own positions about what is being said, and impatience to have one’s say. If I am building an argument in my mind or preparing a clever question to ask the speaker while she speaks, I am unable to truly listen and register that person’s ideas, values, and feelings, all of which are significant in appreciating her experience. This view is consonant with many other perspectives advanced by specialists in listening. For example, according to psychologist Michael P. Nichols (1995), “The essence of good listening is empathy, which can be achieved only by suspending our own preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person” (p. 10). Similarly, Tom Bruneau (1989) a communication scholar, calls this type of listening “empathic listening,” which he claims “sometimes requires courage and much effort to lose one’s own egocentric identity.... It is the obverse of selfish listening” (p. 16).

In the training, we are taught to listen by first carefully attending to the speaker’s story, its content and explicit facts. We listen to the speaker, provisionally extending the status of truth to his perspective, even if such truth is partial in nature. Those facts reflect how the speaker has experienced the conflict under consideration; and it is *that* experience that needs to be validated and acknowledged in this process.⁴ Yet, listening to verbalized facts is only the start; we need to move from effective listening to compassionate listening. We are thus also taught to listen for the speaker’s values and feelings, discernible under the surface of speech, perhaps in the tone of voice, perhaps through body language, perhaps in the pauses and the silences that punctuate his speech.⁵ In the training, these tasks are taught separately, isolating one from the other; but the goal is to attend to all three levels while we engage in compassionate listening, a difficult challenge indeed. And while we do all of this, we must quiet our own minds and silence whatever agitation begins to creep up as we get “triggered” by the

⁴ According to physician and writer Rachel Naomi Remen (2007), the facts of a story may be understood as its “bones,” with the speaker’s experience overlaid upon them.

⁵ Paul Friedman (1993) writes, “Embedded in our narratives are clues to what we really think and can not, or will not, articulate in an expository way. Discerning belief systems that drive narrative accounts is a listening skill vital to social researchers” (p. 205).

speaker's facts and affect, which may well offend if not enrage us. In a sense, this emphasis on listening to the speaker's own experience while quieting our own assumptions and perspectives reflects a commitment to a phenomenological process of knowing and understanding, one that calls for the "bracketing" of our own views.

As a group, we decide that if we perceive that a delegation member sitting next to us during a listening session is becoming unduly exercised by what is being said, we are to turn towards her and give her a kiss on the cheek, to remind her to return to a neutral emotional state. We must discipline ourselves to locate that quiet space within, the unflappable core essence of our being, where we find we are connected to everyone and everything around us. I ask if this "core essence" is to be thought of as Buddha Nature, since I find the language being used very redolent of Zen. "Whatever you can connect with or associate with 'core essence' works," explains Leah Green, director of The Compassionate Listening Project and our trainer, adding, "It is that high loving essence that we can intuit when we are centered at that place." We are instructed to pay attention to our body, for when we are in tune with our core essence, the body is soft, quiet; the body can also tell us when we are engaged in reactivity, when we have been triggered; it will then feel tense, anxious, tight.

Our job as compassionate listeners is to create a safe space for the speaker, and this means making room for her truth to take center stage, while our own truths are put in abeyance. As I come to understand it, what this means, *de facto*, is the displacement or suspension of the listener's self in the service of the speaker. TCLP uses the language of "letting go of ego attachment, of the need to be right" (TCLP's Advanced Training, Seabeck, Washington, February, 2008). Like other spiritually informed approaches to listening, TCLP has been deeply influenced by Buddhism. Gene Knudsen Hoffman, characterized as a "Quaker peacemaker and mystic" (Manousos, 2003), was a dedicated student of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and provided much of the conceptual foundation for the practices and principles of The Compassionate Listening Project in its early years.⁶ Hence, the appeal to remove the ego, quiet the mind, open one's heart, and return to the "core essence" when one is disquieted by the speaker's message can be seen as a very direct dimension of Buddhist practice, somewhat modified for the purposes of placing listening as the central activity of this process.⁷ But one can also interpret the removal of the self or ego from the listening moment as a type of love, perhaps in its *agape* form, as a sacrifice of one's own interests and concerns for the sake of affirming the other.

Of course, listening is not seen as an end in itself, but as the practice of being present to our interlocutors on a daily basis, and in so doing helping them to feel acknowledged and accepted. Ultimately, this practice is to be put in the service of conflict intervention, when listening deeply can connect us across significant boundaries of difference for the sake of deep mutual understanding. There is an emphasis here on right relationship, an ethical view

⁶ Since its founding in 1996, TCLP's practices and principles have grown and have been further developed by a small cadre of certified trainers, including its director, Leah Green.

⁷ In fact, Thich Nhat Hanh (2003, ch. 2) speaks of "deep listening" or "compassionate listening" when referring to methods similar to TCLP's. Quakers refer to this kind of attentive listening as "devout listening" (Halifax, 2003, p. 138).

emphasizing care, healing, and, ideally, reciprocity and mutuality between speaker and listener—emphases that analytically may be located within the ambit of feminist ethics.

Gene Hoffman was a long-term peacemaker, involved in efforts of citizen diplomacy during the Cold War, participating in many delegations to the Soviet Union involving American and Soviet citizens. In the 1980s she turned her attention to work in the Middle East with Israelis and Palestinians. Hoffman's views on conflict and peacemaking were also shaped by her multiple experiences with psychotherapeutic methods—and her responses to them. She became an active participant in Re-evaluation Counseling, some decades ago espoused by Quakers across the country, which she describes as follows: “We were taught to listen to one another and care for one another in new ways, and we belonged to a network of people who were all seeking self-healing through this peer counseling process....Re-evaluation Counseling was a gift of caring that people could give one another—a ministry of love.... This was part of its great appeal to me ... the capacity for ordinary people to help each other heal themselves by means of aware, attentive, safe, caring listening” (Hoffman, 2003b, pp. 154-155).

The intention behind compassionate listening is thus to bring healing to the speaker—and possibly to the listener as well—since the “fundamental premise of Compassionate Listening is that every party to the conflict is suffering and that every act of violence comes from an unhealed wound” (Green, 2007, p. 106). By promoting the idea of “healing the world from the inside out” (TCLP's Israel/Palestine delegation training, Jerusalem, November 7, 2006), Compassionate Listening thus advances a spirituality grounded in healing.

In the mid-70s, Hoffman completed her master's in religion and pastoral counseling. Her rich and varied background shaped her view that

While we stand steadfast against cruel actions, our attitude toward violent people requires ... compassion towards them.... I believe that our work as peacemakers is not to take sides but to seek truth, that there will never be peace unless both sides are listened to. We must care about those who hurt others, and listen with respect to those who disagree with or oppose us. I believe that through such listening we can open new avenues for communication where people are in conflict. We hope that one day they will be able to listen to each other. (Hoffman, 2003e, pp. 278, 281)

As she claims that no side “is the sole repository of Truth,” Hoffman (2003d) reveals her Quaker commitments: “But each of us has a spark of it within. Perhaps, with compassion as our guide, that spark in each of us can become a glow, and then perhaps a light, and we will watch one another in awe as we become illuminated. And then, perhaps, this spark, this glow, this light will become the enlightening energy of love that will save all of us” (p. 190).

To listen compassionately, TCLP's literature frequently reveals, is to “listen with our ‘spiritual ear’” (Green, 2007, P. 106), which is more than a well honed skill. “I am not talking about listening with the human ear,” Hoffman (2003c) explains, “I am talking about ‘discernment,’ which means to perceive something hidden and obscure.... This is very different from deciding in advance what is right and what is wrong and then seeking to promote our own agenda. We must literally suspend our disbelief and then listen to learn whether what we hear expands or diminishes our sense of Truth” (p. 254).

Such listening is to be done through the provision of attention and uninterrupted space for the articulation of the speaker's thinking, feeling, and valuing. Another way that empathy is encouraged in this approach is, as has been suggested, through "listening with an open heart." This I take to mean suspending judgment and connecting to the basic humanity and the suffering of the being to whom we listen. Martin Buber (1970) might conceptualize such an encounter between speaker and listener as one between an "I" and a "Thou," one characterized by unconditional acceptance.

I return now to the Compassionate Listening delegation's visit to Beit Umar and our meeting with Mayor Farham al-Qaham, which I introduced earlier in the paper. You will remember that soon after our trip, I received an e-mail from him suggesting our visit had had a major impact on him. Upon reflection, I wonder why this meeting was so significant for him. I intuit that he is not used to being listened to by outsiders (including the Jews amongst us) and to have his "truth"—however partial—acknowledged and affirmed; this may well have felt that *he* was being acknowledged and affirmed. This is, of course, an experience that is common for people who experience oppression, insofar as their voices are often silenced in the public arena. Being listened to attentively and with care and compassion by a delegation of international non-Palestinians is likely to be a healing moment for Palestinians, for the pain they experience under occupation is exacerbated by their perception that the world has forgotten about their suffering.

Buber (1966) reminds us that the kind of acknowledgement and affirmation extended by compassionate listening "does not mean approval; but no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person" (p. 105).⁸ So I conclude that this, too, must have been a transformative moment for the mayor, as it was for me. I begin to understand the power of compassionate listening more deeply. My experience mirrors Hwoschinsky's (2006) observation that "the real challenge of Compassionate Listening is to hear the stories of both the oppressed and the oppressors, to listen to people who hold very different values from our own, and to develop empathy for the human being which transcends the issues" (p. 11). A similar understanding of the complex concept of empathy is articulated by Alan Geyer (1998), Canon Ethicist at the Washington Cathedral, when he writes that peacemaking requires "[t]ranscendence of one's interests and perspectives for the sake of understanding the interests and perspectives of the other side, which calls for the virtue of *empathy*" (p. 87; italics in the original).

I am reminded here of psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's (2004) powerful account of her meetings in South Africa with Eugene de Kock, the Afrikaner known as "Prime Evil" and considered by many to be the most brutal of apartheid's covert police operatives (p. 4). In her book, *A Human Being Died That Night*, she tells of the time when she asked him to talk about his encounter with the widows of two of his victims. "His face immediately fell, and he became visibly distressed.... There were tears in his eyes." As he expressed his feelings, his hands trembled, his mouth quivered. Gobodo-Madikizela continues, "Relating to him in the only way one does in such human circumstances, I touched his shaking hands, surprising

⁸ A similar view is advanced by psychologist Michael Nichols (1995) when he writes, "By momentarily stepping out of his or her own frame of reference and into ours, the person who listens well acknowledges and affirms us. That affirmation, that validation, is absolutely essential for sustaining the self-affirmation known as self-respect" (p. 15).

myself.” She recoils for a moment, becoming aware that “not too long ago [he] had used these same hands, this same voice, to authorize and initiate unspeakable acts of malice against people very much like myself.... And yet ... something else seemed to assure me that there was nothing especially incongruous in this display of emotional vulnerability and my response” (p. 32). In that encounter, Gobodo-Madikizela recognizes an empathic response on her part after the fact; this was a spontaneous response to de Kock’s suffering, not one following rational reflection.

A similar dynamic may well be at play when Israelis and Palestinians who have lost a loved one to the Middle East conflict are brought together by The Parents Circle – Families Forum to share their stories of grief and loss. Half Israeli, half Palestinian, these bereaved families, bonded by their sorrow, turn their efforts to reconciliation between their peoples while the conflict goes on (see <http://www.theparentscircle.com/about.asp> and the film *Encounter Point*, directed by Julia Bacha, 2006, which movingly features some of these families.)

Scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution agree that when opposing sides are brought together, it is important to establish trust by first exploring similarities across their divides. This is certainly the case, for example, in religious dialogue, where the discovery of similar ethical impulses or shared scriptural figures may be used as a stepping stone to deeper connection between the two sides. (See, for example, Abu-Nimer, 2002, and Gopin, 2002). It seems to me that in the case of compassionate listening, the commonality that is discovered is more affective and less consciously mediated by analytic, religious, or intellectual categories. The listener is confronted with the raw emotions of the storyteller, whether they be grief, anger, or fear. My experience with the mayor, as Gobodo-Madikizela’s with de Kock, suggests that empathy may be the only available response in such encounters—that is, feeling the pain of the other—assuming the listener truly opens herself to the other. This takes me to a particularly poignant reflection shared with our delegation by a group of Israeli Jewish women we met in the Galilee. One of them, Marsha, told of “a moment of moral shame” she experienced during her first visit to the West Bank some years back. She was shaken to the core as she listened to the Palestinians’ stories, recollecting that “The world broke apart when I realized what Israel is doing to the Palestinians.” Like the others we met that evening, she is now involved in the Israeli peace movement and active in projects toward reconciliation. This might suggest that when empathy is at work in the ways described, when space is created to truly listen to the other, a move toward compassion has taken place, that is, a shift that might well move to action on behalf of the other.

It is important to recognize that however fruitful engaging in compassionate listening across divides may be, it is obviously not the be all and end all of reconciliation and peacemaking efforts. There are certainly limits to this method, as alone it cannot secure peace between opponents. I like to picture it as a beginning point in a trajectory of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, insofar as it brings adversaries together to recognize each other’s pain and humanity, which helps to create trust. In so doing, compassionate listening has the capacity to lay the groundwork for other necessary steps leading to reconciliation and lasting peace, including the recognition of power differentials between adversaries and to injustices calling for redress.

Storytelling in Compassionate Listening

In compassionate listening, storytelling and listening go hand in hand. Unlike some methods of conflict resolution that involve dialogue or the exchange of political points of view, this approach relies on storytelling as central to communicating one's experience to another. In my estimate, it is this emphasis that particularly contributes to the effectiveness of compassionate listening as a method of conflict intervention. You will recall that I first referred to the mayor's narrative as a *spiel*; I perceived the many facts he delineated about the conditions of his village as unfortunate and even tragic. But I was only able to get past his being a member of Hamas when he shifted his narration to his personal experience. My concerns about Hamas's position regarding the state of Israel were temporarily displaced as I focused my attention on this man's painful experiences, vulnerabilities, and protective love for his children. Retrospectively, as I analyze these dynamics, I identify several dimensions of compassionate listening that contributed to my ability at that time to see the mayor in his full humanity, and not as someone potentially threatening to my Jewish identity, which is partly defined by my commitment to the state of Israel.⁹

During our group process meeting the evening of our visit to Beit Ummar, a Jewish member of the delegation expressed tremendous distress at having had to engage with a member of Hamas. She experienced this as a betrayal of the Jewish people. Particularly addressing other Jewish members of our delegation, she asked us to share our reactions. I first explained my original reservations and apprehensions; but then I said, "I *made* myself bracket out the mayor's political views by centering myself and listening to his humanity." In short, I *had* been able to access that "core essence" that Leah Green had spoken about in order to focus on the mayor's story. As a Jew, I had felt no inconsistency between my Jewish commitments and the experience of being in touch with my "core essence." Perhaps this approach works because of the elasticity of this concept; Leah may have been right—one may fill it with any content that feels personally fitting and appropriate to one's religio-ethnic worldview. I suspect that Yossi Klein Halevi (2002) did just that when he ventured into a journey of reconciliation with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. Of course, it helped that he was involved with mystical fellow seekers whose boundaries are far more permeable than more conventional borders. As he movingly tells it in his book, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, he connected with others across hatred and distrust by engaging in listening and silence *with an open heart*.

The emphasis of listening to the other's stories with an "open heart"—of listening with the heart, not the mind—serves to suspend hierarchal and dualistic forms of thinking and categorizing. One is encouraged to relate to the other outside familiar social conventions and cultural constructions, embracing the notion that our core essence connects us to each other at the level of our very humanity. In doing so, we are called, at least momentarily—in a kind of

⁹ I recognize, of course, that my perspective is not generalizable to everyone; I am not an Israeli citizen and do not live with the potential violence experienced by Israelis on a daily basis, which often colors their views on peace and security, and which might well affect their openness to listening to Hamas members and other Palestinians. At the same time, sessions conducted between Israeli Jews and Palestinians by TCLP have resulted in experiences similar to mine on the part of Israeli Jews (Leah Green, personal communication).

liminal space—to disengage from our group affiliations. This kind of listening, therefore, becomes an exercise in empathic connectedness. At that moment, for me, the mayor ceased being a threat to my people—given his association with Hamas; I came to perceive him as a wounded human being; I became connected to him by his suffering and my empathic identification with that suffering. This process of identification reverses the dehumanization of the other so common in conflict situations (see Lederach, 1999, ch. 3).

Another dimension that forwarded this type of connectedness for me was hearing about the mayor's experience through an actual story, a personal testimony, as opposed to the discussion of facts told in the "spiel." Stories engage us emotionally—through the heart, as it were; by contrast, facts command the mind's attention, which is not the principal seat of empathy. It is not coincidental, for example, that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission relied on narration of life stories as a process of national healing in South Africa. So, for me, it was not only the mayor's *personal* account, as such, that was significant, but the fact that this account was delivered in story form—that is, his experience of being arrested and its consequences for himself and his family, particularly his children.

I entered the mayor's office with a good deal of anxiety about meeting him, given his membership in Hamas, classified as a terrorist organization by the West, its charter known to call for the destruction of the state of Israel. My encounter with and openness to the mayor's personal story highlighted his humanity, thereby displacing for me my internalized "master narrative" about that organization and its members, and hence suspending my totalizing identification of him with Hamas's charter. His story challenged that master narrative; instead, listening compassionately to the mayor's story revealed a suffering, vulnerable human being—whatever else he might be. This dynamic ultimately problematized my reliance on what James C. Scott calls "public transcripts," (in Lipsitz, 1977, p. 13) or representations of reality favored by dominant groups, in this case, by the West, in general, and by the United States and the state of Israel, more specifically. Given this tendency, George Lipsitz (1997) observes that "every representation leaves something out." He goes on to suggest that every struggle to tell a story "is also a struggle to displace a story" (p. 19). The upshot is that I left the village of Beit Ummar enlarged by this encounter and compelled to humanize the other—a member of Hamas—and to reorganize my attitudes and emotional predispositions, even as I struggled and continue to struggle with the political complexities of the conflict on the ground.

Conclusion

My hope is that the preceding account of compassionate listening communicates its effectiveness in engendering empathy and its potential as a path to conflict intervention and reconciliation across individual and group divides. The idea behind this method is to practice it enough so as to become compassionate listeners in our everyday exchanges. Yet, like any other practice that calls for inner transformation, this one presents difficult and ongoing challenges. So often, preoccupied with our own lives and responsibilities, our everyday encounters lack attention, empathy and compassion toward the other. If that is the case, what can we expect when traversing divides across serious or seemingly intractable conflicts?

As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, Paul Tournier (in Powell, 1969) believes that most conversations are "for the most part dialogues of the deaf" (p. 5), failures, in fact, at

authentic communication. Do we, as ethicists, teachers, or practitioners, currently model such “dialogues of the deaf” for our students, colleagues, and others in our social worlds? Should we? How do we invite our interlocutors to consider the value of active, compassionate listening?

Tom Bruneau (1989) believes empathic listening “can be taught and should be taught as a natural and essential skill in being fully human.” Though “it is difficult [and] ... requires much listening energy,” he concludes that “the alternative is much too grim to consider” (p. 16). How do we begin the process of learning and teaching this form of listening? How do we engage others in what undoubtedly involves what David Wellman calls “creative discomfort” (personal communication)?

Social activist Fran Peavey (2003) spent several months traveling the world with a sign reading, “American Willing to Listen.” In some places people lined up for the opportunity to talk about their lives to someone truly interested in listening to them without judgment. She herself was transformed by the experience of meeting so many people and learning so much about their realities, concerns, hopes, and dreams. Not too many of us are willing or able to undertake such a project of boundary crossing across the globe. But ethics involves the establishment of right relations between and among individuals and peoples. If compassionate listening constitutes a path to such relations, perhaps we need to see it as a moral imperative and begin thinking of ways to implement it in our teaching, in our collegial relationships, and in our daily lives. We might then view listening as a form of social action,¹⁰ as a type of social transformation.

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¹⁰ According to Johanna Leseho and Laurie Block (2005), “In the therapeutic context, listening is social action” (p. 184). Might such a claim apply elsewhere as well? If so, are we as ethicists and teachers mandated to pursue such a form of social action?

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