

THE EGO HEARS BUT LOVE LISTENS

by Ian Pinto, silb

Two old acquaintances who hadn't seen each other for years, were walking down the street together, reminiscing old times.

"Just a minute," said one, "I think I hear something," and turning a loose paving stone over, he liberated a cricket which was chirping merrily away. "Why, that's astounding. Of all the people on the street at this hour, hurrying from work, you alone heard the cricket above all the traffic noises."

"My friend," said the first. "I learned a long time ago that people hear in life only what they want to hear. Now, the noise of traffic has neither increased nor decreased in the past few moments, but watch." And as he finished speaking he let a silver half dollar fall from his pocket to the sidewalk. Everyone within an amazingly large hearing distance stopped and looked around.

Each of us has been blessed with two ears which enable us to connect with the world around us through sound. You would think that hearing comes naturally to us. It does to some extent. However like in the story, many of us reduce our capacity for hearing. We adopt an attitude called selective listening, wherein we hear only what we want to hear and become deaf to things that don't appeal to us.

The ability to hear is vital for a healthy relationship. So often

you hear people saying to one another, "Just hear me out!" Everybody likes to be heard but not everybody is willing to listen. This is a sad situation that we are facing today. We don't have time to talk and listen to one another, and then we find ourselves wondering why our relationships aren't working out. While this is true of all relationships it is specially so for families.

Listening takes time, and in our rushed world we feel we haven't got that sort of time. When one person approaches another and says or indicates, "I've something I want to talk about", the listener isn't going to do much good if she says "Well, hurry up, because I have washing to do and the beds to make." Yet, this is just the sort of reply many parents give their children when the child badly wants the comfort of an understanding listener.

Perhaps he came home early from school because the other boys wouldn't play with him, and his mother says, "Well, don't mind them. Go out and play with Joe." Within him, the little lad's heart is crying out "But they don't want me. Why do none of them ever want me?" But his mother has gone out of the room at this stage. She is too busy to listen. She hasn't tuned in to him. She loves him, oh yes, but she is too busy to listen, so he feels lonely and unloved.

HEARING AND LISTENING

Livestrong.com published a crisp article that lucidly distinguishes between hearing and listening. It succinctly brings out the features of hearing and listening and helps clarify the two concepts. When a person responds to your words by saying "I hear you," you may sometimes wonder if he is truly listening to you. Perhaps you find your mind wandering off when someone is sharing her thoughts with you. Hearing and listening have quite different meanings: Hearing is a passive occurrence that requires no effort. Listening, on the other hand, is a conscious choice that demands your attention and concentration.

Everyone wants to be heard and understood, but at one time or another most people don't listen and fail to understand the meaning of another person's words. It's a human desire to have your feelings acknowledged, whether or not someone agrees with you. Listening creates an intimate connection and makes you feel cared about.

Developing good communication skills is critical for successful relationships, whether parent, child, spouse, or sibling relationship. We all have had experiences where we have felt heard and understood and we've all had experiences where we have felt misunderstood and even ignored. Generally, when we feel heard, we are less angry, stressed, and more open to resolving problems than when we feel misunderstood. Feeling heard and understood also develops trust and

caring between people.

You can hear someone speak without listening to the words. Hearing defines only the physical measurement of the sound waves that are transmitted to the ear and into the brain where they are processed into audible information. Hearing occurs with or without your consent. When you merely hear someone's words but are not listening to what's being said, it can lead to misunderstandings, missed opportunities, regrets and repentment.

Listening goes far beyond your natural hearing process. It means paying attention to the words that are being spoken with the intention of understanding the other person. Your personal perceptions and prejudices can affect the quality of your listening skills. For example, if you feel that the other person is crying over what you perceive to be trivial matters, you are less likely to listen to her. This is a strong tendency especially when dealing with children. What may seem like a big problem for the child may in fact be something small and insignificant but it is imperative that a parent or elder takes the trouble to listen to the child and give her/him an impression that she/he is heard and that her/his problem is acknowledged. Even though this may seem unimportant and tedious, it is important to the child and hence must be taken seriously. The self-esteem of the child is affected by the reactions of her/his parents and elders to the child's talk.

There are four basic levels of



hearing and listening, according to Toast Masters. You can easily fall into one of these categories in different conversations. A non-listener is totally preoccupied with his personal thoughts and though he hears words, he doesn't listen to what is being said. Passive listeners hear the words but don't fully absorb or understand them. Listeners pay attention to the speaker, but grasp only a part of the intended message. Active listeners are completely focused on the speaker and understand the meaning of the words without distortion.

Some of the things that prevent us from listening well are:

1. When we assume we know what others are thinking, or that they should know what we are thinking.
2. When we focus on what we want to say while others are talking—instead of listening to them.
3. When we bring up other problems and issues unrelated to the topic at hand.
4. When we assume we know what is right for others and try to convince them of this.

All of these things either keep us from sending a clear message

or keep us from receiving the message the other person is trying to send.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Communicating well takes practice and effort. It is not something that comes naturally for most of us. Below are some keys to good communication. These skills and techniques may seem strange and awkward at first. But if you stick with them, they will become natural in time. Active listening is a way of listening to others that lets them know you are working to understand the message they are sending.

- Make sure your body language conveys to them that you are interested and listening. You can make eye contact with them, turn your body toward them, and nod as they are talking to let them know you are listening.

- Reduce any distractions that will keep you from focusing on their message. Try to stop whatever you are doing that may distract you from their message—such as watching television or trying to read while the person is talking to you. You may need to tell them, “I will be better able to listen to you once I am done with my work.” Trying to listen while doing other tasks usually does not allow one to clearly hear the message.

- Listen for the content and the feelings behind the words. Do not just listen to the content of what is being said. Listen for the feeling that the person is trying to convey to you. Are they expressing joy, sadness, excitement, or anger—either through their words or body language?

- When the person has finished talking, paraphrase back to them what you heard them saying. “What I am hearing from you is...” “It sounds like... was very upsetting for you.”

- Do not offer advice to the person. When we offer advice (especially when it was not asked for) it often shuts down communication. The person first needs to know that you have understood them and that they have sent their message clearly to you.

You will be surprised at how your conversations and relationships change when you focus on listening to the other person—rather than thinking of your next response.

Children too, need to be taught to listen. One of the first steps in educating them in this regard is for us to listen actively to them. When we actively listen to children, we are letting them know that they can send a message and that their message is important to us. As noted before, it is important that we give them our full attention—listening for the feelings as well as the content of their message. We must restrain from offering advice right away.

Second, we need to actively teach children how to listen. The child needs to focus on the person who is talking—eliminating as many distractions as possible. This may mean turning off the television, asking them to look at you, or having them come in the same room with you while you talk with them. Just as we give them our attention, we need to teach youngsters to give their attention to others. To be sure

they have understood your message, ask youngsters to repeat back to you in their own words, what they heard from you. In this way, you are teaching them to paraphrase what they have heard. If the child does not repeat the message back clearly, this offers a time for clarification and another opportunity to teach that good communication takes effort—and that we sometimes don't get it right the first time. Finally, children learn the most by communicating with us and by watching how adults communicate with each other.

The sort of listening that is really loving, is a sort where one gives oneself with total concern for the other person—with an assurance of complete confidentiality. Each member of our families needs to be so loved. How wonderful it is if within a family everyone feels accepted and trusted by everyone else. Whether or not we give them time, our children will grow physically, but they will not grow emotionally or spiritually to their full potential unless we give them time as individuals to talk to us about themselves and in such talking, to learn, as well as to teach us more about what is happening to themselves.

Listening is an art that is developed over a period of time with repetitive, conscious effort. Our lifestyles make it incredibly tough for us to listen. Yet, we all desire to be listened to, and hence it is only right that we ‘do to others what we expect them to do for us’ (Mt 7:12). □