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## Listening for the Sacred: A Method and Pedagogy Toward Hope

### Abstract:

Active listening and storytelling are proving to be effective practices toward generating empathy and compassion across different generations, cultures, and beliefs. In this paper I explore the methods of Holy Listening and storytelling as means used by faith communities and public agencies to create spaces where storytellers and listeners can be transformed by the simple acts of sharing and listening. Practitioners of religious education can use methods of Holy Listening and storytelling to promote learning across barriers as well as to learn more about the lives of their own faith communities.

It is said that “being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are indistinguishable.”<sup>1</sup> Listening well is a powerful act of empathy. In this paper I will examine insights from the practice of Holy Listening as it was used in the Young Adult Initiative at Garrett-Evangelical as an interview protocol with guided, open-answer questions; storytelling methods practiced by libraries, churches, and other sacred spaces for the purpose of empathic listening; and give examples of the use of listening and storytelling as bridges in churches, libraries, and other spaces that can be used concurrently in religious education to help bridge divides and build relationships across differences.

In March 2017, the Young Adult Initiative at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, funded by the Lilly Endowment, embarked on an ambitious project to conduct thirty in-depth interviews with young adults in the Chicago area about their spiritual lives, work lives, private lives, and the ways in which the Church has helped to form, and sometimes malform, their faith. Each hour-long interview consisted of questions such as:

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<sup>1</sup> David W. Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1982).

- What is important for me to know about your growing up years that had an important impact on who you are (such as a-ha! moments/travel/family/health issues)?
- In what ways, if at all, have your ideas about (or your relationship with) your faith evolved over time? Tell me about any ideas or experiences that challenged, destabilized, or called into question your spiritual/religious beliefs (if this has been part of your experience). How did you respond to the experience you described?
- How did you get involved with your church or faith community? How did you hear about it? What initially motivated you to attend? What made you want to return?
- How does this [church/community] compare with your past experiences of church or community?
- From your perspective, what types of people participate in [church/community]? (for example, age; race/ethnicity; gender; sexual orientation).
- How do you feel about the people? Do you know everyone? Lots of new friends? Awkward people? Some you don't like?

These kinds of open-ended questions created space for the interviewer to both learn and experience empathic connection with the persons interviewed. The interview questions not only solicited the telling of experiences, but also functioned as sites for meaning-making in the creation of an often stream-of-consciousness response.<sup>2</sup> In most cases, the persons interviewed

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<sup>2</sup> Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 75.

were thankful for the opportunity to share their stories and the process of the interview itself led to further self-understanding and self-empathy. They experienced a form of rediscovery, where even though they had experienced something, in the telling of the story they discovered something new.<sup>3</sup> In telling or retelling stories, they felt more connected to their experiences. It is rare in casual conversation for someone to be really listened to, and the interviewees were often grateful for the chance to be listened to so deeply without any agenda being sold.

The interview process we engaged in was called Holy Listening, and was created and directed by Dori Baker, senior research fellow with the Forum for Theological Exploration. Holy Listening, as described by Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, is a pedagogical strategy to build empathy between listener and storyteller; educate about difference; and serve as a mediator by which both listener and storyteller learn together and create knowledge that can help both imagine and even create spaces of hope for engagement and practice across faith differences.

In 2007, Baker and Mercer developed the concept of Holy Listening in relation to their work in religious education with youth. In their book *Lives to Offer*, Baker and Mercer describe Holy Listening as a means of creating space for teens to offer testimony—not just to what God has done, but to “the voicing of memories of an experience, event, or relationship that has been tucked into the seams of everyday living.”<sup>4</sup> What they are describing is the power of storytelling combined with the power of deep, connected listening.

Baker and Mercer go on to say, “When invited, these stories might pour forth and come into focus as significant testimony to God’s activity in the small moments of life.”<sup>5</sup> The Young

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<sup>3</sup> Dori Baker, Tobin Belzer, Bethany Stolle, and Karen E. Mosby, “Holy Yearnings, Holy Listening, Holy Partnerships” March 2018, [https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy\\_listening\\_report\\_f?f?e=1301864/63074758](https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy_listening_report_f?f?e=1301864/63074758), 19 (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, 73.

<sup>5</sup> Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, 73.

Adult Initiative interviewees experienced this “coming into focus” as they vocalized what they knew internally but had perhaps not attempted to explain coherently as a story. The practice of responding with story to someone invested in deeply listening to that story is a profound way of making meaning from one’s experiences. Many of our interviewees answered short, one-sentence questions with long, connected trains of thought that often started with something simple and ended with something deep and meaningful. As Baker and Mercer so deftly describe,

With only the briefest of prompts from the listener, the speaker sorts out the possibility of a fulfilling future, sometimes one that is radically countercultural. The speaker makes urgent use of this rare audience, basking in the undivided attention of a listening “other” to test significant new meanings.<sup>6</sup>

The interviewees were not the only ones to benefit from their storytelling experience. The young adults who were conducting the interviews also found the *listening* experience to be meaningful in multiple ways. There was a mutuality to the process that the interviewers appreciated. They were positioned to create a space for another person to reflect deeply and as one interviewer noted, giving them “the spotlight and letting them shine in it.”<sup>7</sup>

The interviewers were drawn into the stories they were being told, which creates a shared empathy between the storyteller and listener. Interviewers reflected on their own experiences that connected to what they heard in the interviews. Even though it wasn’t required, some of the interviewers set up further connections with their interviewees around shared interests or a simple desire to know the person more deeply. One interviewer said, “I felt confident in that

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<sup>6</sup> Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Dori Baker, Tobin Belzer, Bethany Stolle, and Karen E. Mosby, “Holy Yearnings, Holy Listening, Holy Partnerships” March 2018, [https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy\\_listening\\_report\\_f?f\\_e=1301864/63074758](https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy_listening_report_f?f_e=1301864/63074758), 19 (accessed September 13, 2019).

space. They had made themselves vulnerable: I didn't want to leave. I was like 'okay we should probably do this again.' There was this trust built... and I get to keep maintaining that trust."<sup>8</sup>

In practicing deep listening to someone they were acquaintances with but didn't know very well, the interviewers found that they had made assumptions about their interviewees that were revealed to be incorrect during the space of the interview. One interviewer stated, "One thing that surprised me about the individuals I interviewed was there's a lot about them that I didn't know, that I wouldn't have expected: a lot of passions they have that I was completely unaware of."<sup>9</sup>

Something akin to this method is being combined with the practice of storytelling and used across both religious and secular spaces to foster communities of empathy. Public libraries across the United States are hosting what they call Human Libraries, where patrons volunteer to be storytellers to "readers" who check them out for conversation and to learn from their experiences. The Human Library movement began in Denmark in 2000 and has since spread to 85 countries, including the United States.<sup>10</sup> Evanston Public Library in Evanston, Illinois hosts a Human Library once or twice a year in a program they have titled "UNJudge Someone."<sup>11</sup> A Human Library event is an opportunity for "Readers" to "check out" a real human person ("Book") who has experienced prejudice based on race, sexuality, disability, and/or other attributes. A "Book" has volunteered their time to speak about their lives and engage with

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<sup>8</sup> Dori Baker, Tobin Belzer, Bethany Stolle, and Karen E. Mosby, "Holy Yearnings, Holy Listening, Holy Partnerships" March 2018, [https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy\\_listening\\_report\\_f?f=e=1301864/63074758](https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy_listening_report_f?f=e=1301864/63074758), 19 (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Dori Baker, Tobin Belzer, Bethany Stolle, and Karen E. Mosby, "Holy Yearnings, Holy Listening, Holy Partnerships" March 2018, [https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy\\_listening\\_report\\_f?f=e=1301864/63074758](https://issuu.com/shane206/docs/holy_listening_report_f?f=e=1301864/63074758), 20 (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> "Human Library: unjudge someone," Evanston Public Library, [www.epl.org](http://www.epl.org), <https://www.epl.org/events/human-library-unjudge-someone/> (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> "UNJudge Someone," Evanston Public Library, [www.epl.org](http://www.epl.org), <https://www.epl.org/unjudge-someone/> (accessed September 13, 2019).

“Readers” in a one-on-one environment suitable for deep listening and respectful questions. The event is held in the library, during a specific timeframe, which creates healthy boundaries around questions and answers, particularly for sensitive topics and themes. In this way, a public space creates an environment where one can listen to and learn from a person who may be radically different from them in a structured environment, free from distractions or unhelpful, unsafe commentaries or stimuli. The library serves as a structured learning environment for developing or furthering empathy, compassion, and bridge-building in a community.

Religious communities are also embracing storytelling as a means of developing empathy and creating space for growth and transformation. Gilead Church in Chicago has become known as the storytelling church, where they “tell true stories that save lives.”<sup>12</sup> At Gilead, storytelling is more than a form of testifying—it is the word of God, for the people of God.<sup>13</sup> It takes the place of a more traditional liturgy or scripture reading as it is performed before the presentation of a sermon from one of the pastoral staff. Gilead Chicago meets weekly in a variety of places—a Sunday service at a bar; a party to welcome newcomers on one of Chicago’s beloved EL trains; and a rented theater that served as a space to build giant forts to reconnect with a sense of childhood wonder and create new friendships as a Lenten discipline. On Sunday evenings at their regular meeting time, between sips of beer, one of the pastors delivers a sermon and congregants tell stories and build community based on inclusivity, shared experience, and a desire to grow spiritually and make sense of a life of faith.

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<sup>12</sup> “Home,” Gilead Chicago, [www.gileadchicago.org](http://www.gileadchicago.org), <https://www.gileadchicago.org/#home> (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Katelyn Ferral, “Life Stories - Not Sermons - Guide Gilead Church in Chicago,” *Religion News Service*, religionnews.com, March 4, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/04/life-stories-not-sermons-guide-gilead-church-in-chicago/> (accessed September 14, 2019).

Garrett Seminary has also embraced storytelling as a means of hospitality for staff, faculty, and students. At the beginning of the 2019 school year, the seminary used storytelling in its first all-employee meeting of the year. Two staff members who had received certificates in Community Storytelling led the community in group storytelling as a kick-off to Innovation Week at the school. They began by asking us to think of a toy we played with as a child in a different way than it was intended. One of the leaders told us how she had an oversized coloring book that she would color in, but also set up on its side in order to “step into” the pages like a tent.

Administrator, staff, and faculty broke out into groups of four and shared our stories, each taking a minute or two. The energy in the room heightened as members of the community recalled using their imaginations in unique and playful ways to create new realities with their toys. Our leaders pointed out to us that there is something about telling stories that connects us to our bodies – we are created to tell stories about our lives, and these stories reconnect us with ourselves. They asked us to think about how it felt to remember our childhoods. Some responded with saying it created a feeling of playfulness in them, while others expressed a painful sadness in how they used to play at one point in their lives, but responsibilities for family life took away their opportunities to play at too young of an age. The act of telling stories together bonded us together as a community, as well as touched a necessary part of our own inner stories. Even for those who already know each other quite well, the act of telling and listening to a story strengthens a bond and the teller and the listener come away with new knowledge about their partner, themselves, and the community.

The leaders of the storytelling experience at Garrett received their certificates in Community Storytelling from *The Hearth: Real Stories by Regular Folks*, founded in 2010 by

author and speaker Mark Yaconelli.<sup>14</sup> Yaconelli founded *The Hearth* on the belief that telling stories can “heal, connect, enrich, and mobilize communities for good.”<sup>15</sup> *The Hearth*’s certificate program makes the case for storytelling as having “the potential to bridge divides, cultivate trust, and inspire action by inviting those gathered to better understand what others have lived, suffered, and overcome. All human divisions could be healed if we would only take the time to listen to one another’s stories.”<sup>16</sup> It is this belief that powers movements like The Hearth, churches like Gilead Chicago, and library programs like UNJudge Someone. Combining Holy Listening and Storytelling has proven to be an effective means of connecting people and bridging communities of difference in these spaces.

The interview process employed by the Young Adult Initiative at Garrett was just the beginning of their five-year Innovation Hub project.<sup>17</sup> In keeping with educator Jane Vella’s principles of adult learning, the interviews served as a compelling “Needs Assessment.”<sup>18</sup> The interviews were coded to reveal the goals, desires, needs, and frustrations of the young adult interviewees. The themes that emerged from the interviews were then used by the young adults and other members of their congregations to contemplate ways to further engage young adults in their congregational contexts. This method of listening for themes is vital according to Vella, for “when adult learners are bored or indifferent, it means their themes have been neglected in the design of the course. . . . People are naturally excited to learn anything that helps them understand

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<sup>14</sup> “About,” The Hearth Community, [www.thehearthcommunity.com](http://www.thehearthcommunity.com), <https://thehearthcommunity.com/about/> (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> “About,” The Hearth Community, [www.thehearthcommunity.com](http://www.thehearthcommunity.com), <https://thehearthcommunity.com/about/> (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> “Certificate Training 2020,” The Hearth Community, [www.thehearthcommunity.com](http://www.thehearthcommunity.com), <https://thehearthcommunity.com/certificate-training-2020/> (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> <https://garrett.edu/youngadultinitiative>

<sup>18</sup> Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, Revised Edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass) 2002.



their own themes, their own lives.”<sup>19</sup> This played out in a group experience of coding for themes by the interviewers themselves. They came alive in the process of sifting through interview transcripts, looking for the common themes among young adults similar to themselves. Holy listening in this context created a deeper understanding and connection to the needs of the young adults involved in Garrett’s initiative and generated renewed interest in the place of young adults in the Church.

Baker and Mercer, through their practice of holy listening with youths, began to see it as a “functional model of the religious educator.”<sup>20</sup> In the same way, religious communities like Gilead Chicago have begun to see storytelling as a model for liturgy and community-making in the Church. Holy listening and storytelling combined prove to be an effective method for religious educators, pastors, and other community-minded persons to begin to understand one another across differences; create space via events that bring people together whose lives normally do not intersect; and provide space for individual and community meaning-making toward the hope of a more just and inclusive world.

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<sup>19</sup> Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*, 81.

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