

*Part II*  
*Clarification:*  
*The Art of Understanding*

4

# NOT LISTENING

Love asks no questions. Its natural state is one of extension and expansion, not comparison and measurement.

—Gerald G. Jampolsky,  
*Love is Letting Go of Fear*

## SELF-ASSESSMENT

Before beginning Part II, take a few minutes to complete this self-assessment exercise. It is relatively simple, but will provide you with important information later. It is essential that you do this *now*, because once you start reading Part II your responses are likely to change, and the value of this exercise will have been lost.

The following six paragraphs are things that a person might say to you. With each paragraph, imagine that someone you know is talking to you and explaining a problem that he or she is having. You want to help by saying the right thing. Think about each paragraph. On a clean sheet of paper write, for each paragraph, the *next thing* you might say if you wanted to be helpful. Write only one or two sentences for each situation.

1. A forty-one-year-old woman says:  
“Last night Joe really got drunk and he came home late and we had a big fight. He yelled at me and I yelled back and then he hit me hard! He broke a window and the TV set, too! It was like he was crazy. I just don’t know what to do!”
2. A thirty-six-year-old man says:  
“My neighbor really makes me mad. He’s always over here bothering us or borrowing things that he never returns. Sometimes he calls us late at night after we’ve gone to bed and I really feel like telling him to get lost.”
3. A fifteen-year-old girl says:  
“I’m really mixed up. A lot of my friends, they stay out real late and do things their parents don’t know about. They always want me to come along and I don’t want them

to think I'm weird or something, but I don't know what would happen if I went along either."

4. A thirty-five-year-old parent says:  
"My Maria is a good girl. She's never been in trouble, but I worry about her. Lately she wants to stay out later and later and sometimes I don't know where she is. She just had her ears pierced without asking me! And some of the friends she brings home—well, I've told her again and again to stay away from that kind. They're no good for her, but she won't listen."
5. A forty-three-year-old man says:  
"I really feel awful. Last night I got drunk and I don't even remember what I did. This morning I found out that the screen of the television is busted and I think I probably did it, but my wife isn't even talking to me. I don't think I'm an alcoholic, you know, 'cause I can go for weeks without drinking. But this has got to change."
6. A fifty-nine-year-old unemployed teacher says:  
"My life just doesn't seem worth living any more. I'm a lousy father. I can't get a job. Nothing good ever happens to me. Everything I try to do turns rotten. Sometimes I wonder whether it's worth it."

At this moment someone in your congregation or very nearby is feeling the pain of depression and wondering whether it's really worth it to go on living. A problem drinker is reaching for that next drink. Someone else is feeling panic, a fear that fills the whole body, and is wondering whether he or she is going crazy. Not far away is a family torn by arguments and misunderstandings and, perhaps, by violence. There is a teenager who has run away from home, or who is now thinking about it. There is a senior citizen who is lonely and who wonders what life means after all these years. There is someone afraid of dying, someone afraid of living, someone who feels lost, someone distressed by what has been found.

How can you reach out to them and let them know that it is safe to talk? And if they do, how can you help?

If we had to choose only one skill to teach to pastors, it would be the skill of *listening*, which is the subject of this chapter and the next. On the surface, most pastors take it for granted that listening is important, but quality listening involves much more than being quiet, or waiting a longer than average time before giving advice. The kind of listening that we will describe here is a whole way of thinking, even a whole way of living in relation to others. It is a skill which, if you succeed in mastering it, will leave you a different person and will continue to teach you and to enrich your relationships throughout the rest of your life. It's that good.

This kind of listening is not easy to learn, nor is it easy to teach. It is especially challenging to try to capture on the printed page the essence of this skill, as opposed to teaching it in workshops where demonstration and feedback are possible.

The best way to begin is by explaining what good listening is *not*. You must first learn all of the things that are commonly confused with listening or that people often do instead of listening, usually with the best of intentions. This whole chapter is devoted to *not* listening. Read it carefully. It is a preparation for learning what

listening is, just as one must wipe a blackboard clean before anything new can be written on it.

## THE PICTURE WITHOUT THE SOUND

Imagine a person you know whom you believe to be a poor listener, one who does not pay attention to what others have to offer. Imagine that you are watching a videotape recording of this person talking to another, and that the sound has been turned off. All you have is the picture. What do you see?

If this nonlistener is like most, several things can be observed. There will be relatively little eye contact. He or she looks away, stares at the floor or a wall or a watch, or perhaps looks around the room to see if there is someone more interesting to talk to. In various ways his or her posture may betray lack of interest—perhaps turned away, closed up, leaning back from the other. The spans of time when the nonlistener is not talking are fairly short; he or she listens to the first few words of the other person, then begins an impatient nodding of the head as if the other's meaning were already understood, hoping to hurry the person along to a breath or a break where his or her own wisdom can again be inserted. There are long spans of time when the nonlistener does not stop talking—apparent monologues. Facial expression doesn't change much, at least not while the other person is talking, and what there is communicates a kind of boredom at having to endure listening to the other person talk. If there is anything else at hand to do—stir the soup, open the mail, polish fingernails, look for a lost paper, fill the salt shakers, alphabetize books on the shelf—the nonlistener is likely to be doing it. Otherwise his or her fingers may be engaged in fiddling with clothing, tossing a pen or pencil, drumming on the arm of the chair, straightening hair, pulling on the beard. If sitting, the nonlistener looks restless, moving about in the chair as if cramps were setting in.

Of course it's a rare nonlistener who succeeds in showing all of these. This is a catalog of the ways in which, intentionally or not, people communicate nonverbally to others that they are at best mildly interested in what others have to say. There are variations based on individual habit—the perpetual smile, the intent frown, the bobbing head that looks ever so much like one of those spring-necked puppy dogs in the back window of a car. Everyone has nonverbal quirks: it is usually a crushing shock to observe oneself on videotape for the first time. Many of these quirks are small and insignificant, but certain characteristic patterns communicate inattention, even if that is not the intent. This can be especially confusing if the words the person says express the opposite.

If you have the opportunity to observe yourself on videotape we recommend that you take advantage of it. Many counselors discover through this process that they have been nonverbally communicating inattention through simple behaviors of which they were quite unaware. What does your picture look like without the sound?

## ROADBLOCKS

As we turn on the sound we encounter a different kind of information, but one that is also very subject to habit. All of us have learned through our life experiences certain “natural” or typical ways of responding to what other people say. These vary widely from one person to another, but usually they consist of responding with one’s own material: one’s own views, beliefs, feelings, judgments, opinions, reactions. That is not always wrong, as it is important to let other people know about you. But doing this, we will argue, is different from good listening.

Almost all “normal” ways of responding turn out to be roadblocks to the other person. What is a roadblock? It is an obstacle in the road which you must go around in order to keep going. That is exactly what happens in conversations. As an individual, you have some important things to say. If you begin saying them to another person—for convenience we will call him “Joe”—what will happen? If Joe is like most folks, he will listen for a few seconds until he thinks he knows what you mean, then he will react with his own material—his own experience, criticism, evaluation, opinion. This will probably have an interrupting effect on you; it will move you away from your own train of thought, and now you have to react to his reaction. If you want to keep on telling Joe about you, you will have to find a way around the roadblock that he put in your way. Otherwise the conversation will soon be only about Joe. If Joe is good at roadblocks, you will soon give up trying to go where you were originally headed and may even forget what it was you originally had wanted to say.

Roadblocks have the effect of interrupting, of stopping the other person from saying what he or she wants to say. They are communication stoppers. They stand in the way of understanding.

Usually the person setting up the roadblock doesn’t mean to be nasty or selfish. Typically the intentions are good. Perhaps the person is trying to be helpful or even to be a “good listener.” Unfortunately that’s not the message that comes across. Behind a roadblock there is usually at least one of these messages:

- “I know how to solve your problems better than you do. Listen to me.”
- “There’s something wrong with you. I’m better than you are. Listen to me.”
- “You’re not important enough to listen to. Listen to me.”

Again that may not be what the person means to say, but by setting up a roadblock instead of listening, that is the message the person communicates. “Listen to me!” Everyone is hungry to be listened to. That’s why it is such a great gift to listen to someone *without* using roadblocks.

A good description of these roadblocks comes from psychologist Thomas Gordon, whose “Effectiveness Training” books are well-known. Perhaps more than anyone else he has succeeded in translating the valuable concepts of Carl Rogers into language that people can understand. The roadblock descriptions that follow were first described by Dr. Gordon in his excellent book, *Parent Effectiveness Training*.<sup>1</sup> They have been modified slightly and examples have been added, but these are the most common roadblocks that Gordon called “the typical twelve.” They represent twelve ways in which people often respond or try to be helpful.

**1. Ordering, directing, or commanding** Here a direction is given with the force of some authority behind it. There may be actual authority (as with a parent or employer) or the words may simply be phrased in an authoritarian way. Some examples:

Don't say that!  
You've got to face up to reality.  
Go right back there and tell her you're sorry!

**2. Warning or threatening** These messages are similar to directing, but they also carry an overt or covert threat of impending negative consequences if the advice or direction is not followed. It may be a threat that the individual will carry out, or simply a prediction of a bad outcome if you don't comply.

You'd better start treating him better or you'll lose him.  
If you don't listen to me you'll be sorry.  
You're really asking for trouble when you do that.

**3. Giving advice, making suggestions, providing solutions** Here the individual draws on her or his own store of knowledge and experience to recommend a course of action. These often begin with the words:

What I would do is . . .  
Why don't you . . .  
Have you tried . . . ?

**4. Persuading with logic, arguing, lecturing** The underlying assumption in these is that the person has not adequately reasoned it through and needs help in doing so. Such responses may begin:

The facts are that . . .  
Yes, but . . .  
Let's reason this through . . .

**5. Moralizing, preaching, telling them their duty** An underlying moral code is invoked here in "should" or "ought" language. The implicit communication is instruction in proper morals. ("Preaching" here is used in its more negative sense, of course.) Such communications might start:

You should . . .  
You really ought to . . .  
It's your duty as a \_\_\_\_\_ to . . .

**6. Judging, criticizing, disagreeing, blaming** The common element here is an implication that there is something wrong with the person or with what he or she has said. Note that simple disagreement is included in this group.

It's your own fault.  
You're being too selfish.  
You're wrong.

In this group as in most of the others, the same message can be implied without using these exact words.

**7. Agreeing, approving, praising** Some people are surprised to find this included with the roadblocks. This kind of message gives a sanction or approval to what has been said. This, too, stops the communication process and may also imply an uneven relationship between speaker and listener. True listening is different from approving and does not require approval.

I think you're absolutely right . . .  
That's what I would do . . .  
You're a good boy . . .

**8. Shaming, ridiculing, name-calling** Here the disapproval is more overt, and is directed at the individual in hopes of "correcting" a behavior or attitude.

That's really stupid.  
You should be ashamed of yourself.  
How could you do such a thing?

**9. Interpreting, analyzing** This is a very common and tempting one for counselors: to seek out the hidden meaning for the person and give your own interpretation.

You don't really mean that.  
Do you know what your *real* problem is . . . ?  
You're just trying to make me look bad.

**10. Reassuring, sympathizing, consoling** The intent here is usually to help the person feel better. What's wrong with that? Nothing, perhaps, but it's not listening. It meets the criterion as a roadblock because it interferes with the spontaneous flow of communication. Examples:

There, there, it's not all that bad.  
Things are going to work out all right.  
Don't worry, you'll look back on this in a year and laugh.

**11. Questioning, probing** People also mistake asking questions for good listening. Here the intent is to probe further, find out more. A hidden communication from the questioner, however, is that he or she will be able to find a solution as soon as enough questions have been asked. Questions interfere with the spontane-

ous flow of communication, diverting it in directions of interest to the questioner but not, perhaps, to the speaker.

What makes you feel that way?

How are you going to do that?

Why?

**12. *Withdrawing, distracting, humoring, changing the subject*** Finally, this very direct roadblock is an attempt to “take the person’s mind off it.” It directly diverts communication, and underneath implies that what the person was saying is not important or should not be pursued.

Let’s talk about that some other time.

That reminds me of the time . . .

Hey, what’s all the fuss about?

You think *you’ve* got problems, let me tell you . . .

I hear it’s going to be a nice day tomorrow.

Oh, don’t be so gloomy. Look on the bright side . . .

Two reactions are common at this point when the roadblock information is presented in workshops. One is defensive: “What’s wrong with that?” At the risk of being repetitious, it must be emphasized, that these responses are not *bad*. Each of them has its time and place, its appropriate uses. However, none of these represents good listening. All of them have the effect of blocking and diverting the person’s own exploration of meaning. To listen is to do something else.

The second reaction is: “My word, that’s everything I say! What else is there?” We assure you that there is something more. To listen is to do something else, and that something else is the subject of Chapter 5.

## **Self-Assessment**

Before proceeding, take a moment now to look back at the self-assessment you completed at the beginning of this chapter. Examine each of your responses carefully for roadblocks. As you identify them, place beside your response a number that corresponds to the roadblock numbers listed in this chapter. If, for example, you had said to the fifteen-year-old girl, “I think it’s very brave of you to stand up to your friends. That’s what you should do,” you might score the first sentence (7) for praising and approving, and the second sentence (5) for moralizing. Had you asked her a question instead, you would score it (11), unless the question was a hidden form of another roadblock like (8), “Don’t you think your parents would feel terrible if you got mixed up with those kids and got in trouble?”, which also has overtones of (2).

This exercise is not intended to make *you* feel bad, or to say that you have been doing things all wrong. Rather it is to acquaint you with the types of

roadblocks that you may be most prone to use through the communication habits you have acquired over the years. These are the easy “reflex” responses that you fall back on instead of listening.

## SUMMARY

A first step in learning how to be a good listener is the removal of obstacles. Various nonverbal habits can communicate disinterest or otherwise disrupt the development of a working therapeutic relationship. Likewise the twelve “roadblocks” represent common ways of responding to people’s statements. They are nonlistening responses, even though they constitute most of the repertoire of many people who regard themselves as “good listeners.” There is nothing inherently wrong or inappropriate in using such responses: advising, questioning, consoling, persuading, etc. Indeed these represent valid parts of pastoral counseling. Yet they are *not* listening, and they do disrupt the client’s natural process. When listening is your goal (as in the clarification phase of counseling) it is helpful to avoid the temptation to use verbal and nonverbal roadblocks, and to rely instead on the skills of reflective listening, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## ADDITIONAL READINGS

- EGAN, GERARD, *The Skilled Helper: A Model for Systematic Helping and Interpersonal Relating* (2nd ed.), Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1982.
- GORDON, THOMAS, *Parent Effectiveness Training*. New York: Wyden, 1970.
- IVEY, ALLEN, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: Skills, Theories and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980.
- IVEY, ALLEN, *Intentional Interviewing and Counseling*. Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1982.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*. (New York: Wyden, 1970).