



Soul Matters

Living Love Through
The Practice of
Deep Listening



Small Group
October 2024

Welcome to the Practice of Deep Listening

*This is your chance to listen carefully.
Your whole life might depend on what you hear.*

- [Joyce Sutphen](#)

Listening helps us find our way. The listening of therapists allows us to navigate our way through life. We turn to prayer to hear God's guidance. We listen to experts so we can get ahead. Like a flashlight that leads us through the darkness, listening helps us stay on course.

And yet maybe there's more to it than that. What if listening doesn't just guide us through the world, but also *creates* our world.

Just think about why you listen to those close to you. Is it really just to gather information? To hear the other clearly? Or is it because you've discovered in those rare moments of deep listening that a space suddenly opens up between and around the two of you? A space that is radically different than the space you inhabited a few minutes prior. A space that feels sacred. A space that, once you've experienced it, you never want to leave.

This is why the flashlight way of understanding listening is so limited and limiting. Listening's value isn't just instrumental. It doesn't just help us collect and clarify information. It's not just a tool.

It's a place!

That sacred space of being deeply listened to isn't just calling us home; it *is* home. We don't have conversations; we are our conversations. Listening literally constructs the world we live in. And whom we become.

Consider that old story about the cricket and the coins. Two people are walking down a busy city street. Everyone is rushing to and from their work, trying to get ahead. One of the friends turns to the other and says, "Do you hear that? It's a cricket!" The other friend responds with skepticism, but after focusing his attention finally hears it. "Wow," he says, "How did you hear that cricket with all the noise around us?" His friend responds, "It's all about how I was raised, about what I was taught to listen for." He goes on, "Here, I'll show you something." The friend then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a handful of coins - nickels, quarters, dimes - and he drops them on the sidewalk. Everyone who was rushing by stops... to listen.

One wonders if this is why the poet says, "Listen carefully. Your whole life might depend on what you hear."

Again friends, we must remember this: We don't have conversations, we are our conversations. Who and what we listen to is who and what we become.

May this month, and our time together in our groups, help us take one more step toward listening our way home.

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did and what gift it gave you.

Option A

Lectio Divina and Listening for a Text to Speak

This year our monthly themes are framed as practices, as a way of inviting us to think more deeply about our historic UU commitment to “deeds, not creeds.” With that in mind, this exercise invites you to try out a deep listening practice developed by our Christian siblings. It’s called Lectio Divina, which translates to “divine reading.” You can learn more about it [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

The basic idea is to deeply listen to a text by reading it multiple times through a different reflective lens each time. You can also think of it as bringing different discernment questions to the text, with each question inviting you to listen to the text in a new way. It’s all about bringing greater intentionality to a text so that it “speaks” to you, or so that your inner voice can speak to you through the text.

Here’s our suggested instructions, which honor the traditional approach but add a few Soul Matters twists:

- Start by picking a text. Poems are usually best, so pick a favorite poem you want to revisit. You can also choose from [THIS LIST OF POETRY](#) that we’ve put together.
- Center yourself. Sit quietly for a couple of minutes. Or do some deep breathing.
- For the **first reading**, read it aloud and simply **focus on the feelings** it evokes. During and after reading, ask yourself: What is the dominant feeling I am experiencing? Which part of the poem evoked the strongest emotional response? What happened in your body as you read the text?
- For the **second reading**, focus on which phrase or line “**pops out**” at you or “[shimmers](#)” as you read it. Then reflect afterward on that phrase or line, asking: Why is this line hooking me? What is my inner voice trying to say to me through it? How is my inner wisdom trying to get me to look at or wrestle with something through this line/phrase?
- For the **third reading**, focus on what **memories** arise. Before, during and after you read, hold in your mind questions such as “What memories are being stirred?” or “What memory does this poem want to reconnect me with?” Afterward, reflect on the question of, “What does this memory want me to do with it?” or “What does this memory of the past want to say to me about my present?”
- For the **fourth and final reading**, ask yourself, “How is my inner voice and deepest self trying to offer me **a message of comfort or challenge** through this poem?”
- If you are up for another reading or want to swap one of the above out, consider using this question to guide you: “Who am I in the text? Which character, object or action represents me and where I’m at right now?”

Option B

The Metaphor of What Speaks to You

Listening to your inner voice is obviously about trying to hear a message. But the often less obvious (but just as crucial) part is deciding what metaphor to use to describe that inner voice. Or to put it another way, how we envision our inner voice significantly shapes what we hear.

For instance, if we think of our inner voice as “our soul speaking,” we will listen quite differently than if we think of it as “our heart speaking.” Likewise, we will surely hear something different from “the still, small voice within,” than from “the ache buried deep inside me” or “my creative muse.”

So, to honor this part of the practice of deep listening, spend some time this month reflecting on the metaphors you’ve used to understand and relate to your inner voice. Here are the three ways we suggest you go about it. As you reflect, consider writing down the names/metaphors as you reflect. Or maybe even draw a representation of them as you go!

- **Explore your current name for it:** What metaphor is dominant for you now. Why and how did that come to be? Do you notice anything new as you retrace the story of how this came to be “your metaphor”? Do you notice a gift this metaphor gave you that you didn’t notice before?
- **Explore your past names:** Trace all the metaphors you’ve used over your entire lifetime. Start with your childhood; maybe “God” is what spoke to you then. Move into your youth, when maybe it morphed into “my conscience.” Then later maybe it became “the devil on my shoulder.” And now maybe it has become “that still small voice within.” After you are done, step back and reflect on the narrative arc of all these metaphors. What do the twists and turns of their disappearance and emergence say about you and the story of your life? How did each of them serve you well at the time? What about them didn’t serve you well? What did they help you hear? What did they not allow you to hear?
- **Explore other and possibly new names:** Write down as many names/metaphors as you can think of. This is all about the metaphors that you’ve heard others use, i.e., you may never have used “the angel and devil on my shoulders” or “Jiminy Cricket” or “the Holy Spirit,” but you know others have. After you are done listing as many as you can, sit back and soak the list in. Meditate on them until a couple stand out. Ask yourself why they speak to you. Then add your own imagined metaphors, ones nobody has ever used, but ones you are now inspired to “try on.” Ones that you think will help you hear what you need to hear; ones that might make you into the listener you need to be in your life right now. Let your creativity loose as you come up with the names. For instance, “my mama bear within,” “the wild horse inside that wants loose,” “my untamed self,” “The child that went inward to stay safe,” “the rebel I keep hidden inside,” “The river within.”

Option C

Listen to a Labyrinth

One of the most ancient deep listening tools is the labyrinth, a maze-like structure on the ground used for introspective walking meditations. For this exercise, spend some time this month learning about them, finding one(or creating one) and walking it.

To help you on your way, you can get background on the spiritual practice of labyrinths [here](#) and [here](#), as well as some how-to guidance [here](#) and [here](#). Labyrinths are quite popular so it should be easy to find one at a park, university or church near you. If you can’t find one, you can try this wonderfully creative [at-home stone version](#)

or try a [finger labyrinth](#) using a simple printable finger labyrinth found [here](#) or [here](#). If you are feeling adventurous, you could also make one in your backyard using [spray paint](#) or [mulch](#) or [leaves](#), build [one in the sand](#) if you are [near a beach](#), or create one in your home out of [candles](#).

When it's time for you to walk the labyrinth, we suggest that you bring to mind a question, worry or problem as you enter the labyrinth and reflect on it as you wind your way to the middle. When you arrive at the center, remain there for a while and listen for an insight or answer to the question you brought with you. Once you feel that you've listened enough, walk back focusing on how you might integrate the experience or the message from the center into your living and loving.

Option D

Practice the Art of Listening

We practice to become good musicians. We practice to become good athletes. We practice to become good artists. But somehow we've been led to believe that we don't have to practice to become good listeners. So let's spend the month focusing on and practicing **just one listening skill**. Yes, spend the *month*! After all, it's not really practicing if you only do it a few times. So keep your chosen listening skill/tactic in your back pocket and look for opportunities to use it. And if you are looking for motivation to stick with it, just remind yourself of the words of pastor and minister David Augsburger, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable." Knowing that we are getting better at loving, not just listening, will surely make the practicing worth every minute.

Oh, "What listening skill might I choose?" you ask. Well, we've found a few that seem manageable, impactful and most needed. Here you go:

- Stop Interrupting by [taking a breath](#) and/or [looking them in the eye](#) or using the [80-20 rule](#)
- "Go on." & "Tell me more." (i.e. "[Empty the bucket](#)")
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpnNsSyDw-g&t=47s> (found minute 1:20-2:05)
- "Will you tell me your story?" and "I'd love to know how you came to this point of view."
<https://urbanconfessional.org/blog/howtendisagree>

Option E

Which Deep Listening Companion Piece Speaks to You?

Sometimes we come across a quote, song, article or movie and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light.

With this in mind, spend some time this month going through the *Companion Pieces* section below to **find the one piece that speaks most powerfully to you**.

As you do so, we encourage you to use the same discernment practice as we do with the packet's list of questions: Go through them with an eye for the one that "shimmers" the most.

Come to your group ready to share the piece you picked, why it called to you and the journey it took you on.

Option F

Ask Them About Deep Listening

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It's also a great way to deepen our relationships! Below is a list of questions to help you on your way. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won't be a typical conversation. Telling them a bit about Soul Matters will help set the stage. *Remember to also answer the questions yourself as they are meant to support a conversation, not just a time of quizzing them.*

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation(s) and what gift or insight it gave you. As always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a message of comfort or challenge through these conversions with others.

Deep Listening Questions:

- On a scale of 1-10, how good of a listener are you? Tell me a story to help me understand why you named the number that you did.
- What type of people do you have the hardest time listening to?
- Thinking back to your childhood, what did you learn about listening by watching your parents interact with each other?
- Have you ever heard the ocean or the woods or the sky speak?
- If you could go back to a conversation and correct how you listened, what conversation would that be?
- Do you believe that our bodies carry a wisdom that our minds don't? If so, tell me about a time when the wisdom of your body "saved" you or helped you avoid a mess. Was there ever a time that you regret not listening to your body?
- If I were to put my ear down to the ground of *your* life, what questions would I hear bubbling [beneath the surface](#)?
- How have your wounds and losses altered the way you listen?
- How good are you at listening compassionately to yourself?

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. How you answer them is often less important than the journey they take you on.

So, read through the list of questions 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions "[shimmers](#)."

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to [speak to me](#) through it?*
- *How might Life or my inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*



1. Thinking back to your childhood, what did you learn about listening by watching your parents interact with each other?
2. Have you ever heard the ocean or the woods or the sky speak? If so, how might their words still be relevant for you today?
3. If you could go back to a conversation and correct how you listened, what conversation would that be?
4. Have you checked in with your longings lately? What might they be asking of you?
5. If I were to put my ear down to the ground of *your* life, what questions would I hear bubbling [beneath the surface](#)?
6. How have your wounds and losses altered the way you listen?
7. What if prayer is really about listening until you hear a voice that says "[You are beloved](#)"?
8. If you asked [Love](#) "Where do you need me to direct my attention?", how might it answer you back?
9. What would the world sound like to you without the noise of worry in your head?
10. What noise gets in your way the most: The noise of self-doubt? Striving? Scarcity? Jealousy? Regret? Something else?
11. How good are you at listening compassionately to yourself?
12. There are [those who say](#) that listening to the wisdom of the unprotected, marginalized and silenced is the only way that the path to justice becomes clear. What is one step you could take this month to hear those voices?
13. Has being listened to ever felt like being loved?
14. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. Nor are they intended to be analyzed in your group. Instead they are here to companion you on your personal journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of embodying the practice of deep listening in your life.

Word Roots & Notes

Listen comes from the old English, *hlysnan*, meaning both "attend to" and "obey."

"Silent" and "listen" are anagrams. They have all the same letters in a different order!

Wise Words

The first duty of love is to listen.

Paul Tillich

Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable.

David Augsburger

When someone deeply listens to you it is like holding out a dented cup you've had since childhood and watching it fill up with cold, fresh water. When it balances on top of the brim, you are understood. When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved.

[*John Fox*](#)

Our listening creates sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person.

Rachel Naomi Remen

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept.

[*Henri Nouwen*](#)

Questions that have no right to go away are those that have to do with the person we are about to become; they are conversations that will happen with or without our conscious participation.

David Whyte

Sainthood emerges when you can listen to someone's tale of woe and not respond with a description of your own.

Andrew V. Mason

One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story people often interrupted her to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely.

[*Rachel Naomi Remen*](#)

Interrupting sends a variety of messages. It says: "I'm more important than you are."

"What I have to say is more interesting, accurate or relevant."...

"This isn't a conversation, it's a contest, and I'm going to win."

[*Dianne Schilling*](#)

There is something in every one of you that waits; so listen for the sound of the genuine in yourself. And if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you're searching. And if you hear it, and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born... you will, all of your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

[*Howard Thurman*](#)

We have, at least a lot of us have, awesome instincts. If we listen hard enough to our own hearts, we notice when the whispers become fervent little screams: "That! That! That's what I want more of. That's what I crave to understand. That's the kind of person/mountain/book I want to be near. That's the way I want to feel."

[*Courtney E. Martin*](#)

First, learn to listen.
Not only for enemies around
corners in hidden places,
but for the faint footsteps
of hope and the whisper of resistance.

[Rev. Sean Parker Dennison](#)

If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law's protection most!—and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it.

James Baldwin

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The human race is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

[Maya Angelou](#)

My friend, Agape, says it like this: “Hear the Biography, not the ideology” ... When you find yourself in disagreement, just ask one question: “Will you tell me your story? I’d love to know how you came to this point of view.”

[Benjamin Mathes](#)

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers...
If what a tree or a branch does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

[David Wagoner](#)

The real “work” of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me,... and calls [me] beloved... To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being, to your guts, and let that voice resound in your whole being.

Henri Nouwen

The silence of the morning includes you.

The wildflowers in the pasture welcome your looking...

The noise of the city is not mindless but pleading.

Hear the world calling to you,

neither an emperor nor a beggar

but a lover, a spouse, calling you to come home.

[Steve Garnaas-Holmes](#)

Places sing calling songs. Just now, they might be missing their people. We might learn that by allowing ourselves to miss them... In our bone-deep missing, and in our willingness to remember ourselves as worthy of being missed, we could begin to hear [their] songs.

[Adam Wilson](#)

Our bodies are telling the stories we have avoided or forgotten how to hear - and sometimes our inability to feel our feelings (the messages that precede the alarm bells) means that our bodies have to scream in order to get some attention.

[Hillary L. McBride](#)

I sometimes wake in the early morning & listen to the soft breathing of my children & I think to myself; this is one thing I will never regret & I carry that quiet with me all day long.

[Brian Andreas](#)

Speak as if God is listening. Listen as if God is speaking. Speak as if Spirit is speaking through you. Listen as if Spirit is listening through you.

[Alexandra Bell](#), on *Quaker Practice*

Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

Parker Palmer

Music

Click [here](#) for our Spotify playlist on Deep Listening
Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on Deep Listening

Remember! [Our theme-based playlists](#) are organized as a journey, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Videos & Podcasts

Everything is Alive

<https://www.everythingisalive.com/>

If we listen deeply and imaginatively enough, we discover that everything is alive and speaking to us, even that soda can on the shelf or that bar of soap sitting by the sink!

We suggest starting with [this episode](#) and if it hooks you, move on the [this one](#) and [this one](#).

The Story Of John Cage's '4'33"

On listening to the music of silence

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bGU9NTJllo>

More [HERE](#) ; One performance of it [HERE](#)

Weightless by Marconi Union

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfcAVEjslrU&t=344s>

A song designed to slow a listener's heart rate, reduce blood pressure and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. One set of [neuroscientists](#) have named it the most relaxing and stress-relieving song on earth.

Sanctuaries of Silence - a listening journey

<https://vimeo.com/268526502>

The Power of Walking and 17-Year Vow of Silence

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4PMfoAK2Ek>

Adam Grant on How to Debate Someone With Opposing Views

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onwCTtU1Vyc>

Dancing and Listening to Grains of Rice

The instructions for [this art piece](#) as well as [this one](#) were simply "listen to the rice and listen to your partner." Watching them create it can't help but help you listen to yourself!

Articles

Want to Fix Your Mind? Let Your Body Talk.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/18/magazine/somatic-therapy.html>

"Listen" Deeply to a Painting

The New York Times challenges you to [test your deep listening skills](#) by spending 10 minutes with [one painting](#)?

Relatedly, check out the "[slow looking art movement](#)."

How to speak to a hostile crowd

<https://www.planetcritical.com/p/even-the-millionaires-are-fed-up>

On the so-called "radicals" making it possible for the so-called "moderates" to be heard.

On Listening to What's Beneath Our Anger

<https://www.michaelswerdloff.com/anger-secondary-emotion-what-protecting/>

Books

[You're Not Listening](#)

[A Rhythm of Prayer](#)

Movies

[A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood](#) (Hulu)

[White Right: Meeting the Enemy](#) (Kanopy)

[Zone of Interest](#) (Hulu)

[Harriet](#) (Netflix)

More Inspiration on the Monthly Theme...

on our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

on our Instagram Page:

"soul_matters_circle"



© 2024-25 Soul Matters ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Packets are for use only by member congregations of the Soul Matters Sharing Circle.

Learn how to join at <https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com>