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“Compassionate Listening”

The following paper was presented as part of a workshop entitled **“De-polarizing the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: An Experiment in Town-Gown Dialogue in Olympia, Washington”** at the 2004 National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation.

*1. Introduction*

Some people in our community felt that they were not safe enough to speak. The listening circle component of the lecture series was specifically designed to address the need to create a safe place for people to speak and to hear each other.

*2. Roots*

Compassionate Listening, with capital letters, is a specific kind of activity, just like Bohmian Dialogue is a specific kind of dialogue. In our discussions, we felt that it was important that we be conscious and conscientious of the root of our listening circles.

Compassionate Listening was developed by Gene Knudsen Hoffman in response to a recognition that in a conflict, all parties are in need of healing through being heard. The wide spread use of Compassionate Listening in the Middle East started in 1996, when Leah Green, then director of the Mid-East Citizen Diplomacy Project, and Hoffman took a group of 18 people to Israel and Palestine to practice Compassionate Listening. Since, The Compassionate Listening Project became an independent non-profit directed by Leah Green.

We have a resource list for those interested in more information available after our presentation.

*3. What we did*

The facilitators in this project have a wide background in related activities. There is experience with canonical Compassionate Listening, Dispute Resolution & Mediation, Dialogue, Non-Violent Communication, Co-counseling, Teaching, community involvement and activism, to name a few. The structure of the listening circles that we created were informed by all of these backgrounds. The activity which we undertook was not canonical

Compassionate Listening, but rather was informed by the various backgrounds of the facilitators and the situation.

Our primary connection for this project to Compassionate Listening is through a member of the Jewish community in Olympia, Susan Rosen. Additionally, other community members provided an introduction to Compassionate Listening to the Olympia community in one event during a month long series in 2002 called “Choosing Peace: a series for the whole community.” Several listening group facilitators were also familiar with Compassionate Listening through components of a year-long 48 credit program at The Evergreen State College called “The Power and Limitations of Dialogue” taught by Patrick J. Hill.

Our circles involved as many of the participants as were willing to come after the lecture series. The participants were given randomly assigned groups and the groups were generally small. Later in the series we started to combine groups if they were smaller. The group sizes over the series ranged from 4 to 15. There was likely variation in the style and technique for each facilitator, but in general the groups were directed to create an intentional space where judgment would be suspended and each participant would be given a chance to be heard by all the other participants without interruption. Facilitators generally tried to seed the circles with a topic that related to the theme of the particular lectures that night and to keep the group focused on sharing in a safe place.

#### *4. What is Compassionate Listening?*

As a practitioner of dialogue, I'm certainly aware that listening is an essential element to what I do. However, I have come to realize that the listening intended by Compassionate Listening is something that is fundamentally, perhaps subtly, different. If I listen with the intention of having dialogue emerge then I have failed to actually listen. While practitioners of Compassionate Listening with whom I've talked hold that Compassionate Listening may be a necessary precursor to not only dialogue but rational discourse, but that if I enter with the intention of going to another step I have precluded myself from an authentic practice of

listening.

While compassionate listening can lead to understanding and dialogue, that's not an appropriate goal. Compassionate Listening is about awakening an awareness that there are more fundamental and important connections between people than our conflicts, our understandings or our ability to communicate. There is an inescapable, essential connection between people that is bigger than any of us.

One premise of Compassionate Listening is the belief that each party in a conflict is wounded by that conflict. A related premise is that hearing the story of another surfaces unhealed wounds. By listening to the surfaced wounds of the participants, compassionate listening hopes to allow for mutual compassion and understanding.

However, listening occurs without an assumption that the listener is in agreement. This means that listeners do not need to defend themselves. Learning that listening to another without interrupting isn't the same as agreeing with what the speaker is saying can be difficult.

A fundamental assumption of Compassionate Listening is that reconciliation cannot happen if we take a sides. It's also not about switching sides. Taking sides is a rigidity that destroys the ability not only to listen, but to think rationally. Rationality ceases in the face of emotionally charged conflict. Unless we are fully present we can't get to thinking rationally. The desire to dialogue will also get in the way of the listening because any agenda is an inflexibility and distraction from the project.

Compassionate Listening is different in my mind to other kinds of dialogue because, while it includes suspension, it does not surface conflict. It begins when the participants are all in a place where they have as strong an emotional charge as the others. As an aside, this is one way that our listening circles were not canonical Compassionate Listening. Compassionate Listening is formed around emotionally charged issues whereas dialogue is a process of getting to a place where participants can get beyond their personae toward their personally charged issues which may not be the same as those for other participants.

Compassionate Listening is unique also especially in who you listen to: your enemy. A fundamental premise to Compassionate Listening is that humans are good, but that we lack loving, cooperative, energetic, engagement. Compassionate Listening is not about meeting and talking about the least contentious issues, but to discern the ineffable connection between human *even with* the most contentious issue present. This extraordinary challenging and requires deep and heartfelt enthusiasm. Practitioners learn respectful inclusive behaviour that surfaces constructive and positive interdependence through both being heard by and listening to people whom they have dismissed or rejected.

Compassionate Listening is specifically useful in cases when participants are too polarized for dialogue or when the emotional charge would be so great as to disable rational discourse. Compassionate Listening is a process over time; an ongoing relationship.

I want to reflect what makes Compassionate Listening distinct from dialogue. Compassionate Listening is not about an emergent shared meaning, but is about reawakening shared humanity. Compassionate Listening does not necessarily lead to action, and an agenda to action will get in the way. In contradiction to the definition on the NCDD website, I would suggest that dialogue is not foundational, but rather a higher order of communication that requires rationality unavailable in situations where serious polarization and emotional charge are present. Therefore, dialogue will result in more polarization because it cannot clear the emotional distance, the psychological distance between people.

If one were to say that listening is already part of dialogue, then what has been missed is the difference and uniqueness between simple listening and deep, heartfelt, non-judgmental compassionate listening that reaffirms humanity and connectedness between people that have dismissed each other in the past.

The foundation of Compassionate Listening then is not that it is a step toward dialogue or reconciliation. In the face of emotionally charged polarization, dialogue is part of the problem not a solution because listening compassionately, without judgment nor agenda, must re-humanize and connect humans in conflict.

Polarization then is not the problem, but a symptom of something more primary – a lack of awareness and awakening to the fundamental and positive interdependence between humans that is larger than our conflicts and our skills at reconciliation or dialogue.

## Resources

- Abu-Nimer, Mohammed (1999). *Dialogue, Conflict, Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel* . N.Y: SUNY Press.
- Ateek, Naim Stifan (1991). The Basic Principles of Dialogue in the Israeli -Palestine Conflict: Respect, Honesty, Sincerity, Humility. In Gordon. H. & Gordon, R. (Eds.) *Israel Palestine: The quest for Dialogue* . Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books (pp. 59-73)
- Bernards, Rita (2000). *Pioneers in Dialogue: Jews Building Bridges* . In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. Hackman, M. Peters, X. Zuniga (Eds.) *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* London: Routledge (pp. 191-198).
- Hwoschinsky, C. (2002) *Listening with the Heart: A Guide For Compassionate Listening*. Indianola, WA: The Compassionate Listening Project.

The Compassionate Listening Project  
<http://www.compassionatelistening.org/>

Cooperative Communication Skills Extended Learning Community  
<http://coopcomm.org/>

The Search for Peace: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict  
<http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/palestinianisraeli/>

Guidelines for the Listening / Discussion Dialogue Groups  
<http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/palestinianisraeli/dialogue.htm>

Choosing Peace: a series for the whole community  
<http://www.scn.org/wwfor/Olympia911.html>