
Co-Listening as Best Practice for Any Issue

By the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.
– George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

For decades our family-based house church has offered pastoral counseling in the Christian tradition (www.FaithAliveAHC.org). We are also skilled, however, as 'co-counselors' in the non-religious, humanist practices of Re-evaluation Counseling (RC). In that dual capacity we have experimented with different ways to engage diverse community groups in listening and interacting at deeper levels of authenticity and self-disclosure. For my part, I currently offer a Sunday morning adult Christian education class at my church called, "Our True Selves." The class teaches best practices variously called 'listening exchanges,' 'support listening,' or 'co-listening;' a simple but rarely afforded opportunity for participants to take turns sharing concerns without interruptions.

As an interpersonal and intergroup exchange, the practice fosters an experience of mutuality. It shares that intention with the experience advocated by the African-American preacher and mystic, Howard Thurman: the experience of listening for "the sound of the genuine" in ourselves and in others. A simple set of guidelines renders the practice safe and respectful. It enjoins participants to observe BOTH confidentiality AND taking turns without interruption, judgment, advice or even commenting. (See "How to Begin Support Listening Sessions" at www.coming-together.org and www.anti-racismonline.org; applicable for any topic and not only anti-racism best practices.)

If relaxedly but scrupulously followed, the ground rules can enable people with sufficient good will to hear one another's most heartfelt and strongest commitments across major differences and tough issues. Such issues can include everyday experiences and range through tough political issues as well as lifestyle choices and faith matters. Obvious topics in a congregational setting would be transition or failure, loss and grief, or death and dying, and faith-based responses to such life cycle occurrences.

Co-counseling

Co-counseling is the core practice developed by the peer counseling organization called Re-evaluation Counseling (RC). Peer counseling organizations differ from therapy or clinical mental health practices. Rather as self-help groups they feature education and skilled practices focused on interpersonal growth and development. While non-professional, they are nonetheless regulated and self-accrediting by dedicated practitioners.

RC in particular offers a simple but powerful process that involves people taking turns listening to each other without interruption. Confidentiality and peer coaching skills make it safer to share as fully as possible. Remarkable results occur

when people across all age groups and multiple backgrounds learn to listen to one another effectively. Release from distresses rooted in the past renews the ability to think and act powerfully with care for oneself and others, including concerns for the quality of our environment and for justice in society.

Excerpt: accessed 10/1/2018 <http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Co-counselling>

Co-counselling functions by giving people an opportunity to work on whatever issues they choose with the accepting support of another person. They do not have to please the other person and whatever they do or say is okay. Indeed, the other person does not even need to understand what they are working on. In fact, co-counsellors sometimes work in a language that the other person does not understand, if they use any language, as co-counselling is often done non-verbally. The counsellor is not doing things to the client and is only using methods that both have learned.

Safety (in the sense of being very low risk) and the sense that a co-counselling session is a safe space is important to the method. There are strict rules of confidentiality, in general nothing about anyone's work in a co-counselling session may be revealed to anyone else. This is stricter than in other practices where practitioners discuss clients with supervisors, colleagues and sometimes with all sorts of other people. The peer relationship makes a considerable contribution to a sense of trust.

The nature of the co-counselling session opens up the possibility for people to get in touch with emotions that they would avoid in any other circumstance. The value of working with emotions was apparent throughout the development of co-counselling and has become a core focus of the approach. Co-counselling training emphasizes methods for accessing and working with emotions, and co-counsellors develop considerable emotional competence.

To get involved in co-counselling, it is usually first necessary to complete a 40-hour course in The Fundamentals of Co-Counselling. The training involves learning how to carry out the roles of client and counsellor. It also covers the guidelines or rules affecting co-counselling for the particular organisation . . .

The particular organization introduced in the preceding paragraphs is the International Re-evaluation Counseling Communities (IRCC), featured online at www.rc.org and headquartered in Seattle, Washington, USA, and organized in urban areas and towns throughout the nation and the world including Atlanta.

Thurman's *Sound of the Genuine*

As introduced above, at my church on Sunday mornings I provide a series of 'co-listening' classes for the adult Christian education hour. These classes aim to enhance our individual and collective ability to be fully ourselves—our true, worthy and estimable selves. From our Christian theological perspective, persons become most truly ourselves through beloved community with other selves, just as God in Trinity is three-Persons in unity. Yet there are also best practices that can aid us in listening for the "sound of the genuine" in both others and ourselves.

In a signature address called, "The Sound of the Genuine," Howard Thurman (1899 - 1981) coined that term as a key feature of his humanist theology. During a long career as a celebrated African American pastor and mystic, Thurman advanced the provocative perspective that human beings continually seek to experience our true selves sounding through our encounters with others. Too often however, "there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations . . . and you are buffeted by these."

Rather than shrug off our yearning to inhabit our identity, Thurman invites us to cultivate a discipline of listening; listening for "the sound of the genuine" not only in ourselves but also in others. Here too, as with other goals and outcomes that we desire and make commitments to pursue, we need a disciplined practice for overcoming the obstacles and pitfalls involved in achieving our highest potential. Indeed, the rewards of shared listening are well worth taking up the challenges involved, as Thurman also proclaimed:

- I want to feel that I am thoroughly and completely understood so that now and then I can take my guard down and look out around me and not feel that I will be destroyed with my defenses down.
- I want to feel completely vulnerable . . . exposed and absolutely secure . . . That I can run the risk of radical exposure and know that the eye that beholds my vulnerability will not step on me. That I can feel secure in my

awareness of the active presence of my own idiom in me . . . and having learned to listen to that, I can become quiet enough, still enough to hear the sound of the genuine in you.

What if we were so attuned to one another, that with other listeners we could explore more deeply ‘our true selves?’*

Moreover, as Thurman went on to say: “there is in every person that which waits, waits, waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. There is that in every person that waits—waits and listens—for the sound of the genuine in other people. And when these two sounds come together, this is the music God heard when God said, ‘Let us make humanity in our image’”

—Howard Thurman, “The Sound of the Genuine”**

Let us listen together, then, for the authenticity that God hears when the sound of the genuine in us comes together with the sound of the genuine in others.

**Our True Selves*: Journal of Middle Class Liberation, Rational Island Publishers, Inc.; 719 Second Ave., North Seattle, WA 98109 USA; publishing for Re-evaluation Counseling. www.rc.org/publication/present_time/pt181/journals_ad

**Howard Thurman, Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College, May 4, 1980; as edited by Jo Moore Stewart for *The Spelman Messenger*, Vol. 96, No. 4 [Summer 1980], 14-15; <http://eip.uindy.edu/crossings/publications/reflection4.pdf>