



remind others that no judgemental response is permitted
listening for differences
methods by which we might reach out to others
diverse perspectives
embrace every member and hear every story
positively influence adolescents
pulling together of communities with generosity
listening for differences
new awareness emerges of life beyond their own experiences

LISTENING FOR DIFFERENCES

I first heard the phrase “listening for differences” from Margaret Wheatley, one of my favorite mentors. A woman of extraordinary wisdom and grace, her teachings about leadership have inspired people worldwide. Last spring I had the good fortune to study with her as I sought a new perspective on my role as a middle school counselor.

At the heart of Wheatley’s work is her unyielding faith in human goodness. She believes that, given the opportunity, our best selves come forward with the capacity to resolve conflict, embrace differences, and move forward with courage.

Whether she is speaking to CEOs in New York, kindergarten teachers in Kansas, or tribal elders in Africa, Wheatley’s message is the same: We cannot legislate a loving and caring community through policy. Only through our relationships with one another and our commitment to helping each other feel welcome, invited, and necessary, are we able to build a place of integrity, creativity, and strength. Greed, competition, and individualism cannot sustain a healthy community.

“Listening for differences” describes one simple method by which we might reach out to each other. No two people, after all, experience the world in exactly the same way, and we need to hear everyone’s story in order to weave the entire tapestry of humanness. To cut someone short or to exclude someone is to leave a hole in the fabric of our understanding.

When we can truly listen to another person without attacking him or defending ourselves, without arguing our own perspective in an effort to convince, and without judging the experience of the speaker, then we create a possibility for learning something new. When we can listen only with the pure intention of discovering how another person’s experience is different from our own, then we are *listening for differences*.

Offering Peace

As a middle school counselor, I spend a lot of time helping students learn how to listen for differences. When some of my middle school students scrape and scuffle for a top berth in the social pecking order, I often end up with groups of kids in my office. The competition is fierce as each individual ego believes it is fighting for survival.

I gently introduce the possibility that every person in the room has a rightful place in our community, that each one's voice is equally as valuable as the person's next to him or her, and that there is enough energy and caring to go around to ensure that everyone's needs will be met. We then set about practicing "listening for differences," reminding each other that no judgmental, argumentative, or defensive response is permitted.

It is then that the magic happens. Students begin to hear one another's stories, their empathy grows, and new awareness emerges of life beyond their own experiences. A more benevolent and supportive world suddenly seems possible. The students themselves generate solutions to their group problem, leaving my office with a greater respect for themselves and others. They marvel at their own creativity, ponder their newfound wisdom, and go forward with support and empowerment.

Not only are they now feeling better themselves, but they also have more compassion for their peers. They have experienced a new meaning of community and they know they have a rightful place within it.

Lessons Learned

I am always amazed at what our children teach us. They understand "listening for differences" much more quickly than adults do. Perhaps as adults we think we already know everything, or we think we have to pretend as if we do. This became evident as a group of us were practicing listening for differences at one of Wheatley's workshops. The topic of conversation was people's responses to September 11, 2001, and folks immediately began sharing where they were on that day, their disbelief as they watched television coverage, and the pain of revisiting New York City in the aftermath.

One woman stated that she thought a lot of good had come out of the whole experience and referred to the pulling together of communities with generosity and helping hands. Immediately, another group member pounced on her statement, saying, "Obviously, you did not lose someone close to you on that day! There was nothing good about it; it was horrific and vile, and only someone ignorant would think it was good!"

Tension in the room immediately rose. The woman who had made the initial comment began stammering her apologies while another woman tried to defend her. Meanwhile, another man jumped in with, "I don't think she meant the event was good, I think she meant that there have been some good things that have happened as a result of the event."

With a gentle wave of her hand, Wheatley put a stop to the whole discussion. "Well, it took you less than three minutes to slip back into a mode of criticism, judgment, and defense," she said. She acknowledged that those modalities do have their place, but they have become the habit with which we approach our interactions.

Clearly, it would be a challenge for us to give up our need to be *right* in favor of our desire to learn through *accepting*. Thankfully, with practice, by later in the week we could "listen for differences" beyond a mere 180 seconds!



Perhaps children have an easier time with this concept because they have less fear, more capacity to embrace change, and more faith in human goodness. Every student I have ever encountered is eager to be heard once he or she can trust that the experience shared will not be judged and the student's value within the community is unquestionable.

All kids, no matter of what race, spiritual practice, or economic status, hunger for the opportunity to tell their story, and they all discover some new meaning in their life through the telling. They also long to hear the stories of others, perhaps intuitively knowing that our world depends upon multiple and diverse perspectives to heal and grow. We could learn much by their example.

Embracing Differences

One gift we can give our children is to begin more consciously creating communities that embrace every member, hear every story, and honor every perspective. As middle school educators, we know that modeling is one of our most powerful teaching tools. Thus, we must begin with ourselves. We can practice listening for differences in the faculty lounge, at committee meetings, and during parent conferences.

In the classroom, we may be teaching students the art of debate or the elements of a persuasive essay, but consider this:

- Are we providing tools for them to understand and empathize with another human being?
- Are we setting aside time in our classes to validate our students' personal experiences?
- Are we allowing them to hear the feelings and perspectives of others in a non-competitive, accepting atmosphere?
- "Listening for differences" can become a useful guideline during advisory group discussions or when teaching young leaders how to run a student government.

Whether one teacher is practicing with students, or whether a whole school has adopted "listening for differences" as a theme for the year, be assured that the effort will positively influence adolescents' lives.

Celebrating Awareness

School can be a place where students, parents, faculty, and staff are truly present for each other, talk with each other, and focus on what is possible. When we have the courage and the willingness to practice listening for differences, our defenses fall and we begin to make connections that transcend the misunderstandings of racial, cultural, and religious barriers.

Once we admit to ourselves that we don't already have all of the answers and insights that we will ever need, we become free to celebrate the awareness that unexpectedly emerges in a community that welcomes new possibilities from every heartfelt voice.

Marcia Rogat is a middle school counselor at Cary Academy in Cary, North Carolina, and author of *Kid-to-Kid: A Facilitator's Guide to Empowering Students through Open Discussion* (Creative Thought Press), available from the NMSA online bookstore.

Resources

Margaret Wheatley's books include:

Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time, 2005

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future, 2002

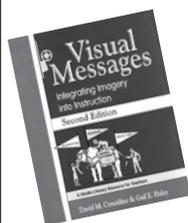
Leadership and the New Science, 1999

A Simpler Way, 1996

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