

Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening

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The political climate and discourse during the 2016 presidential campaign was divisive and unwelcoming of refugees, immigrants, Muslims, and other religious minorities. This toxic atmosphere was reflected on college and university campuses throughout the country. At Westfield State University, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students were the targets of verbal attacks, prejudice, and disrespect. The Muslim students, in particular, were afraid to walk around campus and attend their classes. The Interfaith Chaplains Council, along with the Interfaith Advisory Council comprised of faculty, staff, and students, met to discuss the current concerns of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students, and collaborated to create a listening event based on the World Café model. This article addresses listening as a contemplative practice for building just communities and shares the process that went into the creation of the “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” event, as well as participants’ responses to the event.

BACKGROUND

The political climate and discourse during the 2016 US presidential campaign was divisive, unwelcoming of refugees, immigrants, Muslims, and other religious minorities. This toxic atmosphere was reflected on college and university campuses throughout the country. At Westfield State University, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students were the targets of verbal attacks, prejudice and disrespect. The Muslim students, in particular, were afraid to walk around campus and attend their classes. The one place that provided safety and security for students was the Albert and Amelia Ferst Interfaith Center.

The mission of the Interfaith Center is to support religious and spiritual life and to promote interfaith understanding at Westfield State University. In support of the university’s mission to prepare students for life in the global community, the center seeks to promote respect for and understanding of diverse religious traditions, to help students relate their religious traditions to their personal choices and to build a more just society.

Fr. Warren J. Savage, the Acting Director of the Interfaith Center and Catholic Chaplain, along with the clergy members of the Interfaith Chaplains Council—Rabbi Efrain Eisen, the Jewish Chaplain; Imam Rasul Seifullah, the Mus-

lim Chaplain; and Rev. Rosemary Dawson, Rev. Bruce Arbour, and Mother Nancy Webb Stroud; the Protestant Chaplains—collaborated with the members of the Interfaith Advisory Council to address the religious intolerance, bigotry, and disrespect of others on campus.

The Interfaith Chaplains Council, along with the Interfaith Advisory Council, which is made up of faculty, staff, and students, discussed the current concerns of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students on campus and decided to host an event that would create an opportunity for dialogue with an emphasis on listening to each other. The decision to plan an event to dialogue with and listen to others was in keeping with the mission and vision of Westfield State University and the Albert and Amelia Ferst Interfaith Center: to educate a diverse and welcoming community, to promote interfaith understanding, and to promote respect for and understanding of diverse religious traditions.

The members of the Interfaith Advisory Council (IAC) decided to create an Interfaith Dialogue Subcommittee to plan the Interfaith Dialogue event. This subcommittee was expanded to include students from faith-based/spiritual organizations, faculty, and other interested parties from the campus community. In addition to Dr. Keator and Alessa, the Subcommittee Leader, the subcommittee was comprised of Hibo, the Co-President of the Muslim Student Organization; Matthew, the President of the Meditation and Contemplation Club; Jessica, Vice-President of the Meditation and Contemplation Club; Meytal, a member of the Jewish Student Organization; and Fr. Savage, the Catholic Chaplain at the Interfaith Center. All are co-authors of this paper.

Contemplative Listening in an Intersubjective Field of Conversation

Many people think that dialogue first begins with speaking, but its starting point is listening, which can lead to the development of meaningful relationships, shared values, a broader worldview, and respect for the experiences of others. Through listening, we begin to appreciate the presence of another and open beyond our limited perceptions and historical ways of making sense (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2015, p.13). This is precisely what the members of the subcommittee noticed as they listened to one another during their planning conversations.

Contemplative listening means listening with a deep self-awareness--understanding that we have been shaped by the influences of racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, socio-political, and economic patterns passed down from generation to generation. Listening without judgment challenges people to plumb the depths of their hearts to identify and uproot the false assumptions, distorted perceptions, and prejudices that were learned and reinforced by those influential patterns. The members of the subcommittee had to address and work through their own assumptions and prejudices as they listened attentively to each other's narratives

of different cultural, racial, religious, and political experiences. All of the members of the subcommittee were inwardly transformed by listening to the stories of hatred, racism, and prejudice experienced by some of the students. Listening without judgment is not an easy practice and cannot be learned overnight. Listening without judgment requires that people intentionally suspend imposing their embedded assumptions, prejudices, and limited worldview on others before they have listened attentively to the subjective experience of another person. It is in listening to another person's subjective experience that one is challenged to address the unhealthy and destructive patterns of prejudice and discrimination towards others.

The subcommittee meetings became a learning laboratory in which the members experienced a meaningful engagement with people they knew on a superficial level. At each subsequent meeting, the members of the subcommittee flowed into "an intersubjective field of conversation," (Gunnlaugson, 2009; Bache, 2008) wherein the members experienced in the sharing of their subjective experiences a moment of new awareness *between* the sharing of others' inner subjective experience of a lived reality such as racism, discrimination, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or homophobia. The term intersubjectivity (literally, *between subjects*) implies the understanding that there is an active, conscious, and communal field that people can access and cohabitate, known in intersubjective theory as the "intersubjective field" which builds through deep, open, compassionate, and respectful listening. Intersubjectivity takes into account the fact that the experience of a person must be respected and that the person must be afforded a sacred space in which he or she can articulate how this experience has shaped and informed his or self-understanding, worldview, assumptions, and prejudices.

It was amazing to observe how members of the subcommittee leaned in with interest and respect to listen to the personal stories of Alessa and Meytal, both Jewish students; Hibo, a Muslim student; Matt, a Christian student; and Jess, who identified as Wiccan, as they revealed their thoughts and feelings, fears, and reservations about an Interfaith Dialogue event on campus. As members continued to listen to each other share their personal and painful experiences, a type of energetic field of compassion began to arise and expand, dismantling their fears and reservations, opening their minds and hearts, and connecting the members of the subcommittee to something greater than themselves. As Bache points out, "When we enter into meaningful, reciprocal, and cross-pollinating conversations, I think we energize not only each other but the subtle fields we are part of" (2008, pp.134-135). The building of just communities begins with intersubjective dialogue, and intersubjective dialogue begins with listening motivated by a desire to know the other person in his or her own skin. It is person-centered, rather than content-centered.

By practicing contemplative listening the members of the group were enabled to enter into an intersubjective field of conversation, and as a result of the mutual sharing of their subjective experiences, their worldviews, knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of each other's cultural-religious background expanded. Their doubts and fears gave way to compassionate listening. After much conversation, the group decided to call the event "Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening." This title underscored what the members of the subcommittee learned in their collaboration and conversation with each other, specifically that listening without judgment is a necessary prerequisite to authentic dialogue, self-transformation, and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

The First Step: Learning to Listen

The World Café is an event format which is "designed on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges" (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 4). A World Café format provides a safe space for participants to explore all types of topics, especially those that are contentious, sensitive, and charged. Subcommittee member Dr. Keator had adapted and integrated the World Café model into her courses with positive results. Students shared with her the following feedback: "I am seeing that my perception is not the only true one and I have new insights as I hear the discussions of other groups," and "I would say that I am learning a greater ability to think outside the box and look at how other people perceive things around me. It's useful to do an activity like this because it opens the blinders that you naturally hide behind" (Students, 2016). This process, as noted by Margaret Wheatley in her introduction to *The World Café*, "reawakens our deep species memory of two fundamental beliefs about human life. First, we humans want to talk together about things that matter to us...Second, as we talk together, we are able to access a greater wisdom that is found only in the collective" (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. ix).

Dr. Keator shared the World Café process during an Interfaith Advisory Council (IAC) meeting at the beginning of the 2016 fall semester. Alessa, the President of the Jewish Student Organization and a member of the IAC, was interested in this idea and wanted to explore it further with other members of the IAC.

At the first subcommittee meeting, the members of the group were introduced to each other and the World Café method. Although excited about the World Café method, the members of the subcommittee raised questions and concerns about how it would actually work, the common concern being the safety of participants to express themselves freely and openly without fear of judgment from others. In addition, some of the members of the subcommittee were concerned that listening was not enough, and requested that time be set aside for discussing the issues raised during the listening period. However, others

felt strongly that the contemplative practice of listening (the ability to give one's full attention; to suspend preconceived assumptions, prejudices, and judgments; to lean in and really listen to the voice of another) had become counter-cultural, especially considering the current political climate; it was an important and necessary first step in the dialogue process. As Krishnamurti (1968) noted, "One listens and therefore learns, only when in a state of attention, a state of silence in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet. Then, it seems to me, it is possible to communicate" (p.84). Throughout the meeting, the subcommittee recognized the importance of learning to listen with attention and receptivity as a necessary prerequisite to dialogue.

Over time, the members of the subcommittee began to experience the value of being in a nonjudgmental safe space, one imbued with a deep sense of respect, patience, and wonder. The faculty and staff members of the subcommittee collectively had over 50 years of experience in contemplative practices and could speak to the importance of having a safe space for contemplative listening. The student members began to learn that contemplative listening requires the willingness "to simply be present with what you hear without trying to figure it out or control it" (Fisher, 2004, p.44). As the students experienced what it felt like to be listened to without someone in the group trying to change or persuade them, they began to feel more comfortable opening up and revealing aspects of their inner world. Having experienced this type of openness and receptivity, they were then able to offer this same openness and receptivity to one another. The more they opened, the deeper they listened to one another. With each subsequent meeting not only did their worldviews continue to open and expand, but together they were experiencing first-hand a more profound sense of how contemplative listening shapes and informs relationships. In light of this contemplative stance, their understanding and respect for each other continued to develop. As the subcommittee continued to meet, they intentionally practiced contemplative listening.

Over the course of many meetings, the subcommittee recognized that engaging in dialogue requires intentional contemplative listening that could change people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that contributed to the climate of divisiveness, fear, and prejudice on campus. The Jewish and Muslim students on the subcommittee experienced the power of contemplative listening in our meetings, and as they did, they began to open up and share some of their painful stories of being the targets of ignorance, discrimination, and prejudice in the classrooms and dining commons. Yet, when they tried to address a person's misconception and erroneous assumptions, they were often met with resistance and arrogance rather than openness and understanding. There was no space for listening and an interpersonal dialogue. However, during our subcommittee meetings, the students began experiencing the power of contemplative listening as a necessary first

step to authentic dialogue. A deeper level of trust developed, so much so that Hibo (a Muslim student) even invited her siblings to attend the dialogue event. The more the subcommittee listened to one another, the more they realized that true dialogue cannot happen when people are unwilling to expand their own limited worldviews.

In order to become active listeners, people need to become aware of and practice suspending their assumptions, prejudices, and beliefs before engaging in dialogue with people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and religious-spiritual traditions. As David Bohm points out, “The object of dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions—to listen to everybody’s opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means” (Bohm, 1996, p.30). Therefore, the subcommittee decided the event would focus on contemplative listening, stressing the need to be open and receptive to another person’s subjective experience in a safe, nonjudgmental space.

Creating a Space for an Intersubjective Listening Experience

The subcommittee wanted to make sure they found a suitable, comfortable space for participants to have an intersubjective dialogue experience. We decided to hold the event on a Wednesday evening in The Owl’s Nest, an open space just below the library and near the student union (a student-friendly area). We also decided to use round tables to create a sense of welcoming, community, and inclusiveness where everyone at the table would feel a part of the dialogue experience.

The subcommittee also thought that combining a meal with the event would help to create a feeling of hospitality; therefore, the event was preceded by a simple meal of pizza and beverages. Eating with people from different cultures, religious traditions, and ways of life provided an opportunity for the participants to engage in informal conversations with each other, especially with people they never encountered before. Our thought was that the informal conversations during the meal would make people less afraid to step outside their comfort zone to share their personal experiences around a table with others. The informal meal with people from diverse backgrounds was a natural way to create the intersubjective field, to get people to listen to another perspective and begin to dismantle learned prejudices and stereotypes. As Gunnlaugson highlights, “Unlike either third- or first-person methods, second-person approaches offer the benefits of rich engagement not only within, but also between participants and the intersubjective field of conversation” (Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott & Bai, 2014, p. 305).

The next task of the subcommittee was to create a flyer to advertise the event. The members of the subcommittee were well aware of the risks and chal-

allenges associated with promoting anything on campus with the word “interfaith,” since many on campus are skeptical of anything that deals with religion. The subcommittee chose to advertise the event with the title “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening,” inviting the campus community to “Join us for an evening of Interfaith Dialogue.” The flyer included a picture of a circle with the symbols of various world religious traditions.

Discerning and Developing Questions for the “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” Event

After the above-mentioned elements were in place, the subcommittee needed to discern and develop some meaningful questions for the interfaith dialogue event. This was the most challenging aspect of the planning process. In terms of developing the questions, each leader went back to his or her respective organization (Jewish Student Organization, Muslim Student Organization, Meditation Club, and The Catholic Newman Club) to solicit input from other students. This input was brought back and shared with the subcommittee for further dialogue. In the end, the subcommittee decided to use the following six questions:

1. How has your religion shaped your identity?
2. How can we help our society to become more tolerant of faiths other than our own?
3. What concerns around religion and culture do you have in light of the current political climate in the United States?
4. Do you feel safe to practice your religion on campus? Why or why not?
5. How does your religious tradition/culture address sexuality?
6. How do people of your faith/culture engage in feasting and fasting to celebrate or commemorate special religious/cultural events?

The focus of the event was on the practice of attentive listening; therefore, in order to maximize the listening experience, the subcommittee designed the event to allow the participants to have maximum exposure to people from diverse backgrounds and provoke personal narratives in response to a set of prepared questions, especially ones that would create in the moment a potential “I-Thou relationship” as described by Scott. The subcommittee was intentional in its efforts to postpone the need for ongoing conversation in order to stress the importance of intentional listening as the prologue to authentic dialogue.

The questions were designed with the intent to elicit a brief narrative of subjective experiences that would begin to challenge and change the embedded perceptions and assumptions of others around the table. After much dialogue, the subcommittee members agreed to allow participants two uninterrupted minutes to answer each question, which afforded the participants ample time to sit at three tables, each with a different question. At the close of the event, participants would have experienced the power of being given some uninterrupted time and space to share their subjective experience in response to some specific questions within an exercise of attentive listening on an individual and communal level. In addition, this allowed for ample time at the end of the process for the recorders—designated note-takers assigned to each table throughout the event—to share the responses from their respective table with the whole group. At the end of the evening, the participants would have practiced attentive listening with one another for over an hour.

The subcommittee understood the potential inherent in any given moment for deeper truths to be revealed. As participants began to suspend their own internal narratives in order to listen to one another, even briefly, their understanding, respect, and compassion for the one sharing his or her subjective experience deepened. One student shared a story of being ridiculed at 10 years of age: “When I started wearing the hijab in 5th grade, I had to explain why I wore it...that Islam means peace...and at 10 years old, this is hard. I lost most of my friends.” Another participant exposed a personal prejudice: “I used to think that all Arabs wanted to destroy us...then I... got to know others and now I am more open to talk.” In the end, the subcommittee saw that the amount of time taken to respond to a question was not the primary factor for whether understanding developed; the power of contemplative, intentional listening to the subjective experience of another without judgment was not dependent on the amount of time spent speaking.

Instructions and Guidelines

The subcommittee also knew that it was important to establish ground rules in order for participants to understand the event format and focus on the practice of listening as an essential dimension of the interfaith dialogue. After several drafts, instructions and guidelines were finalized and printed. The following instructions and guidelines would be reviewed and distributed to the recorders assigned to a specific table.

“Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening”

Instructions and Guidelines

- There are six tables. Each table will consist of five people (in the end, more people attended). After ten minutes everyone switches to a new table except the recorder, who will remain at their original table throughout the entire interfaith dialogue.
- Each table will have one question which everyone at the table will have the opportunity to answer, including the recorder.
- Each person will have two minutes to verbally answer the question based on his/her worldview (religious, cultural, or personal). At the end of two minutes, a bell will sound noting the end of one person’s turn and the beginning of the next person’s turn. We will move clockwise around the table.
- After everyone at the table has had a turn to speak, participants will move to a new table.
- Participants will have the opportunity to sit at three different tables during this event.
- After participants have sat at three tables, the whole group will come together and each recorder will read aloud the thoughts and ideas brought up at his/her table.
- Participants are free to share if they practice a specific religion, culture or perspective; however, it is not required.

THE “INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: ART OF LISTENING” EVENT

On a cold rainy Wednesday evening in November of 2016, 37 students, faculty, and staff gathered at The Owl’s Nest at Westfield State University to participate in “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening.” Six round tables were set up, with six or seven chairs at each table. Due to the fact that there were actually more people attending than had been planned for, the subcommittee members had to quickly place more chairs around the tables. The typical World Café model would have had eight tables with approximately four chairs at each table. However, the students seemed to enjoy having more people at the table to listen to each other share their thoughts, experiences, and feelings.

At the beginning of the event, Alessa stood up and welcomed everyone, introduced all of the members of the Interfaith Dialogue Subcommittee, and explained that the event was not designed to become a debate or informal discussion session on a range of issues; rather, it was an exercise in learning to listen to the thoughts and experiences of each other without judging or responding to them. In addition, the subcommittee members, who had been practicing contemplative listening during the subcommittee meetings, each sat at a different table to support the contemplative listening practice.

Throughout the event, participants sat at three different tables, each containing a specific question, and participants took turns answering the question in the allotted time frame. In keeping with the World Café model, there was one recorder at each table who participated, but instead of moving to a different table with a different question, remained at the table and took notes on what participants shared. These notes were then shared at the end of the event so that everyone could have the opportunity to hear the thoughts, stories, and concerns that were shared in response to the question assigned to each table. After the participants had sat at three different tables, responded to a question, and listened to the responses of others, the entire group came together to listen to the feedback of the recorder from each table. The recorders’ responsibility was to simply record the participants’ comments to the question and not comment on what they heard at the table throughout the evening.

The Questionnaire

The subcommittee felt it was important to offer a questionnaire at the end of the dialogue event to gain an understanding on how the event impacted the participants’ worldview, attitudes and feelings towards others, and self-understanding. The subcommittee also wanted to know what worked, what didn’t work, and whether they would be open to participate in another Interfaith Dialogue event again at a future date. The questionnaire read as follows:

The “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” Questionnaire

Dear Participants:

We are excited to have you participate in our special event! Please take a few minutes to answer the reflection questions below in order to help us plan the next event.

Thank you for listening!

Sincerely,

The Interfaith Advisory Council, Jewish Student Organization, The Meditation and Contemplation Club, The Catholic Newman Club and the Muslim Student Organization.

1. What did you find valuable about the event?
2. Did your awareness, perspective, or understanding on anything change or grow? Explain. What brought about this change?
3. Do you have any suggestions/improvements for our next event? (be specific)
4. What was the most memorable part of the evening?
5. What religion/culture/perspective do you identify as?

Participants responded that the most memorable part of the evening included the following:

- Everything about it!
- Listening to understand, not to judge
- Deeply listening
- How everyone had a turn to talk
- Sharing my experiences

- The trust with which people shared
- I'm glad there were people from so many different faiths to educate each other on a personal level!
- Actually feeling important for once and safe that I can share my opinion
- The little discussions that popped up at the end of everyone's turn, when there was extra time
- People letting their guard down and listening to other people's viewpoints
- Listening to Muslims' experiences and the hurt they have known
- Having a discussion with a Muslim girl
- How everyone was so engaging
- The willingness to be open and to share from the heart.
- The sharing at the end

When asked if their awareness, perspectives, or understanding changed or grew, participants responded:

- It didn't change, it broadened.
- Awareness of others and the world
- Yes, it definitely did change, made me really feel safe and happy that I wouldn't be judged about my opinion
- It made me realize that there are good people in the world
- I grew because I heard views from people who have a different religion and background than me.
- I didn't have a change because everyone has things in common.
- The value of Interfaith dialogue around difficult topics
- More awareness of others' struggle with their religion's views. Better understanding of differences and challenges people face intrinsically.
- A chance to speak without interruption-a rare thing
- Listening to our brothers and sisters from the Muslim faith share what was most important to them as well as their fears.
- The pain of some of the students
- Yes, more tolerance, more education
- Yes, I know now that many people from different religions face the same problems I face.

- Our approach must accommodate differences if we really want to engage each other.
- My awareness of religions
- The awareness that there were people of Muslim origin on this campus grew. I had previously never met any Muslims and had a conversation with them before.
- It enhanced my understanding that we are all basically the same.
- The people who are Muslim in the room feel extremely hurt, and not understood. I knew that they must feel this way but to hear it expressed made me feel strongly.

When asked what they found valuable, participants responded:

- Finding openness and communication amongst other people
- Being able to gain new perspectives
- The fact that people were allowed to be open and feel safe discussing their own opinions
- Listening to other people's perspectives
- The engaging, open, comfortable, respectful, inclusive atmosphere
- The willingness to be open and share from the heart
- Space for being heard and promoting listening
- People from different religions in each group were able to talk to each other about the problems they faced
- Individuals were honest about their feelings, which enabled me to be honest.
- Meeting people of different religious/ethnic backgrounds

When asked for suggestions for improvement, we received the following suggestions:

- Name tags
- Promoting the event earlier and to the wider community
- It was perfect!
- I feel like this event changed my understanding. There is nothing to fix.
- I wouldn't change a thing
- Have more people with other perspectives

- Seek to address problematic behaviors on campus—violence, sexism etc.
Dialogue
- There needs to be more deconstruction next time!!
- More of the same kinds of questions
- Some time for dialogue at the end
- A little music after the table exercise to cleanse the listening palette

Findings and Responses

The questionnaires revealed that participants gained new and deeper perspectives from engaging in the “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” event. Several participants commented on the significance of the space in which the event took place, expressing that it was open and safe. There was value in having “a space for being heard, for practicing hearing, and for promoting listening.” In terms of feeling safe, participants commented, “People became vulnerable and let down their guard in a space like this because it felt safe.” Another participant felt “safe to share my opinion.” From this event, the subcommittee learned the significance of creating an intersubjective field in which people feel safe and trusting of each other to practice contemplative listening. The practice of contemplative listening allowed participants to open up and share their subjective experiences without being challenged, judged, or intimidated by another person’s unreflective response. Although some participants suggested that more dialogue and discussion would be helpful, the participants’ responses supported the value of the practice of contemplative listening as a prerequisite to dialogue.

CREATING A SECOND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE EVENT

When the subcommittee met to share and converse about the findings, they decided to create another interfaith listening event during the spring semester 2017. This time around, there was much dialogue about how to deepen the listening experience. Some subcommittee members wanted to begin with a dialogue, whereas others felt strongly about continuing to develop the listening aspect of dialogue. In *Dialogue: The Art Of Thinking Together*, Isaacs notes, “The heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen. Listening requires we not only hear the words, but also embrace, accept, and gradually let go of our own inner clamoring” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 83). Since listening is such an integral part of authentic dialogue, the subcommittee decided to continue to focus on the practice of listening.

There was a strong feeling on the part of the members that in order for dialogue to deepen and become transformative, participants needed time to practice deepening their “listening muscles” and getting to know one another in

order to begin to feel comfortable sharing their inner truths together. The subcommittee did not want to rush nor force dialogue prematurely. Therefore, the subcommittee planned the second event in the spring semester 2017, to be held on Wednesday April 5th, and developed new questions for this second “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” event.

The subcommittee decided to create a new set of questions that were more subjective in nature as a way to deepen the *I-Thou relationship*. As Scott notes, “The intrinsic value of dialogue as a contemplative practice lies in its ability to create, uncover, explore, and develop meaning: to manifest an *I-Thou* relationship which reveals and affirms self and other; and to serve as a way of being in the world” (Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott & Bai, 2014, p. 237). These questions would help to develop and support the intersubjective field in which the participants would be challenged to listen more attentively to each other’s responses and learn something new about the people around the table. The subcommittee learned that the nature of the questions matter, and therefore worked to deepen the questions for the second dialogue event. For the first event, the subcommittee had framed the questions in terms of one’s religion and culture; however, the second time around, the questions were framed more in terms of subjective experience. These questions were more personal in nature, such as “What prevents you from deeply listening?” or “What concerns around religion and culture do you have in light of the current political climate in the United States?” As Jess noted, “This time around [the second], I feel like the questions were more personal and people had to become very raw and vulnerable. That was my favorite part because I don’t feel like I see enough vulnerability or people being that open about their truths and points of view.”

Therefore, the following questions were developed:

1. What prevents you from deeply listening?
2. How does your faith and/or culture view forgiveness?
3. Identify a particular prejudice/judgment you struggle with? How did you come to feel this way?
4. What concerns around religion and culture do you have in light of the current political climate in the United States?
5. How have your relationships with others changed or challenged your worldview?

PARTICIPANT AND SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBER REFLECTIONS

As the Art of Listening events progressed, openness, honesty and trust continued to grow. Participants began to share deeper feelings, worries and fears, especially in terms of the politically charged climate during and after the 2016 presidential election. During the first event, which took place in the fall, before the Presidential election, participants expressed a variety of subjective emotions that have arisen in the current political climate such as nervousness, anxiety, anger, terror, fear, powerlessness, and disappointment. Participants stressed the need for “open mindedness within the country,” “to be accepting of other,” and a willingness not “to judge others.” They also voiced worry over the increase in hate crimes, “Hate crimes are rapidly increasing, the KKK [being] normalized by the media and even celebrated,” and wondered “what this says about us?” They also mentioned that minorities such as Muslims and LGBT people are “verbally attacked, more oppressed, and less safe.”

There was a recognition from the participants reflecting on this question that everyone must work to “create harmony, whether for or against [a certain political candidate].” During the second event in the spring, after the presidential election, participants shared, “There is an irrationality that creates an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ mentality, which creates division. This keeps us from seeing that we are all brothers and sisters.” Another responded, “The concern I have as a practicing Muslim is the hate that is being encouraged by the President. Islam means peace. Terrorists don’t practice peace. We are good people; we practice peace.”

As participants began to open and trust each other, their inclination was to share their deeper thoughts in spontaneous conversations between table movements. This natural propensity of students to engage in conversation before developing the skills of contemplative listening highlights the challenge of suspending conversation before contemplative listening has taken place. The focus of both events was to teach the practice of contemplative listening to deepen the subjective experience of another person before engaging in intersubjective dialogue. As Bache explains,

When we talk and listen together something new enters the room... At the first level, creativity is enhanced because the café more effectively taps the full potential of all the people present. By seeking *everyone’s* input to thought-provoking questions and systematically *cross-fertilizing* streams of input and making the room self-aware of its thought processes, the Café increases the likelihood that something new will emerge in the room (2008, 134).

What Bache highlights is precisely what participants experienced. Alessa described the event as “an awakening experience” and shared the following:

As an undergrad student, I often feel like our campus is a small sanctuary away from the ignorance and hate of the world. This interfaith dialogue opened my eyes to see that unfortunately not all students have the same safe haven on campus as I do. It's easy for me to scroll past the horrific news stories and the profiling of those who practice Islam. When it's on the news it's easy to pretend it doesn't affect me. My Muslim brothers and sisters don't have that luxury. When I sat down across from a Muslim student my own age and looked into her eyes and heard her story, I realized this isn't something I can ignore anymore. I have a voice and it needs to be heard. I can use it to fight back against the hate and violence. I can use it to educate. If more people had access to interfaith dialogue, the fear that surrounds the unknown and breeds hate would begin to diminish.

Many participants commented that their awareness and worldview expanded by having the opportunity to encounter new people, to listen to another's story in person, and to hear about other religions. One participant even commented, "It was the first time I met a Muslim believer and a Muslim preacher."

In the end, the participants felt both events were an overall success. Not only did participants seem genuinely engaged, the subcommittee members all enjoyed working together to create the events. Meytal, a member of the subcommittee, felt empowered.

Taking a leading role in a committee that decided to dedicate one evening to learning together how to listen, respect, and appreciate other people was amazing for me. It made me realize how much our basic, so-called communication skills aren't developed enough as a society.

Matt, another member of the subcommittee, remarked on the positive effect it had on the participants, including himself.

The event helped me identify how people view different religious practices. Having many people engage in "The Art of Listening" from various ethnicities, genders, cultures, and spiritual-religious traditions provided me the opportunity to listen to other's perspectives. The whole evening broke down barriers and built better understanding between people. Just listening to one another helped us overcome common misunderstandings and stereotypes that often fuel distrust, suspicion, and bigotry.

Hibo, the Co-President of the Muslim Student Organization, really appreciated listening and learning from others as well as being able to share her own stories. She saw it as a powerful method to reconsider pre-conceived notions and ideas around religion and culture.

Being able to develop, facilitate and participate in “The Art of Listening: An Interfaith Dialogue” was an eye-opening experience for me. I got to hear different people with different religious perspectives other than mine and answer questions about how they use their religion as a guide in their lives. What I learned is that having people with all different faiths come together can change your previously-held opinions of others, their religions and cultures. I liked it because not only did I get to meet people and hear their stories, but I also got a chance to share my stories. In the end, I think it helped people look inside and re-consider their pre-conceived notions around religion and culture.

Jessica offered the following reflection on the evenings, summarizing the power of listening.

“The Art of Listening” offered a space to nurture openness. I don’t think it would have been as successful as it was if it didn’t allow people to open up. I believe that it left all who attended much more mindful about what it means to truly listen; to someone’s pain, frustration, anger, or unique truth and at the least, it planted the seed for more compassion for the people in attendance to interact with one another a daily basis. I know that I walk in the world differently because I am white and this shouldn’t be tiptoed around because it is true. There are times, as hard as I try to be mindful, where I forget my privilege and forget that there are people that I go to school with, my classmates, who face racial and religious discrimination. “The Art of Listening” brought me face to face with classmates who can tell story after story of random people screaming at them to “leave their country” or harassing them for publicly displaying how they worship. There is a big difference between hearing about harassment from the news, from someone I will never see, and hearing it from someone my age right across the table from me. I don’t mean that it negates the other peoples’ pain whom I will never meet, but there is still a difference because it means that it is happening here and it is happening now.

FOR ONGOING DIALOGUE AND REFLECTION

The “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” events were a demonstration of how people from diverse experiences, cultures, social backgrounds, religious traditions, and ways of life can come together to listen deeply to one another and dialogue together to build just communities based on mutual respect. The participants’ responses reflect the transformative power of contemplative listening to another as a pathway to greater interpersonal connection, authentic dialogue, increased understanding of human persons, and the strengthening of the compassionate impulse to respond to the forces of racism, prejudice, and discrimination on an individual and institutional level.

The fact that two “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” events happened, one in the Fall Semester 2016, and one in the Spring Semester 2017 at Westfield State University, underscored the need for greater commitment of students, faculty, and other professionals to collaborate on a project that focused on the contemplative practice of listening to promote the respect and well-being of all people and a deeper appreciation for diversity, equality, and a spirit of inclusiveness. Before the close of the 2017 spring semester, the subcommittee met at the Interfaith Center to dialogue about planning another “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” event, which they decided to offer during the fall of 2017. There was genuine amazement and enthusiasm among the subcommittee members for the overall success and the openness on the part of the participants for more opportunities to engage in contemplative listening and interfaith dialogue. The feedback from the participants from both events provided the platform for planning the next “Interfaith Dialogue: The Art of Listening” event. For example, participants shared themes around empowerment, inclusion, resilience in the face of negativity and hatred, white privilege, and the need for better communication skills.

The building of just communities within the institutions of higher learning such as colleges and universities cannot be achieved without paying more attention to the contemplative dimension of education (Zajonc, 2014); in particular, the practice of listening that leads to intersubjective dialogue and deeper learning inside and outside the campus community. The students’ responses highlight the need for authentic dialogue among people and underscore listening as an important contemplative praxis in the building of just communities. In a world struggling with growing division between people from different backgrounds, the blatant disregard for the dignity of the human person, and the absence of compassion, contemplative listening has the capacity to be a healing balm.

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