

Breaking the 3-Minute Dialogue Barrier

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Summertime: "lazy, hazy, crazy days...A time of soda and pretzels and..." Does that sound like summer around your house? Doesn't sound like summer around our house either. Summer around our house is chaos. It's a house echoing with "I'm bored. When are we going to do something exciting?"

Translation: School's been out for two weeks. The kids have regained the energy they expended studying for finals. The family vacation isn't for another month. And they've seen all the new movies at Loews and Blockbuster Video. Our dialogue questions could easily become a nightly rerun: "I'm about ready to scratch our names off of their birth certificates and set them their own apartment! How do I feel about that?"

Summers are tough for us. Our prime time routine of dialoguing right after supper is blown to bits. Our treasured "time for us" gets put on the endangered species list as we transmogrify into "super chauffeur", and the reluctant entertainment committee.

Despite dialoguing every day, we sometimes lapse into routines in the way we listen to one another. We catch ourselves hoping our dialogue will become a magic ritual that automatically leads to badly needed crescendos of intimacy. But, it doesn't. So, every now and then during the summer, we need to ask how can we bring excellence back into our experience of each other through dialogue?

Bringing Excellence Back to Our Dialogue

This summer's Olympics are all about excellence. Maybe that can give us a clue for how to put excellence back in our dialogue. If dialogue were an event in the Olympics, how do you suppose they would judge it?

One way might be to score it as an endurance contest -whoever can dialogue the longest time without missing a day -wins. Except that we've gone for many years without missing and sometimes it seems like the goal of our dialogue becomes "don't break the string." That's not excellence. Yet, it seems like some points ought to be awarded for consistency. It's an important part of our dialogue.

Maybe they should judge based on who has the rosiest glow at the end of the dialogue. Except that sometimes when we tackle touchy subjects, we don't glow. Sometimes we end up looking like something the cat dragged in. So, dialogue should also have an element of "degree of difficulty," like the diving events.

Here's how we would answer the question: The Olympic medals for "Excellence in Dialogue" should be awarded to whoever comes closest to experiencing what it is like to be their partner during each dialogue.

Points would be awarded for empathy, listening with the heart, persistence, imagination, and determination. Points would be taken off for not dialoguing in prime time, allowing distractions to curb your concentration, and stopping when you understand your spouse instead of pressing on until you experience him or her. Consistency and "degree of difficulty" are necessary steps along

the way. But the real excellence in our dialogue comes only when each of us approaches every dialogue with the determination to "experience what it is like to be you!"

So, especially during the summer, or whenever we're in a rut in our dialogue, we need to ask ourselves: are we going for excellence today? How seriously am I going to try to be a world class listener in this dialogue?

Listening Like a Lover

There was a time when we came close to being world class listeners for one another. We were each other's best friends and confidants long before we discovered the joys of heavy duty kissing in the back seat of a Chevy.

Many a summer night we'd sit on Dee's front porch talking for hours until her Grandma would come to the screen door and start clearing her throat about every 30 seconds. So, I would go home and call her on the phone and talk for another couple of hours. We may not have gotten Olympic medals for listening, but we might have made Guinness' Book of Records for the longest continuous conversations.

We felt totally trusting of one another, and we just naturally shared feelings, needs, dreams, fears, worries, insecurities. We absorbed one another. If the other was upset by something, no matter how trivial, working through that upset became the focus of our conversation and attention. There was no such thing as self-protection or ignoring or putting each other on hold in those days. We were ravenous to know and experience one another. We listened like lovers.

Listening is easy when you are seventeen and your best friend loves you and you have your whole life ahead of you to dream about. It's a whole different ball game thirty-plus years later when it's 95 degrees in the shade and your wife wants to tell you how much she resents you working overtime, she has only one nerve ending left and the kids are hell-bent on destroying that one. It's hard to be non-judgmental, let alone sympathetic when the feelings you're listening to have you as their direct object. Relearning to listen like lovers especially when we're into a touchy subject is our biggest summertime challenge.

Listening like Associates

Much of the time these days, we don't listen like lovers, we listen like associates. We listen with preoccupied minds focused on getting the pertinent data, understanding the difficulty and offering great advice. If I'm caught up in trying to figure out a problem when Denie starts to talk to me, it can take me several minutes to clear my mind. Sometimes what he is saying simply doesn't register. The same thing happens when I am coping with strong feelings.

A couple of weeks ago I was very worried about one of our kids and my feelings were consuming me. In the middle of this, Denie was trying to tell me about what happened at work. I knew Denie needed me to listen to him and be present to him, but it was very hard for me to set aside my feelings. Most of the time I ended up half-listening to Denie and half being aware of my own sense of worry. I sure wasn't giving him the kind of undivided attention I used to give.

Sometimes we even listen like associates in our dialogue. The Olympic judges would probably barf. We read our love letters, and instead of exploring our feelings, we chat. Part of the chat is usually a "Well, how do you feel right now?" But those answers and feelings are just one more piece of information we exchange.

Other times, we go through a ritual attempt to listen as the other guy describes his feeling. In these situations, we ask all the right questions like "Is it bigger than a breadbox? Can you remember a time when you think I felt like this?" But we really aren't concentrating on the answers and trying to make the person and the feelings real for ourselves.

Sometimes when we're dialoguing on one of our "touchy subjects," we listen defensively. We start to hear criticisms mixed in with the feeling descriptions, whether they are there or not.

A steady diet of this kind of "listening like associates" can quickly turn our reasons for continuing to dialogue into "I guess we should." And then we start secretly wondering if it's worth the effort in the first place, since there are so many other things to do during the summer. After all, who in their right mind wants to make themselves vulnerable when they aren't sure of how that vulnerability will be received?

We only listen like lovers when we allow ourselves to be touched and affected by what the other person is saying. We only listen like lovers when the other guy hears the message "I want to know all there is to know about you," instead of "I already know you and I know what's best for you."

When we listen like associates, we make the same rude discovery we made last summer: the act of dialoguing all by itself does not change anything!

Excellence with Oscar the Grouch

We know very well that the goal of each dialogue should be to experience what it's like to be the other person. But when the summer chaos is getting to us, it takes a really big decision to say "I want to experience what it's like to be you," to the human equivalent of Oscar the Grouch. It's hard to snuggle up close and say "Baby, is your grouchy feeling bigger than a breadbox?" But we also know that keeping distant from one another makes things worse.

So how do you cherish a lover when he or she is Oscar the Grouch? We are coming to see that compassion, sympathy, and gentleness are not only decisions we can make if we put our minds to it, but they are also pre-requisites if we are going to achieve the intimacy in the way we listen to each other.

The next step we have to take in truly experiencing one another is the step of appreciating what the other guy is going through. In order to get to this point of experiencing the other, we first have to go through the stage of understanding. So we try to satisfy the need for understanding within what we write in our letters. We work to create dialogue questions that are targeted toward understanding.

The Three Minute Barrier

Finding excellence in our dialogue and listening like lovers only happens when we accept that there is a difference between dialogue and conversation. During the summer chaos we need lots of conversations. We need to understand and be understood, and that's what conversations are for. But when we turn our dialogue into a conversation, we are missing the whole point of dialogue. Once, during the verbal part of our dialogue, we decided to set an oven timer so we would remember to stop describing our feelings after ten minutes. Hah! The reality was we ran out of ways to describe our feelings after about three minutes. The fact is it takes us about three minutes to fully understand the feeling our partner is describing. We say "Yeah, I've got it! It's

like the embarrassment we felt when we were out to our friends' house for dinner and our daughter spilled her milk on their carpet."

At this point, we have discovered a common memory. We are in the ballpark. We have some reasonable understanding of the feeling. And we have hit a wall! We have not gotten to "I have experienced what it's like to be you," we've gotten to "I remember having a feeling like that myself." Big difference.

And if we don't watch ourselves, that's where we stop. We settle for a common memory. The biggest barrier to experiencing what it is like to be my partner is understanding my partner. The goal of dialogue is to punch through that three minute barrier of understanding, and keep on trying to actually experience what it is like to be my partner right now. It takes a determined act of the will to keep going. It is only when we reach that three minute point of understanding that we can even start to listen like lovers. Listening like a lover is a decision we have to make each time we sit down to dialogue. It doesn't come naturally -at least not so far. The toughest part is this: in order to listen beyond the three minute barrier of understanding, I have to make myself not reach conclusions or make judgment about what I hear. My objective is to take in, to absorb my spouse. Conclusions and judgments kill any possibility of that happening.

Listening Five Ways Simultaneously

To be successful at listening like a lover, to punch through that three minute barrier of understanding, I must listen five different ways all at the same time. First, I listen with my ears. I hear the words, hear the tone of voice, and hear the phraseology. All of those are indicators of what is really going on inside my lover. Listening with your ears involves all the things our teachers use to say to us: focus, concentrate, and give your undivided attention.

For us, accurately hearing one another means going to a quiet place for dialogue, telling the kids we don't want to be disturbed unless it's an emergency, and either taking care of the must-do stuff before we dialogue or mentally disciplining ourselves to set it aside for awhile.

Secondly to listen as a lover, I must listen with my mind. Listening with my mind means I use all the principles of active listening: asking for clarification, feeding back what I've heard to confirm that it's what my partner meant, constantly encouraging my partner to give me a fuller understanding. Active listening requires concentration and imagination, both of which come from our minds.

Thirdly, we need to try to listen with our eyes. This means paying attention to all the non-verbal signals my partner may not know she is broadcasting. Those are indications of the feelings: the posture, the expressions, the body position, what her hands and feet are doing. They tell me a lot about what's going on inside. Many times, Dee will say something like "you are telling me about an intrigued feeling, but your foot is jiggling like crazy" Sometimes that means you are feeling agitated. Is there agitation in your feeling now?" Many times, these kinds of questions help me to see my own emotions better.

The fourth way of listening is with our hands. Just the way Dee grips my hands when we dialogue tells me a lot about the intensity of her feeling. Or the way I absent-mindedly rub her knuckles while I'm describing my feeling tells Dee that I'm disturbed by something.

What does "Listening With My Heart" Actually Mean, Anyhow?

And the fifth way of listening like a lover is listening with our hearts" Listening with our hearts goes beyond simply understanding the message. When I am listening with my heart, I give Denie the message that what he is telling me is as important to me as it is to him - because he is so important to me.

Listening with my heart only happens when I make a determined effort to empty myself so I can be filled up with Denie. I must use all the other four types of listening. But what makes it listening with my heart is captured in the words "want and hunger." I WANT a fuller experience; I am HUNGRY to know Denie in the fullest dimensions. I am emotionally, spiritually, and physically leaning toward him. More than anything else, I want Denie to know how much he is loved by the way I am receiving him, even if what he is saying isn't pleasant.

This is all well and good. Just decide to listen like a lover, right? But then comes the ultimate Olympic challenge: how do I listen like a lover when the subject matter involves me and her feelings are difficult? That's when the defensiveness kicks in, and listening like a lover gets kicked out.

The only way I have ever been successful at listening like a lover when Dee is upset or angry is to pretend I am a third person for a while, and try to see me as she sees me" I decide to sort of hover above myself for a few minutes and try to see myself as another person might see me. To listen like a lover at these times, I must decide to stick my own feelings in my back pocket.

Listening with my heart does not mean that I agree with what Dee is saying. I can continue to have a different perspective, but still want to love her for who she is with her own point of view.

Listening with our hearts is rarely easy. Often it takes all the determination, concentration, and imagination that's in us. But only by listening with our hearts can we build genuine respect, trust, love, and true confiding relationship. So in a very real sense, how we listen to one another is the best tangible measure of how sacramental we are.

We are currently working our way through a major decision in our lives involving a job change, which will also require us to move to another city. We've been using our dialogue to help us to explore our feelings about all of the various aspects of this decision. With this kind of topic, our temptation is especially strong to shortcut the feelings part of our dialogue and get quickly into discussion on the issues.

But last Tuesday, we did it right. We put aside the issues and worked our butts off to punch through that three minute barrier'. I didn't actually make it to the point of fully experiencing what it's like to be Dee. But the effort to do so made a huge difference to us. I had been losing sight of her because of the emphasis on the issue.

When I tried so hard to experience her fears and uncertainties myself, it resulted in a true crescendo of intimacy for us. We just held each other and cried. It was an exquisite moment of both vulnerability and peace. And it has changed the way we have treated each other ever since.

Listening to experience each other, not just to understand, is the best remedy we know for the summer dialogue doldrums. The real question we need to face this summer is not how often do we listen like lovers, but rather, how often do we even try?