

# Contemplative Listening

## Readings, Poems, Images and Prayers



*Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.*

*– Henri Nouwen.*

*To be one in Christ, we must all love one another as our own selves. To love another as oneself means to treat her as oneself, to desire for her everything that one desires for oneself. This desire has no meaning unless one is willing to take definite steps to help someone else...*

*– Thomas Merton*

## Some Guidelines for Online Contemplative Listening Circles

A contemplative listening circle is a practice that fosters a contemplative way of listening and speaking to others in small groups. The intention is to honour the sacred worth of each individual, to open a deeper and more meaningful way of communicating, and to foster compassion and empathy for others.

Offering this practice to each other online is an easy and effective option when meeting in person is not practicable. Forming a contemplative listening circle with others who share an interest in the practice, also offers the opportunity for reflection on the practice, and ongoing learning and sharing of ideas and resources.

This introductory guide will hopefully provide some orientation and inspiration to anyone wishing to develop a practice of contemplative listening, whether it is offered to friends and family, colleagues, in opportunistic encounters with strangers, or within intentional contemplative listening circles. These resources are offered on the understanding that contemplative prayer is a regular part of a person's practice, so a basic introduction to Centering Prayer is included, along with poems, prayers and inspiration to get you started. Some additional readings are also included at the end. Your ideas and feedback on this resource is welcome.

### Guiding Principles

- Speak from the heart
- Listen from the heart
- Everyone participates as peers

### Group Norms

- Speak and listen deeply, from your heart centre
- Let go of any need to interrupt, fix, judge or rehearse what you are going to say
- Slow down: let there be spaces, pauses, silences
- Hold confidentiality
- When it is your turn to speak, indicate that you have finished by saying e.g. "That is what I would like to share" "I am finished, thank you"
- Allow a brief pause after a person has spoken for about 10 seconds

### Guidelines for the facilitator/meeting host

Facilitation of the meetings is rotated around participants where possible

1. **Welcome and Opening:** The facilitator begins by welcoming the other person/s and states the intention (facilitator's suggested words are shown in italics): *'The intention of our time here is to offer deep and open-hearted presence to each other. We are committing to meet together today for one hour (or agreed time), at which time I will close our time together with a prayer/reading.'*

**2. Reminder about Instructions:**

- *I would like to go over our group norms (read out as above).*
- *Each of us will have a turn to share for a minimum of 15 minutes. Take the time you need to share what you are holding in your heart, mind and body. Pause if you need to. Share whatever is arising for you. Trust the flow of the Spirit in this.*
- *After a sharing, each listener takes a turn to offer a brief response (less than 5 minutes) from their heart centre, with comments like the following:*

*'I was touched by....'*

*'I was curious about....'*

*'I noticed.....'*

*'I was struck by...'*

*Each listener indicates when they have finished their verbal response.*

- *Please create a space between each speaker – we will hold the stillness for about 10 seconds. This gives space to listen, from the heart centre, stay attentive and be present.*
- *Please keep your microphones on mute, unless you are speaking.*

**3. Centering / Reflection and Silence:** The facilitator then says *I will offer a brief centering prayer/reflection/practice, which is followed by five minutes silence, at the end of which the first person to share begins.*

**4. Thanks and Closure:** Once the cycle of sharing and responding is complete, the facilitator thanks everyone and closes the meeting with a prayer/reflection.



## Contemplative Listening by Elizabeth Liebert

Contemplative listening means bringing a full-bodied, loving presence to the person before you, as well as to what is said and what as yet remains unsaid. Contemplative listening seeks to honour the presence of the Holy Spirit in the speaker and between the listener and the speaker. Such listening rests in warm, loving, engaged, and prayerful silence, which often needs few or no words.

Contemplative listening is more than simply not speaking. It involves putting oneself aside to attend fully to the other. When your own current or remembered experience begins to play in your mind, set it aside for the moment. I call this self-forgetfulness 'bracketing' to convey the notion that one does not ultimately lose the self. Rather, one chooses, for the moment, to leave one's own concerns aside in order to be fully present to another. Any time your attention wanders from the speaker, it is time to bracket what you are then musing about and re-focus your attention lovingly and prayerfully to the speaker. You can return to your own musing and memories later. This discipline also means that you must withhold your pearls of wisdom, no matter how hard-won ("Let me tell you how I dealt with this same kind of thing – it worked really well"); your own similar stories ("The same thing happened to me"); and your own informed knowledge ("That's what I do in my job; I can help you"). Your best gift is your attentive, supportive presence.

### Contemplative Responding

In contemplative responding we act like a sounding box, taking the speaker's words, letting them resonate within us, and giving them back magnified and made more resonant by our loving attention. We help the speaker, through our response, to hear more deeply what he or she just said. We do not move ahead of the speaker or begin nudging however subtly, toward our own preferred interpretation or outcome. Short, succinct statements that summarise the speaker's words along with their underlying emotional tone are the most effective responses. Some typical starter phrases include:



"I heard you say... [repeat, in the same, or similar words, what you heard]."

"It seems that you... [repeat what the speaker did or felt] because ... [name the expression, action, or tone of voice that supports your educated guess]."

"I noticed that you ... [describe something the person said or did, but without interpreting it]."

"There seems to be a pattern ... [briefly describe the two or three aspects that link together]."

The briefer and more accurate your statement, the more helpful it usually is to the speaker's own contemplative process.

Finally, rest assured that the most important activity in all that follows is simply to hunger for God's life to come more fully – in you, in others, in the world. All the rest is God's job. And God is faithful, beyond our ability to ask or imagine."

Source: "The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making" by Elizabeth Liebert, pp. xix – xxi (Introduction).  
<http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/251380/27169955/1469727451557/Liebert+-+Contemplative+Listening+1+pg.pdf?token=Xr3OMJH4cZ7jCEq97Rt%2Fi%2FTrGo4%3D>



## *Enough*

*Enough. These few words are enough.*

*If not these words, this breath.*

*If not this breath, this sitting here.*

*This opening to life*

*We have refused*

*Again and again*

*Until now.*

*- David Whyte*

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept.

Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.

Henri Nouwen

*The word LISTEN contains the same letters as the word SILENT.*

*Alfred Brendel*

## *When Someone Deeply Listens to You*

When someone deeply listens to you  
it is like holding out a dented cup  
you've had since childhood  
and watching it fill up with  
cold, fresh water.  
When it balances on top of the brim,  
you are understood.  
When it overflows and touches your skin,  
You are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you  
the room where you stay starts a new life  
and the place where you wrote your first poem  
begins to glow in your mind's eye.  
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you  
your bare feet are on the earth  
and a beloved land that seemed distant  
is now at home within you.

- John Fox



## *I am a Hole in a Flute*

*I am a hole in a flute  
That the Christ's breath  
moves through.  
Listen to this music  
Listen to this music.*

- Hafiz



## *Listen*

Everyday  
I see or hear  
something  
that more or less

kills me  
with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle

in the haystack  
of light.  
It was what I was born for –  
to look, to listen,

to lose myself  
inside this soft world –  
to instruct myself  
over and over

in joy,  
and acclamation.  
Nor am I talking  
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,  
the very extravagant –  
but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.  
Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself,  
how can you help

but grow wise  
with such teachings  
as these –  
the untrimmable light

of the world,  
the ocean's shine,  
the prayers that are made  
out of grass?

– *Mary Oliver*





### *It Felt Love*

*How did the rose  
ever open its heart  
and give to this world  
all its beauty?*

*It felt the encouragement  
of light against its being,*

*Otherwise,  
we all remain too  
frightened.*

*- Hafiz*

*Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. ... Mark 4:1-20*



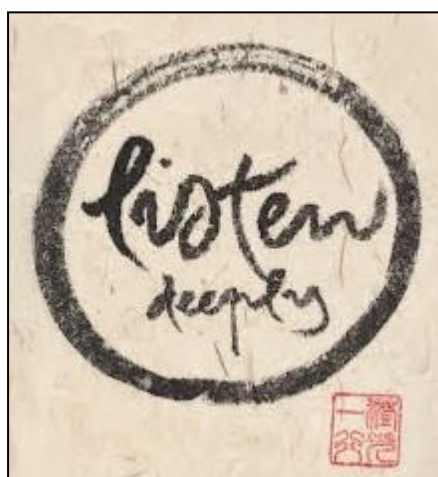


## *The Bridge*

*There are times in life  
when we are called to be bridges,  
not a great monument spanning a distance  
and carrying loads of heavy traffic,  
but a simple bridge to help one person from  
here to there over  
some difficulty  
such as pain, grief, fear, loneliness,  
a bridge which opens the way for ongoing  
journey.*

*When I become a bridge for another, I bring  
upon myself a blessing,  
for I escape from the small prison of self and exist for a wider world,  
breaking out to be a larger being who can enter another's pain  
and rejoice in another's triumph.  
I know of only one greater blessing in this life,  
and that is,  
To allow someone else to be a bridge for me.*

*Joy Cowley*



## *The Guest House – Rumi*

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all  
even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture.  
Still treat each guest honourably,  
he may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
And invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

## An Introduction to Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a modern prayer method based on the intuitive prayer rooted in Lectio Divina (sacred reading). It is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience the Divine's immanent presence with us. Centering prayer is grounded in relationship with God, through Christ, and is a practice to nurture that relationship.

Centering Prayer compliments and supports other modes of prayer— verbal, mental or affective prayer, and facilitates resting in the Divine Presence. Centering Prayer offers a way to grow in intimacy with God, moving beyond conversation to communion.

As Thomas Keating emphasizes, the source of Centering Prayer, as in all methods leading to contemplative prayer, is the Indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. The effects of Centering Prayer are ecclesial, as the prayer tends to build communities of faith and bond the members together in mutual friendship and love.

### Instruction

1. Sit in an upright, attentive posture in a way that allows for an erect spine and open heart. Place hands in your lap.
2. Gently close your eyes and bring to mind your sacred word, image or breath as your symbol to consent to the presence and action of God within you. Your sacred symbol is intended to be the same every time you pray. It helps to ground you in the present moment, allowing you to give your undivided loving, yielded attention to God. Choose a name for God or a characteristic for God like, Love, Peace, etc.
3. Silently, with eyes closed, recall your sacred symbol to begin your prayer. As you notice your thoughts, gently return to your sacred word. Do this however many times you notice your thoughts.
4. When your prayer period is over, transition slowly from your prayer practice to your active life.

It is recommended to pray in this fashion for a minimum of 20 minutes, two times a day. Start out slowly with initial prayer periods of five to ten minutes, working up to the desired length of time.

### Resources

[Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening](#) by Cynthia Bourgeault

[Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form](#) by M. Basil Pennington

[Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer](#) by Thomas Keating

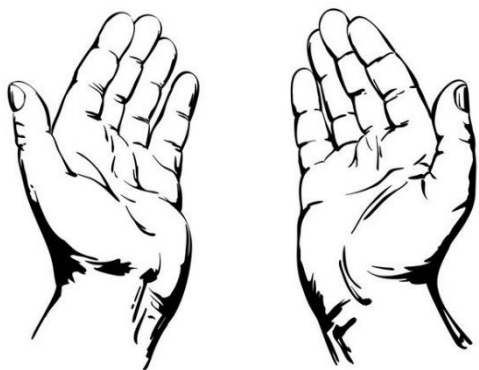
[Open Mind, Open Heart](#) by Thomas Keating

[The Heart of Centering Prayer](#) by Cynthia Bourgeault

[The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God](#) by David Frenette

Visit [Contemplative Outreach](#) to download an introductory pamphlet on Centering Prayer

## Prayers and Reflections to open or close meetings



*Loving God*

*We ask you to be present with us specially today.*

*Open our ears so we may hear your voice*

*Open our minds to receive your wisdom*

*Open our spirits to know your presence in all of life*

*Open our hearts to receive your love*

*We ask this in Christ's name, amen.*

### **Centering Practice**

*Close your eyes and bring your attention, slowly and sequentially, to whatever you are experiencing at this moment ... in your body ... your feelings ... and your mind. (pause)*

*Now come back to that part of yourself that noticed all this, the aware part of yourself that is at one with, and more than these other parts of yourself, and rest in this place.*

*Repeat a simple quote – e.g.*

- *I open to the presence and action of God.*
- *The mind creates the abyss, the heart crosses it*
- *Be still and know that I am God*  
*Be still and know that I am*  
*Be still and know*  
*Be still*  
*Be*
- *The whole of the spiritual life is meeting our edge, and softening.*

*E te Atua*

*Into our emptiness, breathe your fullness*

*Into our tiredness, pour your energy*

*If we are discouraged, bring us your hope*

*If we are anxious, bring us your peace*

*Be with us, e te Atua, in our living,  
and be in our beginnings and ending and the journey  
in between. Amene.*



## An Irish Prayer (adapted)

As we open our circle today,  
may the strength of God pilot me  
the power of God uphold me,  
the wisdom of God guide me.  
May the eye of God look before me,  
the ear of God hear me,  
the word of God speak for me.  
May the hand of God protect me,  
the way of God lie before me,  
the shield of God defend me,  
the host of God save me.  
May Christ shield me today.  
Christ with me, Christ before me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit,  
Christ when I stand,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.  
Amen



## Namaste

My soul honors your soul.  
I honor the place in you  
where the entire universe resides.  
I honor the light, love, truth,  
beauty and peace within you  
because it's also in me.  
In sharing these things  
we are united. We are the same.  
We are one.



## *Prayer for Community*

*O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other's burdens and our joys. Listen to our hearts' longings for the healing of our world. [Please add your own intentions.] . . . Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, amen.*

*(Adapted from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations)*

*The blessing of God, the eternal goodwill of God,  
the shalom of God,  
the wildness and warmth of God, be among us and  
between us, now and always, Amen.  
(the NZ Prayer book)*



Above all, trust in the slow work of God/Love. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. Only God/Love could say what this new spirit gradually forming in us will be. Let us give God/Love the benefit of believing that God's/Love's hand is leading us, and let us accept the anxiety of feeling ourselves in suspense and incomplete.

*(Prayer of Teilhard de Chardin – adapted).*

## Additional Reading Resources:

*An excerpt from:*

*Contemplative Listening: A Simple, How-to Guide* by Carl Gregg

[www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/01/contemplative-listening-a-simple-how-to-guide/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/01/contemplative-listening-a-simple-how-to-guide/)

**Listen Compassionately with a Non-anxious Presence** – You do not have to have all the answers, nor could you. One definition of contemplative listening is “listening another into speech.” By listening prayerfully and with all your senses, you are offering another person the time and space to process their inner and outer experience. Many people will never give themselves permission to take the luxury of an hour of self-reflection without this protected time and space of your meeting with them. Almost everyone will be shocked at the revelations they find themselves articulating. Most essentially you are helping give them a container in which these self-disclosures can emerge.

**Limit Your Responses.** Contemplative listening is not a conversation, and it’s not about you. The hardest part of this process is for the listener to simply, deeply, and radically listen — bracketing and letting go of your own curiosity and desire to share your story. You are accompanying another on *their* spiritual journey. Four classic responses are the following:

- “When you said ..., I noticed ....”
- “When you said ..., I was struck by ....”
- “When you said ..., I felt ....”
- “When you said ..., I got an image of ....”

It’s best to, for the most part, limit yourself to these simple, short responses. Remain aware of the speaker and how she or he may be deepening the story in his or her responses to what is shared. Remain aware also of your own inner experience as it relates to the speaker. Keep moving with the speaker, responding to what the speaker is communicating in the present in order to follow as the speaker’s developing story.

If you have a peer that might benefit from this process, you could meet once a month for an agreed time, with one person listening first, then switching roles. Such a regular meeting could give you the necessary practice to offer this skill to a stranger.

**Be Comfortable with Silence:** Allow natural pauses and be comfortable with silence as another way of being presence to the other, and allowing spaciousness for them to gather their thoughts and tune into their interior experience. As a way of becoming more comfortable with silence and resting in God’s presence, I highly recommend the book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* by Cynthia Bourgeault.

## *Heart of Listening by Larry Hinkle*

[www.odysseyinchrist.com/resources/spiritual-reflections/heart-listening](http://www.odysseyinchrist.com/resources/spiritual-reflections/heart-listening)

*Learning to listen with the heart moves us from the role of observers and enables us to become participants with the Creator in a world full of grace and possibility.*

—Elizabeth Canham



Contemplative listening operates on a deeper spiritual plane than even active listening does. Contemplative listening refers to ways of hearing God and experiencing his presence but also applies to listening to others. When we listen to others at this level, we are able to sense the presence of God and oftentimes hear the voice of God in the other person. Required in this kind of listening is a stillness and a quietness of heart that is open to the spiritual dimension. Austrian pianist, poet and author Alfred Bendel insightfully wrote that, “The word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent'.”<sup>1</sup> Author and Professor Rachel Naomi Remen says that this kind of generous listening creates a holy silence that allows for both the speaker and the listener to better understand themselves.<sup>2</sup>

This is more than a “psychological strategy” says Henri Nouwen. On the contrary, it is opening ourselves to the Spirit of God within us and to the Spirit of God in the other. He says that, “the Spirit of Jesus prays in us and listens in us to all who come to us with their sufferings and pains. When we dare to trust fully in the power of God’s Spirit listening in us, we will see true healing occur.”<sup>3</sup> This is at the heart of contemplative listening where a sanctuary of wholeness is created for those parts of our lives that have “been denied, unloved, [and] devalued by themselves and by others.”<sup>4</sup> The heart of listening reflects the heart of God who hears the cry of his people and responds (Psalm 34:17).

As a spiritual director, I continue to learn how to listen to others at the soul level, where the Spirit of God dwells. This practice extends out to family, friends, associates and those who come to be ministered to. I concur with Nouwen who wrote that listening at this level is a form of “spiritual hospitality” in which we invite even strangers to become friends. Listening contemplatively opens the door for a greater knowing, loving, empathic caring and a deeper relational heart connection with the Triune God.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/412905-the-word-li...>

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2006), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 81.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*.

## The Use of 'Third Things' by Parker Palmer

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
...The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind —  
Emily Dickinson*

In Western culture, we often seek truth through confrontation. But our headstrong ways of charging at truth scare the shy soul away. If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached 'on the slant.' I do not mean we should be coy, speaking evasively about subjects that make us uncomfortable, which weakens us and our relationships. But soul truth is so



powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and it to approach us, indirectly. We must invite, not command, the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen.

We achieve *intentionality* in a circle of trust by focusing on an important topic. We achieve *indirection* by exploring that topic metaphorically, via a poem, a story, a piece of

music, or a work of art that embodies it. I call these embodiments 'third things' because they represent neither the voice of the facilitator nor the voice of a participant. They have voices of their own, voices that tell the truth about a topic but, in the manner of metaphors, tell it on the slant. Mediated by a third thing, truth can emerge from, and return to, our awareness at whatever pace and depth we are able to handle — sometimes inwardly in silence, sometimes aloud in community — giving the shy soul the protective cover it needs. Rightly used, a third thing functions a bit like the old Rorschach inkblot test, evoking from us whatever the soul wants us to attend to. Mediated by a good metaphor, the soul is more likely than usual to have something to say. But the fact will count for nothing if we fail to recognize that the soul is speaking or fail to pay attention to what it says.

Conversations in which we speak and hear truth on the slant are always at risk because they defy conventional norms. As we explore a May Sarton poem, for example, we may discover (as I once did) that a member of the group did his doctoral dissertation on Sarton. After



listening to people talk about the poem for a while, he proclaimed, "What you have been saying is *not* what Sartre had in mind!" Instantly, the circle became unsafe and this 'expert' tried to dominate it with 'objective' knowledge, intimidating people who had been speaking from their hearts.



In such a moment, the facilitator must move gently — but quickly and firmly — to make everyone feel safe again, including, if possible, the person who made things unsafe. I recall saying something along these lines: 'What Sartre had in mind is certainly an interesting topic, but it is not our topic here. Our

focus is on how this poem intersects our own lives and evokes our own experience. I invited all of you to speak about the poem in that spirit, and I invite you to continue to do so.' But keeping the circle open to subjective viewpoints does not mean that 'anything goes,' another way of saying that we must be intentional as well as invitational. A third thing, in the hands of a good facilitator, provides the boundaries that can help keep our exploration in that creative space between aimless meandering and a forced march toward some predetermined goal.

When people wander from a topic and make comments unrelated to it (often because the topic is touching some nerve), the facilitator can call them back to the boundaries of the text itself, asking them to anchor whatever they say in a word, image, or line from the story or the poem. As we are brought back to the text, we are also brought back to the issue — and to the voice of the inner teacher. Now our exploration is more likely to be driven by the agenda of the soul than by the agendas of ego and intellect lurking in the room.

What T. S. Eliot said about poetry is true of all third things: *[Poetry] may make us . . . a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves.*

Source. "A Hidden Wholeness" by Parker Palmer

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14443>)