

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

November 2021

Radical Listening

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Once a Native American chief was interviewed by a reporter from The New York Times about life in his reservation. It was a short conversation. The chief stopped the interview after only a few questions. “My answers tell more about your questions than about our way of living,” he said.

How do we get better at listening to each other? Even the most curious and open questions can hit a wall of cultural differences. Even at my most interested, my language is always a barrier, for it creates the boundaries for any possible answers. My world is not your world, my social constructions are not your social constructions.

I am a psychologist working in private practice. In my conversations with people, I try my best to position myself in a not-knowing stance. Inspired by Harlene Anderson. And inspired by improv theater, in which the first rule is never to say “no” to what is coming at you, always, “Yes, and...” It requires what Monica Sesma and I in a workshop on this year’s ICCP conference dubbed “*radical listening*” – just listening, without agendas, interventions, or end goals in mind. Really listening. Maybe even getting wiser in the process.

In many ways radical listening is double listening: We try to pay close attention to the other person’s story, but at the same time we listen to ourselves, so that our questions or reflections don’t limit or put an end to the dialogue. It requires my favorite professional approach: What Gianfranco Cecchin called *irreverence*. Staying alert to our own tendencies for falling in love with a specific hypothesis or moral imperative.

Irreverence means trying to recognize our own biases and insisting that this conversation is not the same as my previous conversations. We don’t know where we are going just yet. This allows us to be anthropological explorers of unknown human territories, because we may end up with more questions than answers, with more process than product. We don’t know where we go, but we go together.

Radical listening is not easy. It entails more than “having an open mind” or showing curiosity and interest. It also means holding back. To radically listen means listening to what people want to talk about, even if our professional experience tells us that another topic would be more important. And listening to their values and dreams, no matter how much we personally disagree with these values or dreams.

And herein lies our challenge: I would posit that it is in a sense *easy* to listen to people aligning with our own values or moral stances. Even difficult conversations about depression,

violence, or family conflicts can often be listened to with empathy and patience.

But how would you respond to the following dilemma? Imagine you are in dialogue with a client with views diametrically opposite to your own – e.g. an unapologetic sex offender or someone who is a proud member of a neo-Nazi community. How would you approach a radical listening position in this context?



Illustration by Fanney Antonsdóttir



Painting by Tanja Lind Tankred