

Listening well: A chaplains vocation

by [Nicole Chilivis](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue



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When I first stepped into the world of chaplaincy as a student in clinical pastoral education, I was miffed by all the talk of “listening presence.” Was I merely a listener? Was I to do nothing different from what I did as a 15-year-old candy striper—listen to patients’ stories?

After two decades working as a counselor and a hospital chaplain, I now understand the tremendous skill required to listen actively and reflectively. I understand that listening well creates a space in which a truth can be spoken. I now am comfortable spending my days saying relatively little, because words often serve to crowd out the space for deep reflection.

A skilled listener can help people tap into their own wisdom. The wife of a dying man, facing end-of-life decisions—“Are you ready to make him a DNR?”—may need something besides advice; she needs help in finding what is in her heart.

Several years of seeing a spiritual director myself gave me an insight: all of us have sundry, even contradictory parts that make us complex people. When my director compassionately listened and waited for me to speak, unfamiliar dimensions of myself made an appearance. I encountered parts of myself that I had spent years hiding, without being aware of it. I learned to talk to and relate gently to the images that showed up in my dreams. Our time together was spacious because the director listened without judgment.

The spiritual director's work is to help another human feel received and accepted "without judgment or distortion, subtraction or addition," says Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward*. "Such perfect receiving is what transforms us. Being totally received as we truly are is what we wait and long for all of our lives." A mysterious power is often felt in moments of listening. Something shifts. When a human being looks into another's eyes, accepting even the broken or unsavory parts, it evokes a deep and abiding hope.

A spiritual director, much like a chaplain, is skilled at knowing when to turn the heat up or down or leave it where it is. The skill is born out of curiosity, experience, education, compassion, and trust in the power of listening. The shy parts of the soul may be invited to speak in a way that begins to heal a deep wound, alleviate a depression, or change the course of a life. Few things are more precious and valuable than the presence of another person who is willing to bear witness, to look at another's life or death with eyes unaverted.

When someone asks me what I do as a chaplain, I still occasionally find myself offering a list of activities. "I administer the sacraments," I'll say. "I anoint dying patients and hold prayer vigils at their bedside with family members. I teach grief and meditation groups." The notion lingers that listening compassionately isn't enough of a job description.

Yet listening itself has a sacramental dimension. When a family gathers around a deceased loved one, the hospital bed becomes a sort of communion table. Around the bed may be a weeping daughter, two ex-husbands, a current partner, two sons who haven't spoken in years, an estranged sister, and a doting brother. When I enter the room, I instantly feel that I am in a sacred space. We form a circle, and we pray. I say something as simple as, "Tell me about her," and the stories begin to flow, followed by the laughter and the tears. Held by love, people suspend their judgments and hurt feelings, if just for the moment. Such moments can be the beginning of a deeper kind of healing.

Sacramental listening reminds us that current suffering isn't the end of the story. God loves us deeply, and the vision for the future is vaster and more magnificent than we could ever imagine. In these moments of profound human presence, we are awakened to the divine presence and see that the kingdom of God is coming and yet is already here.