

Being, Beholding, Belonging

Part III

Empathetic Listening: Program Description

Our children live in a fast-paced, competitive and high-tech world, in a culture where continuous partial attention and multi-tasking are the norm. Are we losing our ability to listen to each other? Do we carry an attitude of respect that allows us to listen to the meaning and feeling that come through another's words?

The "Empathetic Listening" program engages children in a practice of deep listening to each other and to the natural world. During the first half of the program, the children are invited to listen deeply to the natural world during a solo writing time in their own special sit-spot within a beautiful earth sanctuary. They are invited to become still, to deeply notice the place where they are sitting. What makes this particular landscape special and unique? What are you hearing in your special place? What might nature reveal to you? In the rare experience of silence, a voice begins to emerge, their own, inspired by the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the natural world.

The second half of the program begins with an introduction to empathetic listening, a way of listening that creates mutual understanding, trust and respect. Can we learn to listen without judgement? Can we listen without interrupting? Can we reflect back what we think we have heard? Can we sense the feelings behind the words? These are some of the practices that children have an opportunity to explore together in pre-selected pairs.

Our highly experienced staff members carry an attitude of deep respect for all life. We seek always to embody new ways of listening to nature and to each other, ways that are respectful, reverential and relational.

Welcome and Introductions

We welcome the children to the fire circle with Native American flute to quiet the mind. The sounds of a Cedarwood flute intentionally express gratitude for the amazing universe that we live in, for each of them, for the animals of the earth, the plants, the insects and the stones. We speak with the students about the earth sanctuary as a safe place for all creatures, no matter what their size or appearance may be. At the earth sanctuary we are all guests of what lives there and we act accordingly. Everything is protected and worthy of respect for its intrinsic value to the whole of creation.

Living in today's world requires new ways of seeing and new ways of hearing that are different from our habitual ways of seeing and hearing. We share from Helen Keller's biography about some of her experiences in nature and the lovely ways that she expressed her connections with the natural world without having the benefit of her eyesight or her hearing. Helen was forced to develop other ways of knowing to help her perceive the essence of each divine spark of life. She learned to sense life in new ways – tactile, intuitive and deeply interior ways – that connected her with the elements, trees, birds, and flowers.

Empathetic Listening with Nature

It is time to divide the children into three groups of eight children each. The focus will be on listening to the world of nature through all of our senses as well as through our inner sensing. We gather at the trailhead and take a moment to give thanks for the gifts from the trees. We explain that we will be forming a processional line with about 15 feet between each person. We will walk in silence with deep attention to the beauty of the landscape as we walk toward the bridge where we will meet. The sounds beneath our feet are not quiet at all as we swish through the ankle deep multicolored leafy path. Our collective footsteps form a kind of swishy rhythm that gently sounds through the forest, announcing our presence. The air is dry and comfortable in the shade of the forest. The dark green ferns dominate the sides of the paths. There are bird songs far away. A great blue heron flies silently over our heads, but few notice him as they look for rocks and roots on the trail hidden beneath the leaves. The silent solo walking is relaxing. Children are comfortable with this way of being in the forest with us. Silence is a friend, not a foe.

When we arrive at the small bridge over the creek, we gather together with our legs dangling over the side of the bridge and watch the gentle flow of the creek. A crawdad sticks his claws out from beneath a rock. We ask each person to close his or her eyes and to listen to all of the sounds near and far, soft and loud. We tell them that we will softly whistle when it is time to open their eyes. The deep listening brings with it a peacefulness. Eyes closed, the children further relax and listen for a long time. When the time seems right, we whistle softly and invite them to open their eyes slowly to allow the light of the world to enter back in gently. What is the first thing they notice when they open their eyes? What did they hear? We share what we noticed in the silence with our eyes closed.

We invite the children to find a sit spot nearby and to take some time to settle into the special place they have chosen. What do they hear, both inwardly and in the world around them? At the end of their writing time, we listen to each child's unique experience of listening and to what they heard and sensed. The uniqueness of each person's way of sensing paints a beautiful picture

of this special place and how each person perceives in his or her own special way. The second half of the walk back to the TreeHouse is relaxed. The children's eyes and ears are attuned to the music of the forest and the children eagerly share what they notice as they explore with those near them along the path.

Empathetic Listening with Each Other

With everyone back at the TreeHouse, it is time to gather the whole class together again to learn about the art of empathetic listening and to have some fun practicing reflective listening skills in pre-arranged pairs.

What is empathetic listening? Empathetic listening (also called active listening or reflective listening) is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding, trust and respect. Empathetic listening helps the listener to better understand the emotions and feelings that are underneath another person's words. It is often used by mediators to help with conflicts between two parties to help them come to a resolution, but we will be focusing on person-to-person listening.

We discuss habits of listening that inhibit communion between two people and that take away from a sense of being respected and heard. During empathetic listening, we show a willingness to be present and to let the other person speak freely. We are attentive to what is being said, take care not to interrupt, and try not to get distracted. We do not try to change the subject. We listen for the feelings beneath the words. We try to create a positive atmosphere through our body language and non-verbal behavior and provide eye contact. Through empathetic listening the listener lets the speaker know, "I am interested in what you are saying and I am not judging you."

We are now ready to break into pairs and sit together, face-to-face, down by the pond on the grassy dam to practice empathetic listening. The teacher has chosen pairs of children ahead of time, children that are not best friends or at odds with each other, but children that might benefit from extending their circle of friends. The adults will be participating too.

The pairs scatter about on sit mats facing each other and begin to tell a story of a time they were in nature. Instructions are clear to only interrupt if a point needs clarifying. They are consciously paying attention to their body language and eye contact. The children are deeply engaged with one another, and the dam is buzzing with stories as everyone engages in the practice. Our Earth Guides linger and support children who seem to be finished very quickly or who need some gentle guidance.

Lunch

Closing

After lunch, as we come together to reflect on our day, students often say how wonderful it felt to be able to speak without interruption and with such rapt attention. Most of them listen very carefully and are able to reflect what they heard back accurately, including how the speaker felt about the event. The intrinsic value of every human being - and of every creature, plant and stone - has been affirmed through empathetic listening in the natural world. Through this program we come to deeply understand that the Earth is a single, sacred community.