

How Can we Learn Listen More Attentively?

Jack Zimmerman

Have you ever noticed what happens when you really listen to another person or to a creature rustling in the brush at night or to the wind moving in the trees, listen without reacting or even the intention to respond, listen without being influenced by long-held images and memories or firmly held positions, listen instead with a beginners mind and the ears of child hearing a bedtime story?

Most of us rarely listen that way. In ordinary dialogue or group discussions our response usually begins to form well before others are finished speaking. Even in nature's indomitable presence, a self-involved mind will veil the ears (and the eyes as well) from what is actually happening around us. There is now scientific evidence to support the ancient wisdom that giving full attention while listening -- as distinct from just hearing -- is fundamental to creative and spiritual awakening.

We know of no more effective way to invoke this state of listening than through the "Council Process," which has been practiced these past twenty years at the Ojai Foundation in Ojai's Upper Valley. Inspired by the Foundation's trainings and internships, practitioners have brought council to many schools, business organizations and communities in California and other parts of the country.

The basic form of council is simple: The group chooses one or two facilitators, whose challenge it is to keep the process on track. We have found that two leaders, working as a pair, reinforces the feeling of partnership that underlies the Council Process. In order to empower each person to speak in turn, a talking piece is chosen to pass around the circle. The piece can be as innocent as a flower, just picked for the occasion, or as venerable as a traditional handcrafted artifact familiar to the group. There are four basic intentions when communicating in council: speak from the heart, listen attentively, be spontaneous (don't decide what you're going to say until you have the talking piece) and tell your story in a "lean" way. Councils can be open or thematic, depending on the needs of the group. Even in an open council a theme often emerges, perhaps triggered by one person's contribution or the general focus of the sharing.

Council has been an effective way for young people to build self-esteem and learn to speak more effectively, explore their values, resolve conflicts non-violently and tell their personal and cultural stories. It has been used for many years at a variety of independent schools--for example, the Crossroads School in Santa Monica initiated its on-going program in 1983. In 1992 a council program was started at the multicultural Palms (public) Middle School in Los Angeles, where now more than eleven hundred sixth and eighth graders sit in council each week. The Palms program has enabled the school to dispel cultural and racial conflicts and utilize the diversity of its student body in a productive way. In 1996 the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission's gave its education award to the program.

The practice of council has also been useful in business organizations and communities that want to move from a hierarchical structure to one in which responsibility and leadership are shared by many. For example, council was used as the core practice in a six-year long training program at the Xerox Corporation for 350 engineers and managers engaged in a division-wide environmental awareness program. Council has been the basis of numerous “spirit in the workplace” and team building initiatives in such major corporations as Motorola, Moore Business Communications, Southern California Edison, and Rodale Press. Wherever it is used, council provides a training ground for listening.

In 1998, the Foundation created the Center for Council Training (CCT) to assist the growing number of people interested in more deeply integrating the way of council in their work and personal lives. CCT offers educators, business professionals, therapists, community participants, families and couples ongoing council training; in-service and retreat internships; and a variety of experiences in such related areas as storytelling, movement, music-making, mindfulness and wilderness rites of passage.

Those interested in finding out more about council or ordering our book--[The Way of Council](#), by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, Bramble Books, 1996--are invited to visit The Ojai Foundation web site at: www.ojaifoundation.org.

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