

# 1

## How to Create a Listening Environment

In *The Art of Pastoral Conversation* (1981), Gaylord Noyce points out: "listening is hard work. It is far easier to translate a foreign language that we know into our own tongue than to translate our own into the foreign speech. Likewise, it is far easier to direct a conversation along the lines of our own thinking than to respond along the lines of thought and feeling and in accord with the assumptions of others. Sensitive, thoughtful listening makes it more possible" (p. 31).

"Preaching courses teach seminary students how to speak, while pastoral counseling courses teach them how to listen." I have heard this said, and there is much truth in it. As this chapter unfolds, however, it will become clear that there is one very important similarity between preaching and pastoral counseling, and this is that both involve communication. The problem is that the communication skills developed for preaching do not work very well in counseling, which may help to explain the widely held perception (even if it exaggerates the point a bit) that the best preachers are often the worst counselors, and that the best counselors are often ineffective preachers.

## 12 *Giving Counsel*

This chapter will focus on the important role that listening plays in any situation in which a minister assumes the role of counselor. Some readers may feel that they do not need to read a chapter on "how to create a listening environment" because they are "natural listeners." If there is a phenomenon known as the "natural reader"—the child of three or four years old who takes to reading with relative ease—surely there is also a category of persons who are "natural listeners." This ability, in fact, may be an important reason why they were drawn to ministry as a profession, and why they are especially attracted to counseling. At the same time, I believe that reading about listening will, at the very least, help these "natural listeners" to identify what they are already doing that makes them effective listeners. It may also help them to see how their listening ability fits within the larger framework of a helping process.

Others are convinced that they will never become good listeners. To read about listening will merely make them feel more inadequate. While it may be risky to say this (as there are always exceptions), my experience has been that students who truly wanted to become better listeners have in fact become so. With rare exceptions, any student whose listening capacity has not improved as a result of taking a course in pastoral care and counseling was not really interested in becoming a good listener. Listening is a skill that can be taught, but not to an unreceptive learner. A sort of circularity, perhaps even a paradox, in this regard is that to become a listener, one must be able to listen to suggestions or advice about listening from someone else. Reading about listening is itself a form of listening. The reader can "talk back"—challenge or question what has been said—but such "talking back" will have much greater force if the reader has first listened to what the author has to say.

Of course, reading about effective listening and actually engaging in it as a counselor are two different things. What seems simple enough as we read about it may prove more difficult in practice. This gap between reading about effective listening and actually doing it should not be minimized. On the other hand, effective listening is something one can practice outside the counseling role. Since we communicate with many persons throughout the course of a normal day, we can practice effective listening in many natural contexts. When I was first introduced to the "client-centered" approach to counseling—an approach that places great emphasis on listening and reflecting what one hears—I tried it out at parties and other social gatherings. As I was driving home, my frequent reflection on the fact that I had learned a great deal about

quite a number of persons—and had said virtually nothing about myself—confirmed the value of this approach. (I later discovered that persons who suffer from social phobia or anxiety often use this very “method” because they dislike being the center of attention; see Capps, 1998). Readers of this chapter may want to put its claims to a test. They might, for example, use the ideas presented here in talking with one friend and deliberately not use them—or even violate them—in a conversation with another friend, and then assess the two conversations. When engaging in the counseling role itself, one is not as free to experiment in this way.

I suggest, then, that reading about listening can benefit any reader except one who is simply not interested in becoming a better listener. (I have in mind here a lack of interest and not resistance, which, as James E. Dittes points out, is typically “a sign of vitality”; Dittes, 1967, p. 136ff.) Because this is a book on the minister as counselor, the listening that concerns us here is listening that occurs within the context or framework of a *helping process*. When we hear the term *helping process*, we are likely to think of a situation in which the minister is talking with a parishioner in her office about a personal problem. Most of the situations I will discuss in this book will be of this kind. The term also applies, however, to situations in which the minister is helping the budget committee decide between two options, or assisting the education committee in addressing the problem of a shortage of teachers, or counseling the chairperson of the music committee concerning his efforts to resolve a dispute between the organist and the choir director. It may also apply to a seminary professor who is counseling a doctoral student on how to get her dissertation proposal accepted by the faculty committee that reviews such proposals. The same listening skills that are effective in counseling an individual or couple on a personal matter are likely to be effective with these other situations. This is why Carl R. Rogers, one of the therapists who developed the listening methods that are so widely used by psychotherapists and counselors today, was often asked to speak to educators and managers and was even involved in an experiment with Catholic and Protestant youth of Northern Ireland who were brought together in a neutral site for mutual conversation.

In this chapter, I will be concerned with what we might view as an adult learning problem, the problem of how to learn to listen. My approach to this problem will not be instructional, much less didactic. I will not set forth a step-by-step model for learning to listen. Instead, I will address this adult learning problem through indirection, that is, by focusing on ways to create a listening environment, an environment

## 14 *Giving Counsel*

conducive to listening. In taking this more indirect approach, I show, in effect, that I myself have been listening to educators who say that it is very difficult to teach if the environment is not conducive to learning. Similarly, it is difficult to become a good, effective listener if a listening environment has not been created. Once the environment is in place, the difficulty of listening is greatly reduced.

Of course, the word "environment" is a notoriously slippery term, and our politicians have taken full advantage of this fact when they have claimed to be "for the environment" or represented themselves as "the environmental candidate." This slipperiness is reflected in the dictionary definition of environment as "all the conditions, circumstances, and influences surrounding, and affecting the development of, an organism or group of organisms." The key word here, however, is "surrounding," or that which encircles or encloses the organism in question. What are the conditions, circumstances, and influences that "surround" the act or process of listening? What are the conditions that inhibit listening from taking place? And what are the conditions that facilitate its occurrence? I will be concerned in this chapter with these surrounding factors. Then, in chapter 2, I will focus more narrowly on the communication process—the give-and-take between the person who provides a listening ear and the person (or persons) who have asked or expect to be listened to.

### How Anxiety Inhibits Listening

What is listening? The dictionary defines it as "to make a conscious effort to hear; attend closely, so as to hear; to pay close attention." This definition emphasizes that it is a *conscious* effort and that it involves being *attentive*. *Conscious* in this case means being *intentional*, or purposeful, while *attention* means the act of keeping one's mind closely on something. Thus, listening has an *intentional* and an *attentional* aspect, and both are needed for true listening to occur. One might be very intentional—"I will make every effort to listen"—and yet be unable to attend to what is being said or communicated.

A person might not be able to attend to what is being said for many reasons. He may be so conscious of his intention to listen that he is unable to attend to what the other person is trying to communicate. We might call this the paradox of intentional listening. The more intentional one is, the greater the danger that one will not be attentional. Other reasons, however, have more to do with the anxieties that are evoked in oneself by what the other person is saying.

Erik H. Erikson (1963) makes a useful contrast between anxieties and fears. Fears, he says, "are states of apprehension which focus on isolated and recognizable dangers so that they may be judiciously appraised and realistically countered," whereas anxieties "are diffuse states of tension which magnify and even cause the illusion of an outer danger, without pointing to appropriate avenues of defense or mastery" (pp. 406-7).

For someone who has not previously needed to be intentional about listening, the first few experiences of doing this may inherently produce anxiety. One of the goals of this book is that the reader will find intentional listening less inherently anxiety-producing because he has a good idea of what such listening entails. But anxieties are also evoked or created by the things another person says to us. The things that are said or communicated can make us anxious, producing a "diffuse state of tension" that magnifies or causes a sense of endangerment from which we are unable, at the moment at least, to defend ourselves. An obvious example is when we are verbally condemned, as when a parishioner says that she "completely disagrees" with the sermon, or when the senior minister calls the associate minister into his office and begins to list the "complaints" he has heard from a few church members about how she has been handling her youth ministry assignments. Even if the senior minister minimizes these complaints, stressing that the vast majority of the members are enthusiastic about the associate's work with the youth, his use of the word "complaints" is likely to evoke anxiety, and the associate may have difficulty listening to the senior minister's description of the complaints and his assurances that they represent the views of only a few members.

Or when a parishioner comes to the minister and says that he has learned something about the minister's past that the minister had hoped her congregation would never learn about, she is very likely to have an initial response of anxiety, as she is faced with what appears to be a danger for which she has no appropriate defense. If she subsequently calms herself and says to her accuser, "This is something that happened a long time ago for which I have asked and received God's forgiveness," what appeared to be an experience of endangerment has become an opportunity to witness to the efficacy of the Christian faith. Initially, though, she feels anxious because she experiences an inability to defend herself.

Things said to a counselor can make the counselor anxious for various other reasons. They may be categorized as follows:

## 16 *Giving Counsel*

1. *The subject matter itself produces anxiety.* Certain topics that arise in the course of a conversation may make the minister feel uneasy, threatened, or endangered. Talk about death, marital conflicts, conflicts between siblings, or sexual topics may be threatening because they open up wounds from childhood or adolescence. A male parishioner describing a sexual relationship with another male may produce anxiety in a male minister who had an unwanted sexual encounter with a man when he was a teenager. Or a parishioner who says she is thinking seriously about committing suicide may produce anxiety in the minister because his mother committed suicide when he was a boy and he continues to feel that he was partly to blame even though he knows he was not. When anyone brings up the subject of suicide, this minister's anxiety is raised, and he finds that he is unable to hear what is being said from that point on. All he can think about for the next several minutes is his experience of looking at his dead mother's face as she lay in the casket and of asking her why she didn't want to live anymore.

2. *The subject matter produces anxiety when this particular person talks about it.* Topics that may not ordinarily result in anxiety for the minister, but do so when a particular individual brings them up. For example, a male minister may not become anxious when other persons talk about sexual matters, but when a particular woman does so, he becomes anxious, perhaps because he finds her talking about it to be sexually arousing. Or a minister may ordinarily be able to listen to other persons' expressions of anger, but finds herself anxious when a particular person talks in an angry voice because his way of expressing anger is very similar to how her father spoke angrily toward her when she was a child. Thus, even though the man being listened to is expressing anger toward someone else, she feels personally threatened, and reexperiences her inability to defend herself against a threat.

3. *A particular person produces anxiety whatever the subject matter is.* Some individuals make a minister feel anxious by their physical presence alone. The reasons for this may be self-evident. For example, whenever this person comes to a committee meeting, he can be counted on to insult another person, causing the other person to break out in tears, or leave the meeting altogether. Thus, the very appearance of this person raises the minister's anxiety level, as she feels relatively defenseless, not knowing when the insults will occur, who they will be directed against, and what their repercussions will be. Other times, the reasons are less self-evident. The minister may not be aware, for example, that a particular person produces feelings in him that were evoked by his mother

when he felt that she was trying to control him. When this person enters the room, the minister feels unaccountably trapped, like an animal, and looks about for some means of escape. When she speaks, he doesn't hear much of what she has to say.

4. *The anxiety is due to anticipatory dread.* A minister may have difficulty listening to what the other person is saying because he is thinking about what he will need to do later in the conversation. For example, he may be aware that this parishioner will expect him to say a prayer at the end of the conversation, and he may be anxious about what he is going to say. Or a minister in the teaching profession may be dreading the fact that she will need to tell the student that his course work is quite poor. Knowing that he expects that she will have nothing but praise for his work makes this task especially difficult. Or a minister may be anxious about what her next move should be. Will she suggest another conversation together? Will she refer the other person to another professional, and, if so, to whom? Or he may be thinking about something else that he needs to do later in the day, such as a funeral he is dreading because he knows it will be an especially difficult one for the family involved. Or she may be thinking about the fact that her husband is going to undergo medical tests later in the day. If the previous cause of anxiety was more likely to be due to its associations with the past, this one has more to do with dread related to the future, causing one to be less than fully attentive to what is being said right now.

5. *The anxiety is due to an inability to understand what the other person is saying.* Here, the anxiety does not concern the subject matter or the person who is speaking, but the difficulty the hearer is having in understanding what is being said. The reason for the difficulty may be that the minister does not know much, if anything, about the topic of discussion or about how the person who is speaking about the topic appears to be viewing it. For example, the topic may have to do with a person's feeling she is getting the runaround at a social agency. If the minister does not know anything about this agency or its procedures, he may feel that the conversation is simply beyond his ability to follow, and this absence of understanding may cause him to become anxious because his ignorance is self-evident to him, and will no doubt become obvious to the other person as well. Or a parishioner may be telling the minister about a situation involving her extended family and the minister may find that she cannot keep all the names and relations straight. She becomes anxious, afraid her effort to respond will be met with, "Oh, no, no, no, it wasn't Ruthie who had the baby out of wedlock;

## 18 *Giving Counsel*

it was Amy. Ruthie was the one who ran off with that sailor boy we all despised." Or the other person may be discussing a medical procedure that he is about to undergo, and the minister realizes that if she knew more about the procedure, she would be able to understand much better the nature and degree of the other person's anxiety. Although the minister is aware of the fact that one is not expected to know everything, this awareness may be ineffectual in combating the anxiety that her lack of understanding will be discovered and that she may be judged incompetent or even become the object of contempt.

Subjects in which one's understanding may be challenged can be those involving technological developments about which one is uninformed or sociocultural experiences that are very different from one's own. An older minister may simply not understand the slang or jargon of a younger person, while a younger minister may find an older person's stories or anecdotes hard to understand because their sociocultural reference points no longer exist. Ways of speaking that are difficult to understand may be due to age, racial, regional, occupational, or sociocultural differences, so that listening to the other requires heightened attentiveness, which can be fatiguing or exhausting. When I was in Sweden some years ago, I was talking with the wife of a professor friend of mine. As our conversation continued, I became aware that talking with me was physically exhausting for her in that she was having to listen and talk in English. I suddenly realized that this conversation was far more demanding on her than it was on me even though I was doing more of the talking. It isn't especially flattering to discover that one is hard for another to listen to, but it was an excellent illustration of Noyce's point that listening is hard work.

6. *The anxiety is due to one's awareness of differing points of view.* Here, the anxiety is not due to one's difficulty in understanding what the other person is talking about, but to the fact that one understands only too well. How does one listen attentively when what is being said seems altogether wrongheaded, if not perverse? And how does one remain faithful to one's own beliefs while listening to another person who is espousing opposing beliefs? The minister may feel threatened even though the other person is not saying anything negative about the minister. An especially threatening conversation is one in which the other person assumes—perhaps because the minister is a minister—that his viewpoint is shared by the minister. The other person may be attacking the views of someone else, assuming that the minister shares her distaste for these ideas, while in point of fact the minister is in agreement with



the one being criticized. Should the minister say that he disagrees with the speaker, thus jeopardizing the helping process itself, or should he express his disagreement on the grounds that the process cannot really be helpful if he is not straightforward and honest? Topics that are most likely to engender anxiety are ones that concern theological and moral issues. Largely because of their seminary education, many ministers do not have the same theological views as many—perhaps most—of the persons they work with (parishioners, patients, etc.). This is often true of their views on moral issues as well. If these were merely “theoretical” differences, they might not be cause for anxiety, but many of these issues have practical consequences and are therefore integral to the helping process itself. A minister’s anxiety in such a case can range from not wanting her personal views to be found out to concern that she is not being faithful to her calling if she “goes along with” the other person’s beliefs and seemingly endorses their practical consequences.

7. *The anxiety is due to the minister’s current emotional or psychological health.* A minister may be suffering from depression, apathy, or chronic fatigue, and the very thought of needing to listen to the problems or complaints of another person is a threatening prospect. She does not know if she is even capable of being attentive. Even if she is able to hear the words, she is unable to respond to their felt meanings. She wants to care about the other person’s concerns or worries but is having difficulty marshaling this caring, and this very difficulty creates further anxiety. Another minister may not be feeling depressed, apathetic, or fatigued, but he may be feeling the normal burdens of his work and responsibilities. Unlike the full-time pastoral counselor, who anticipates a relatively full day of counseling, the minister in other settings may feel that the role of counselor is a distraction from other, more pressing obligations. Or the fact that it is more occasional—while his role as worship leader is a more definite, routine responsibility—makes it seem somehow more burdensome. His emotional state of resentment at having to talk with this person about her worries—which may seem overblown anyway—may create anxieties, especially if he is aware of his emotional state: “I worry that my hidden resentment will become evident in the way I listen to her.”

The minister who is aware of her troubled emotional or psychological state may make an intentional decision to avoid situations where she is placed in the counselor role, but she may then become anxious that the congregation will wonder why she is doing this and that her own problem will come out in the open, with undesired consequences. If

### 38 Giving Counsel

she does not make this decision, however, she may fear that the counsel she gives to others will be colored by her own emotional state and may therefore be harmful to the other person. Either way, she feels defenseless, and the state of diffuse tension that accompanies this feeling inhibits her ability to listen.

These seven categories may not exhaust all the possible reasons that a minister may become anxious in his role as counselor, but they make my point that anxiety is the most likely reason that a minister may be having difficulty attending to what the other person is saying in spite of the intention to listen carefully. As Freud pointed out nearly a century ago, anxiety is likely to be paralyzing (Freud, 1959). In the context that concerns us here, it paralyzes the minister's capacity to listen—to attend fully—to what the other person is saying. Freud also noted, however, that the very symptoms that we develop in order to ward off the anxiety tell us a great deal about the basis for our anxiety, and about how we characteristically respond to anxiety-producing situations. If, for example, the parishioner's threat to tell others in the congregation what he knows about the minister's past were to prompt her to go home that evening and draft a letter of resignation, this very action would reveal that behind her anxiety is the fear of exposure, and that her characteristic response to such exposure is to punish herself. A similar fear of exposure may, however, be present in the case of the minister who is made anxious by the fact that he does not understand what the parishioner is talking about, though *his* response to such exposure may be to change the subject to a topic that he does know something about, whether or not this is useful to the parishioner in working through her problem. Thus, his characteristic defense against exposure is to introduce a distraction. I know a professor who can be counted on to tell a joke when the conversation moves into an area where his lack of knowledge about it will be evident to the others. The joke is a defensive strategy. It says to his conversation partners, "The topic isn't worth taking seriously."

Usually a fear is hidden behind one's anxieties, and identifying what this fear is can be helpful in dealing with the anxiety itself. The first minister did not in fact go home and write her resignation letter. Instead, after a brief pause during which she collected herself, she informed her accuser that she did not fear exposure, for she had already exposed her shame and guilt to God, and God had granted her forgiveness. The minister who feared the exposure of his lack of understanding took the risk of not changing the subject—his usual defense—and said to the person to whom he was offering counsel, "Perhaps I should know

about the medical procedure you are talking about, but I'm afraid I've never heard of it. Could you describe it for me?" Instead of ridiculing him for his ignorance, she chuckled and said, "Oh my, I hope I can describe it. It took me several days even to be able to say the word for it." Thus, he discovered that his lack of understanding was actually shared by the other person, and in this shared experience his anxiety disappeared.

Erikson identifies several of the fears that lie behind our anxieties, including the fear of sudden or unexpected change, of being attacked from behind, of losing autonomy, of being impoverished, of being exposed, of being closed up, of losing one's boundaries, of being immobilized, of being manipulated, of being abandoned, and of not being guided (1963, pp. 408-11). He suggests that these fears can usually be traced to childhood and that at least some of these fears survive into adulthood, and persist as a "sense of smallness" substratum in our otherwise adult minds. Our triumphs are measured against this smallness, and our defeats substantiate it. In an adult, however, they come to expression in diffuse states of anxious tension, and we may not be able to discern the fear or fears behind our anxieties unless and until we make an effort to identify the connection between our anxiety and the fear that first produced it.

The reader may wish to look over this list of fears in order to determine which one—or ones—are most likely to be activated in a situation where she finds herself in the role of counselor. (Other situations may evoke other, different fears.) For example, she may discern or discover that her anxiety is most likely to be evoked when the other person suddenly begins to speak in a vehement tone, when the other person makes a cutting remark that seems to come out of nowhere, when the other person begins making demands that make it difficult for her to relax in the other's company, when she feels that the other person fails to give her due credit for what they have accomplished together, when she feels that her weaknesses may be in danger of being revealed, when she feels that she is being pushed around against her will, when she feels that the other person has failed her, when she feels that she has been thrown into the counselor role without proper training—"sink or swim." Alternatively, Erikson's list of fears may prompt the reader to identify another one that is more likely to be at the root of his anxiety in this situation.

If anxiety is a diffuse state of tension in which one feels endangered but has no appropriate avenue of defense or mastery, identifying the

## 22 *Giving Counsel*

less behind the anxiety enables one to focus on the danger involved and to develop a judicious and realistic counter-defense. The minister who was able to identify the fear behind her anxiety—the fear of exposure—was able to present an adequate counterdefense to her threatening parishioner. She said, in effect, “If you think that I am worried about your threat of exposure, I need to tell you—for your own benefit, not mine—that I am not worried about it. I have already exposed myself to the One whose judgment and condemnation I most feared, and I have been fully forgiven. Expose me to other members of the congregation if you wish, but my response will be the same to them as it has been to you.” The message here is that she intends to be evaluated by her current behavior and performance, and will, as it were, let the dead bury the dead.

From this exploration into the anxieties that may inhibit our listening to another (or others), I conclude that if a minister has the *intention* to listen, and if she is relatively free of anxiety so that she is able to give *attention* to what is being communicated (to be, in other words, a nonanxious presence), she is well on her way toward being a good and effective listener. This is not to say, however, that the minister is expected always to be able to be without anxiety. In *On Becoming a Person* (1961), Carl R. Rogers discusses the importance of “congruence” in the counselor’s interaction with his client. By this he means that whatever feeling or attitude the counselor is experiencing is matched by the counselor’s awareness of this attitude. A closely related issue is whether the counselor is also able to communicate this feeling or attitude unambiguously (pp. 50–51). I will discuss Rogers’ views on congruence more fully in the following chapter, focusing on the counseled person’s congruence. In the context of our discussion of anxiety, however, it suggests that the critical issue is whether the minister is aware of her anxiety and, if so, if she is able to communicate this anxiety unambiguously to the other person. Such communications often have the effect of reducing anxiety, as I’ve discovered from confessing being anxious in speaking before an audience. The audience nods understandingly, and I begin to feel their support and encouragement as I begin to talk about the topic at hand. In a similar way, revelations of our anxiety in our role as counselors typically put the other person at ease—“I’m a little nervous myself”—and leads the other to pay more, not less, attention to what we have to say.

### Attitudes That Assist Good Listening

I have discussed anxiety as the major impediment to listening and have suggested the various situational factors and kinds of fear that may cause one to become anxious. Now I want to focus on the more "productive" side of listening, centering on the *attitudes* and *conditions* that help to establish a listening environment. As we will see, this distinction between attitudes and conditions is somewhat arbitrary, for the conditions that help to create a good listening environment are a reflection of the attitudes of the listener, and vice versa. Still, the distinction is a useful one, because attitudes have more to do with the disposition of the listener, while conditions relate more directly to the situation, which in this case is the listening process itself. In other words, attitudes have more to do with the listener's internal desire to be a good listener, while conditions relate more directly to one's awareness that listening is a communicative act.

In *The Lost Art of Listening* (1995), Michael P. Nichols suggests that good listening requires the following: *Attention*, *appreciation*, and *affirmation* (pp. 109-19). In emphasizing *attention*, he wants to make the point that better listening does not begin with techniques. Instead, it starts with making a sincere effort to pay attention to what is going on in the conversation partner's private world of experience. Some invitational comments may help to open another person up: "Tough day?" "Are you worried about something?" "Is something bothering you?" This is not, however, technique, but simply saying something that indicates a willingness to listen.

As for *appreciation*, Nichols advises showing genuine appreciation for the other's point of view. One should assume, until proven otherwise, that the other person has a valid and valuable perspective on the problem or concern being discussed. The hardest situation in which to be genuinely appreciative is when the other's point of view is critical of oneself. Nichols notes, however, that one should take this to heart: If you listen without defensiveness, you earn the right to have such nondefensive listening reciprocated. The other person owes you this much. Appreciative listening is often *silent* but never *passive*. It means focusing on the other and on what the other is saying. It often means asking questions for *clarification* and *elaboration*. As Nichols puts it: "Real listening means imagining yourself into the other's experience: concentrating, asking questions. Understanding is furthered not by

### 34 Giving Counsel

knowing ('I understand') but by investigating—asking for elaboration, inquiring into the concrete particularity of the speaker's experience" (p. 113).

Such inquiries should not be perfunctory: "So then what happened?" followed by "So what happened next?" Perfunctory responses will come across to the speaker as mechanical and perhaps as evidence of a lack of interest. She may respond, "I'm boring you, aren't I?" or "It's really a stupid little story, isn't it?" Instead, one might respond, "so down came the vase—flowers, water and all." Technically speaking, this merely repeats what has already been said, but it communicates interest and encouragement to continue. Also, these inquiries should not focus on getting the other person to say more about what someone else was thinking, as though she is a mind reader, but about her own thoughts and emotions. The listener does not say, "Why do you suppose he said that?" or "Don't you wonder what possessed her to behave this way?" (eliciting responses ranging from "Oh, it's just her way" to "Oh, it's the devil in her"). Rather, one says, "And this made you feel..." or "And you were thinking..." This way, it is not the speaker's clairvoyance—her capacity to read the mind of another—but her own world of experience that the minister is appreciating, seeing it as valid and valuable in its own right. Requests for clarification and elaboration are primarily intended to enable the person being counseled to present her own experiential world as accurately as possible. This *is* something to which she *can* attest, whereas the experiential world of another—the person she is talking about—is accessible to her only by inference.

On the other hand, if the speaker has expressed her view that the other person "acted out of spite" or "said it because he knew it would hurt me," the minister shows appreciation for the speaker by refraining from saying that she could be mistaken about the other person's motives or, even worse, supplying another possible motive: "But maybe he just wasn't thinking when he said that" or "Could it be that he was just teasing you?" If the issue is worth pursuing at all, the minister might suggest that the speaker try a little experiment such as the one that Patricia O'Hanlon Hudson proposed to a couple whose fights usually began in the kitchen. When she asked how the fights began, the husband said that his wife gave him her "get-out-of-my-kitchen" look. Hudson suggested that he check out his impression by asking her, each time she had this look, what she was actually thinking. When they returned the following week, they had found that about half the time she had "that look" she was not even thinking about her husband but was

eavesdropping on the children arguing in the other room or thinking about some ingredient she had forgotten to buy for the dinner preparation (Hudson and O'Hanlon, 1991, pp. 17-18). At best, the husband was half-right about what his wife was thinking.

To the extent possible, showing appreciation for the other's point of view means setting aside one's own prejudgments and listening to what the other has to say. As Nichols puts it, one should assume, until proven otherwise, that the other person has a valid point of view. To illustrate, Philip W. Cook in *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence* (1997) relates that men who are being physically abused by their wives find it difficult to get anyone to appreciate their stories, to take them seriously. Because they are afraid of being personally shamed and ridiculed, when they try to get useful advice for how to handle problem, they often represent the problem as one that a male relative or a work associate is having. One man called up a woman's shelter to find out what they advised abused women to do, but the person who answered the phone suspected that he was a batterer himself and was trying to find out how to sabotage the protection process, so he was refused the advice that he desperately needed. If this man had come to a minister for help, would his point of view have been appreciated? Would the minister have assumed, until proven otherwise, that he had a valid perspective on the matter? Or would the minister have immediately doubted the veracity of his claim? Would he have thought, "He is playing me for a sucker. How gullible does he think I am?" To show genuine appreciation for another's point of view means suspending our preconceived convictions and prejudgments—at least initially—in order to hear what the other person has to say and wants to be able to communicate.

Finally, the *affirmation* Nichols writes about is essentially an affirmation of one's understanding of what one has heard. Silence, he notes, is ambiguous, so it is necessary that we communicate—with words—what we have understood the other person to be saying to us. If we do not do this, the other person may imagine that we do not think that what he is saying makes sense, or that it is even worth talking about. He may begin to have doubts, feeling that he made a mistake in making an appointment to see the minister. As Nichols points out, "Ordinarily, we take turns talking: The roles of speaker and listener alternate so naturally that it may be artificial to call what one person says 'the listener's response.' Responding turns listeners into speakers. But listening well is a two-step process: First we take in what the speaker

says, then we let him or her know it. A failed response is like an unanswered letter; you never know if you got through" (1995, p. 114).

There are individuals, some of whom are intending to become ministers, who simply do not have much to say, especially when it comes to "small talk." Men are often this way, viewing themselves as the "strong, silent type." It may seem paradoxical—and it is—that these quiet ones are likely to be experienced as "ineffective listeners," not because they are unable to allow the other person to say what is on her mind, but because they had little to say by way of response. These individuals may need to force themselves to talk in ways they have never talked before. Otherwise, they may be experienced as aloof, even arrogant.

Nichols offers the following examples of responses that affirm the listener's understanding: "So you're saying that you don't think Kevin should join Little League because it will put a lot of unnecessary competitive pressure on him and because you'll be the one who gets stuck driving him to all the games?" Or, "OK, I want to make sure I understand. You're saying we should hire Gloria but that we should make it very clear to her what we expect, and we should be very serious about the probationary period, and if she doesn't do the job, we should let her go at the end of six months. Have I got that right?" (pp. 114–15).

The statement in response to Kevin's mother affirms the listener's understanding that she has two reasons for her objection to his joining Little League. She is then free to indicate to the listener that he has understood her ("Yes, that's what I'm saying") or to indicate that he has understood some but not all of what she is saying ("Plus the fact that Little League keeps us confined to home through the whole summer") or to add some further remarks to what the listener has said ("I wonder if my resentment over being the one who will have to drive him to games is causing me to magnify the competitive pressure on Kevin himself" or "You know, it's really the competitive pressure on Kevin that bothers me. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't really mind driving him to the games."). Would she have come to these subsequent clarifications if the listener had not affirmed his understanding at this particular interval in the conversation? Perhaps so. More likely, though, his response enabled her to take the next step in identifying which of the two objections was uppermost in her mind.

In the statement about the hiring of Gloria, the speaker indicates that she understands the importance to the selection committee of the conditions on which they are willing to offer Gloria the position. Her



beginning and concluding sentences are quite explicit about her desire to affirm what she believes she has heard, and they communicate her awareness that the committee is counting on her to ensure that its conditions are honored. As with the listener's response to Kevin's mother, this affirmation of understanding gives the others the opportunity to say that she has heard correctly, or to amend or add to what she has heard. Had she not verbalized this response, the committee members might have been left to wonder if she had actually heard the conditions of Gloria's hiring, or, if she heard them, whether or not she would support them. Silence, as Nichols puts it, is ambiguous.

Some readers may feel that the listener should not have to give such careful attention to understanding a small matter, such as a mother's objections to her son's joining Little League, while others may feel that such careful attention to the conditions for hiring Gloria is unwarranted. Still others may feel that neither situation warrants this concentrated effort to understand and communicate one's understanding to the speakers involved. To say that these readers are wrong, or to dismiss them with a formulaic response ("God is in the details") would be to violate the principle of appreciation, which assumes, until proven otherwise, that the other person has a valid perspective on the matter. I would want to listen without prejudice to why the reader thinks or feels this way, to be able to affirm what I understand to be the reader's reasons for this, and to not jump to a premature conclusion, such as, "If you think it is not worth your time and effort to try to express your understanding of Kevin's mother's thoughts and feelings about his participation in Little League, you will have a hard go of it in ministry, because, like it or not, this is the stuff you'll be confronted with day after day after day." This conclusion may ultimately be warranted, but at this initial stage, it forecloses the conversation and communicates an absence of appreciation for what the other is thinking, feeling, and saying. The speaker, for example, may not be saying that he deems it not worth his time and effort to try to express his understanding of Kevin's mother's thoughts and feelings about her son's participation in Little League, but may instead be wondering if the whole issue of Kevin's involvement in Little League is a smoke screen for something else that is bothering her, such as her anger at her husband for not giving Kevin the attention a teenage boy needs from his father. Were this the speaker's real point, I would find myself saying something to this effect: "You are probably on to something, though you may be getting a little ahead of the story, so hold that thought--don't let it go--but let's take it one step at a time."

## 28 *Giving Counsel*

While *attention*, *appreciation*, and *affirmation* can be artificially separated, together they reflect a listening attitude. This attitude may be distinguished from the listener's responses, but, as we have seen, this is also an artificial distinction, for the minister's listening attitude is communicated primarily through her verbal responses—mainly of understanding—to what she has heard.

### The Conditions That Support Good Listening

Besides the three *attitudes* that Nichols identifies, there is a model presented by Robert R. Carkhuff in *Helping and Human Relations* (1969) that suggests seven fundamental *conditions* that facilitate positive change in a helping relationship. These conditions, which have been presented in several books on pastoral counseling and pastoral care (e.g., Switzer, 1974, pp. 72-77; Switzer, 1979, pp. 72-94), will be viewed here as the conditions that enable good listening to occur: accurate communication of *empathy*, communication of genuine *respect* for the other person in the helping relationship, a manner of communication that is *concrete*, one that is *genuine*, one that is *appropriately self-disclosive*; an ability to use *confrontation* when necessary, and a focus on the *immediate*. David Switzer (1979) has made the very interesting proposal that these are also the necessary conditions for effective preaching. As with Nichols' three attitudes, these seven conditions blur the lines between conditions and verbal communication. One demonstrates the conditions by saying things that reveal their presence, and what one says contributes to the realization of these conditions. Since we are all aware of the traditional model of the seven deadly sins, we might want to call these "the seven saving conditions" of effective listening.

*Accurate communication of empathy.* This condition is largely a matter of perception, though this perception may involve a rather complex mixture of thought and emotion. The minister perceives where the parishioner is at this moment and seeks to communicate this perception through tone of voice and body language. Empathy has been described variously in the psychotherapeutic literature in general and in pastoral counseling texts in particular, and it has been compared and contrasted with sympathy, which often connotes a feeling of pity or compassion. Carl R. Rogers, the psychotherapist who is generally credited with having introduced *empathy* into the psychotherapeutic lexicon, has described it as the listener's assumption of "the internal frame of reference" of the other. Thus, it means "to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, to

lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so, and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client" (Rogers, 1951, p. 29). In other words, the counselor "concentrates upon trying to understand the client *as the client seems to himself*" (p. 30). The objective is to enter, insofar as possible, into the other person's own world of experience, to know and feel it as though I were the one who is troubled, confused, upset, vulnerable, content, happy, overjoyed.

This, of course, is not an easy thing to do, and Rogers and his colleagues were aware that the effort to abandon the observer role and to absorb oneself in the attitudes, ideas, and emotions of the other requires a kind of self-abandonment that is relatively foreign to us. We have worked hard throughout our lives to differentiate ourselves from others, and now we are being asked, on a provisional basis, to do precisely the opposite. James E. Dittes has described this empathy as one in which the "things that we usually suppose make for personality and a sense of self-presence are absent—sociability, opinions and attitudes, feelings, and history." Watching Rogers on film, one senses that he is "so radically other-directed" that he becomes "totally abdicating of his distinctiveness" and is "so engrossed in the other" that he is "oblivious to the boundaries that constitute and define the self" (Dittes, 1999b, p. 179).

Approximating this empathic entry into the experiencing of the other is difficult enough, but communicating how the world looks from the other's point of view compounds the difficulty. We assume that the other person is able to give verbal expression to the world of her own experiencing, but this is not necessarily the case, and even if it were, she would not know that the listener had become a participant in her world of experience unless she finds a way to express what this world of the other's experience feels like to her. The listener may think that she has communicated her empathic involvement in the other's world by saying, "I feel what you are going through" or "I can imagine how difficult this is for you," but these are "I" words, words that are about the listener. Instead of communicating empathy, they actually communicate the listener's distance from the other's experience. A statement that gets closer to the experiencing of a person who, for example, is confused, is, "Things seem jumbled, muddled, sort of..." If this is said in an empathic tone of voice, one that cannot be mistaken as condemnatory or judgmental, the person who is confused will feel understood and this very understanding will encourage her to enter more deeply the experiential world, which, at this time, is mostly one of

confusion. She might find the word "jumbled" to be an especially accurate description, as her confusion may seem to be a set of letters or words that are out of order, it being her task somehow to put them back where they belong. Or she may fix on the word "muddled" (with "muddy" and "puddle" hovering in the background) and note that she feels as though her experience is one of being in a mess from which she cannot seem to extricate herself. In either case, her confusion is part mental and part emotional, and this, no doubt, partly explains why it is, in fact, confusing: "My mind tells me one thing; my heart tells me another."

Michael Nichols tells a fascinating story about a therapist in training that illustrates what the accurate communication of empathy is *not*. A man in therapy was explaining his relationship with his living but distant father when he suddenly remembered the happy times they'd spent together playing with his electric trains. Caught up in the memory, the man grew increasingly excited as he recalled the joy and pride and sense of belonging he had felt in sharing this family tradition with his father. As the man's enthusiasm mounted, the therapist launched into a long narrative about *his* train set and how he had gotten the other neighborhood kids to bring their tracks and train cars to his house to build a huge neighborhood setup in his basement. After he had gone on at some length, the client could no longer contain his anger about being, as it were, derailed: "Why are you telling me about *your* trains?" he demanded. The therapist hesitated, then, "with that level, impersonal voice we reserve for confiding something intimate, he said lamely, 'I was just trying to be friendly'" (Nichols, 1995, p. 14).

Real empathy is rarely communicated by the minister's telling the other person a story that demonstrates that the minister has had a similar experience. If she were to tell the man who is experiencing a debilitating confusion about a time when she too was very confused, hoping thereby to communicate her empathy, the feelings evoked in him are likely to be similar to those of the man in Nichols' story. The only common element in the therapist's and client's experiences is their train sets. For the client, the story was told in the context of his exploration of his relationship to his father, whereas for the therapist, the story was about his role in getting the other kids to pool their train sets. These were very different experiences, and, even if they had not been, the fact that the therapist had a similar experience does not necessarily mean that he is therefore more capable of entering empathetically into the other's experience than if he had not had such

an experience. For example, the minister who had an experience of debilitating confusion earlier in life may have found it so disconcerting that she cannot bring herself to enter the experiential world of the man who has come to her for help. Her account of her own experience of confusion some years ago may, in fact, have the intention (probably unconscious) of distancing herself from his present confusion.

Some readers may feel that the accurate communication of empathy is dangerous for ministers because they may enter the experiential world of the other so fully that they lose all sense of the boundaries between themselves and the other. Although I will discuss boundaries at greater length in chapter 5, it should be noted here that the self-abandonment that Rogers has in mind, or "the obliviousness to the boundaries that constitute and define the self" that Dittes is speaking about, is a provisional one, arranged or established for the time being, so that the minister can truly appreciate (Nichols' word) the perspective or point of view of the other. In other words, one temporarily suspends one's value judgments, resistance, and defenses, and sees the world from the perspective of a person who is confused about life. The minister may ordinarily have little tolerance for confusion or for persons who seem to "go around in a fog," and she may have spent the better part of her life avoiding situations in which she might be thrown into the kind of confusion she personally experienced years earlier. What she is being asked to do now is not to merge with the man she is providing counsel, but to cross the gulf that currently separates the clarity that exemplifies her life and the confusion that exemplifies the other's life. She enters the other's experiencing at the point of his confusion. It is not that her life merges with his, for, after all, her life of relative clarity and his present life of debilitating confusion have little, if any, common ground, much less basis for interpenetration or merging. What the minister *does* give herself away to is the confusion that the other person is experiencing. She walks in and around this world and takes its measure, feeling it as fully and profoundly as she is able to do, and out of this immersion she communicates her understanding of how it is with him. If, later in their conversation, his confusion begins to lift, in part because he *has* felt understood, the minister will be equally prepared to enter this brave new world of the other's experience, as reflected, for example, in his resolve to try a course of action that, if it works out, will enable him to leave his current muddle behind.

*Communicating genuine respect.* Our respect for the other is communicated by our treatment of the other as someone of worth

## 32 Giving Counsel

who has the potential for growth (Switzer, 1979, p. 77). It is also expressed through our confidence in this person's ability eventually to make decisions in a responsible way. As Switzer points out, respect is not communication primarily, and certainly not exclusively, by the specific words, "I respect you; I value your worth as a person." Such a statement may actually feel condescending or patronizing: "So what qualifies you to say that *you* respect *me*?" Rather, it is communicated through our "persistent focused attention which enables us to communicate empathy with accuracy. Struggling to understand and coming to understand another person, and showing that understanding, is a powerful statement about our sense of his or her worth" (p. 78). Thus, the condition of respect is closely tied to the condition of empathy, as they are mutually reinforcing.

Switzer identifies several ways in which a preacher may show *disrespect* for the congregation. Two of these are especially relevant to the minister as counselor. First is a tendency to be *patronizing*, or treating the other as if he lacks the capacity to understand and/or the freedom and maturity to make his own judgments and decisions. This is perhaps most common when counseling a very young or very old person, but it is also a factor when a male minister is providing counsel to a female parishioner, or when a more educated minister is giving counsel to a less educated person. One can be patronizing toward another without adopting a haughty or supercilious tone of voice. It may occur, for example, when the minister makes an observation and then repeats it a couple more times as though it were too subtle for the other person to understand the first time it was said. A patronizing attitude or tone may also be communicated through questions designed to force the other to think about her problem or situation more systematically or more logically. One minister in pastoral counseling training, for example, conveyed through his questions his feeling that the counselee was not paying careful enough attention to what her husband was saying to her. When she would recount what her husband had said, he would ask her, "So what does that mean? What is he saying?" implying that to anyone who was capable of thinking, the answers should be obvious (Justes, 1985).

On the other hand, an example of respect involves a minister who had taken a troubled teenage boy to a local fast-food restaurant to have a conversation because the boy's mother was trying to dissuade him from his desire to transfer to another high school for its fine theater program (see Capps, 1990, chap. 5). Instead of doing what the boy's

mother had asked him to do—reinforce her efforts to dissuade her son—the minister encouraged the boy to talk about his love for the theater, and he affirmed the boy's judgment that if his desire was to go into acting, the other high school would be much better able to help him prepare for this. He did not attempt to discourage the boy from his aspirations to become an actor, as his mother had done, on the grounds that it is a career in which few succeed, and he credited the boy's ability to think for himself by agreeing with him that the other high school would be better for him, given his aspirations. Because he communicated respect for the boy, it was possible for the boy to talk to him about his own misgivings about transferring from one high school to another and about a career in acting. These were misgivings and doubts that he could not express to his parents because they had placed him in the position of having to defend his ideas and desires.

The second form of disrespect is *manipulation*. Switzer (1979) describes this as a preacher's use of the sermon to manipulate a congregation into making a response that the preacher has already decided for them. It is one thing to preach passionately and persuasively, and another thing to be manipulative and controlling. A similar manipulation occurs in counseling when the minister knows in advance where she wants the conversation to end up, so anything that threatens to take the conversation in a different direction is blocked. Often, such manipulation may disguise itself as providing guidance, and it may be that, in some cases, the line between guidance and manipulation is difficult to draw. Guidance, however, implies that the person receiving counsel will experience the conversation as one in which various outcomes are possible, whereas manipulation suggests that there is only one possible outcome, and this outcome has been decided in advance. For example, the same counselor who suggested to his counselee that she was not paying careful enough attention to what her husband was saying to her was determined to impress upon her that her husband really was in love with her in spite of the fact that he was inattentive to her and did nothing to show that he really cared about her. In fact, she now doubted that he had *ever* loved her. Instead of crediting her experience, much less entering empathetically into her experience of feeling that her husband did not love her and never had, the counselor directed his efforts toward persuading her that her perceptions were wrong, that they couldn't possibly be warranted.

There are many other ways in which a minister may be disrespectful toward the other person, such as becoming *impatient* when it takes the

### 34 Giving Counsel

other person a longer time than most people to verbalize what is on his mind. The minister, frustrated by the slow pace of the conversation, may begin supplying the words the parishioner is struggling for, and may also assume that slowness of speech is evidence that he does not think very well, which can result in a patronizing tone as well. *Impatience* may also be felt toward a person who appears to talk—and reflect—in circles, exhibiting little appreciation for the logical flow of thoughts. The minister may find himself trying to teach her to order her thoughts instead of recognizing that this is the way she thinks through an issue or problem.

Still another form of disrespect is being *too lax*, as when the minister allows the other person to miss appointments without prior notification or explanation. One may also be too lax in allowing a person to trivialize the occasion by engaging in superficial or flippant talk, or in some other way make a mockery of what the minister, as counselor, represents. This is different from genuine “resistance,” where the person receiving counsel is struggling with the very issue of whether to discuss and explore the problem that prompted her to request this meeting, and who therefore avoids the issue by talking about the weather or her conversation with a friend about an unrelated matter, or suggests that the problem she had wanted to talk about has completely resolved itself (for an instance of the latter, see Dittes, 1999b, chap. 11). Instead, what I have reference to here is behavior comparable to a high school student who makes faces at the teacher and emits grunting sounds at regular intervals while the teacher is attempting to explain today’s math lesson. If such behavior is a sign of disrespect for the counselor, so, too, is the counselor’s laxness with the person who is being counseled. It suggests that the minister does not view the other as a person of worth or dignity, but instead takes his disrespectful behavior as a true reflection of who he is.

*Concreteness.* Switzer says that “our task in counseling is to assist the other person in being very specific and detailed about feelings and experiences and their meanings” (1979, pp. 82–83). For example, if a person says, “I have really been upset lately,” the counselor encourages her to identify more precisely what “upset” suggests or means. This may involve finding a more precise word or phrase. Is she, Switzer asks, upset sad, upset mad, or upset fearful? It could also entail, however, asking her to provide an illustration of what “upset” means. A therapist who does not take for granted that he knows what a client is experiencing when she says, “I am depressed” asks her to describe times when she



is "depressed" and then describe times when she is "not depressed" or when her "depression" has temporarily lifted (see Capps, 1998, pp. 139-141). The therapeutic goal then becomes to find ways to increase the times when she is "not depressed." The concreteness is in the two stories she tells about when she is "depressed" and "not depressed."

The same approach might be used, for example, when a husband proclaims that his wife is a "perfectionist" or a wife complains that her husband "lacks ambition." These words and their meanings may seem self-evident, but the minister perceives that they are laden with emotion, and he wants to find some point of entry into the experiential worlds that these words simultaneously reveal and disguise. Does "perfectionist" in this case mean that his wife criticizes his every move? Or does it mean that she holds herself to such a high standard of behavior and decorum that she cannot enjoy life, which both worries and saddens him? Does "lacks ambition" in this case mean that her husband puts very little effort into his work? Or does it mean that he is so devoted to the work he is currently doing that he refuses to consider opportunities for advancement? One way to find out is to encourage the speaker to say more about what "perfectionist" or "lacks ambition" means. Another is to ask the speaker to provide a "for instance."

Concreteness, however, also applies to the minister's own verbal expressions. To say to Mrs. Smith, "I am sure your father's death has been a great shock to you" may elicit the response, "No, I knew he was dying. If anything, it was a great relief to me" (see Hiltner, 1949, p. 37). Perhaps a natural death *should* be more "shocking" to us than it is, but "shock" usually applies to accidental death and unexpected suicide. The minister's misjudgment in this case was in his assumption that he knew—on the basis of past experience? or his intuitive powers?—how her father's death had affected her. Until one has entered the experiential world of the other, one cannot be sure of very much, and this is certainly true concerning the other person's emotions surrounding the death of a close relative.

A better use of words, more acutely in tune with the bereaved person's experiential world, was the minister's question of a parishioner who had lost her husband several weeks earlier, "How has it been with you since John's death?" (See Cryer and Vayhinger, 1962, p. 67). The "it" in his question, while seemingly vague, is, paradoxically perhaps, precise in its imprecision. He did not say, "How has life been treating you?" a far more diffuse way of putting it, and undoubtedly callous sounding as well. And the phrase "with you" is beautifully focused and

concrete. We are not surprised that this simple, direct question elicited not only an account of how the woman had been getting along but also a full narrative of the day's events that led up to her husband's heart attack and his death that evening. In contrast, the minister who asked a woman whose father and husband had recently died, "How is everything today?" received a very noncommittal, "As well as can be expected, I guess" (p. 71). "Everything" is much too general and encompassing, and, for someone who may already be feeling overwhelmed, the question itself reinforces this sense of things. With the loss of her husband and father, "everything" has gone awry, but perhaps "something," if it can be identified and focused on, offers some promise and possible grounds for hope.

For persons who are seminary trained, one of the most difficult challenges that providing counsel for another person poses is that of learning—or relearning—to talk in concrete ways. Seminary education often encourages the use of abstractions—"humanity," "church," "sin," "mission," "Godself," "involvement," "commitment," "faith." These are important words, but they are not very descriptive. As I have argued in *The Poet's Gift* (1993a), one of the best ways to recover one's sensitivity to concrete language is by reading poetry, for in poetry each word is carefully chosen. Denise Levertov begins "The Blue Rim of Memory" with the line, "The way sorrow enters the bone is with stabs and hoverings" (Levertov, 1978, p. 93). There is no room in poetry for the rather facile "great shock" that the minister assumed Miss Smith was feeling on the occasion of her father's death. In a poem about his deceased father, Li-Young Lee confesses that he was "a remarkable disappointment to his father" (1990, p. 39). The word "remarkable" removes this comment from the world of cliché and places it within a richer, more nuanced experiential world. What does it mean to be not merely a garden-variety disappointment to one's now-deceased father, but one who disappointed his father *remarkably*? Is he saying that he disappointed his father in an unusual, perhaps even extraordinary way? But might he also be implying that, in some strange or even perverse way, he *exceeded* his father's expectations for him, that the disappointment was not so much in the fact that he fell short—though perhaps this was true in a sense—but that he fell completely outside his father's more narrow and circumscribed range of expectations?

Of course, poets have the luxury of being able to spend hours, days, and even weeks searching for the word that communicates precisely the experiential world they want to express in language. If a minister

has some of this luxury in the writing of a sermon, she rarely has it in the course of talking with another person in a situation of counsel. It may also be the case that the other person does not feel any particular need to be precise or exacting in her own use of words. If the minister says, "Upset in what way?" she may respond, "Well, you know, just upset." She may even feel she is being interrogated and lash back, "Don't tell me you have never been upset."

Still, as we also learn from poets, concreteness is a verbal skill that can be learned with practice, and this may apply to both the minister and the person being counseled. We have all had the experience of discovering that, after several conversations with a friend during which we each came to know how the other thinks, the quality of our manner of communicating seemed to have improved. As we take our leave of each other, we find ourselves saying, "Now, that was a great conversation!" In a clinical practicum taught by one of Carl Rogers' associates, we listened to the audiotapes of a woman who was very inarticulate when she first entered therapy. By the end of therapy, however, she was not only speaking much more freely but had also acquired a whole new experiential vocabulary. The practicum instructor noted that while her marital problems had been more or less successfully addressed, a more lasting effect of therapy was that she was now able to verbalize what was occurring in her experiential world. Concreteness can be acquired or, for those who have gone through an extensive educational process that deals in abstractions, it can be reacquired.

*Genuineness.* In this context, genuineness and the communication that flows from it mean something different from not misrepresenting oneself and one's intentions. (This form of disingenuousness or insincerity is a boundary issue, and thus more relevant to our discussion in chapter 5.) Here, genuineness "refers to the degree to which we are in touch with our own feelings at any given time, our motivations for doing what we are doing" (Switzer, 1979, p. 85). Thus, genuineness is a measure of "the extent to which there is a correspondence or congruence between our own experience and our awareness of that experience" (p. 85). Switzer emphasizes the role played by defenses and distortions in keeping our own experiences from view, and he notes that anxiety is often at the root of these defenses and distortions. If, for example, we have strong anxieties about death, sexual matters, divorce, or the expression of anger, it is very difficult to keep our feelings—or defenses against these feelings—from inhibiting or distorting conversation with a person who is terminally ill, who wants to discuss a problem involving sexual behavior or feelings,

### 38 *Giving Counsel*

who is considering divorce, or who expresses anger or stimulates anger in us.

In *The Abuse of Power* (1991), James N. Poling relates his counseling experiences with a man who was sexually abusing his five-year-old son (pp. 54–61). Because he *was* aware of his revulsion at what the man was doing, Poling was able to counsel him. On the other hand, a male seminarian who had befriended a single man at church experienced a debilitating anxiety when they went together to a restaurant after an evening service and the man confided that he enjoyed dressing in women's clothing. The seminarian was concerned that the other man had "misunderstood" his pastoral interest in him, but it also bothered him that a man who seemed so decorous in church should have such a "bizarre" private life. He found he could no longer "be himself" in the relationship, and he made an excuse the next time the man suggested going out for pie and coffee after an evening service.

Other types of anxiety leading to a relative absence of genuineness are anxiety regarding certain "kinds" or "types" of persons (such as a person of a much higher social or professional status) and anxiety about one's own lack of expertise or experience as one who counsels. Such anxieties often require a decision, either to keep them in the background—being aware of them but leaving them unspoken because talking about them will not contribute to the helping process—or openly acknowledging them, thus possibly risking that the other will be scared off. I would emphasize that the decision *not* to inform the other about one's anxieties is not, in itself, a lack of genuineness, for oftentimes it is better not to burden the other person with one's own anxieties when he already has anxieties of his own relating to the problem for which he seeks the minister's counsel.

Perhaps a useful analogy is the mother who has the awesome task of communicating to her first baby, through her demeanor, that she knows what she is doing, for her expression of confidence will provide her infant with the "calming structure" that he needs in order to feel secure (Kohut, 1984, p. 30). She needs, as it were, to create a credible, believable world for him. This is precisely the opposite of the TV character Sledge Hammer, a takeoff on Mickey Spillane's detective hero Mike Hammer, who says, "Trust me, I know what I'm doing," while making a total mess of a crime investigation. The minister who is too forthcoming about her anxieties may undermine the confidence the other needs in order to make optimum use of the helping process. The doctor who responds to the patient's declaration that this is the first time she has been in surgery

with, "Well, that's a coincidence, as it's the first time I've performed surgery" may create in the patient an anxiety—bordering on panic—that has a negative influence on her recovery. A seminarian or minister just out of seminary may not "feel" like a counselor, but *is* one by virtue of professional calling, so it is not a lack of genuineness to act like one. The absence or lack of genuineness is an internal process, one where the minister is unaware of his anxiety—or any other emotion that may be inhibiting or distorting his ability to hear and respond to what the other person is communicating—and of the role that it is playing in the way he goes about providing counsel. The issue, as Switzer, following Rogers, expresses it, is the *congruence* between our own experience and our awareness of that experience. In the chapter on managing boundaries, I will discuss this "self-awareness" in more detail.

*Appropriate self-disclosure.* A related condition of effective listening is appropriate self-disclosure, which Switzer describes as one's willingness "to be known as a human being to the other person. Not only are we *aware* of who we are, including the feelings and motivations that we have at a particular time, but we have the ability to communicate ourselves in appropriate ways to the other person" (1979, pp. 86-87). In one sense, this bridge has already been crossed in the case of ministers, for in most cases they are already known as human beings to the other person. Unlike psychotherapists or specialized pastoral counselors, they have already been in contact with the other person, and it is likely that these very contacts are the reason why the other person has sought their counsel. The setting in which counseling occurs, however, frequently gives the other person a glimpse into a side of the minister that is inaccessible in any other setting. Because it is more private than the other settings in which the minister and other person have experienced each other, and because the other person is making self-disclosures, the opportunity, even the desire, to be self-disclosive in return can be very strong. For a person whose other roles are usually quite public—preaching, teaching, leading and participating in meetings, and so on—the longing to "let one's hair down" is something that virtually every minister will experience. The minister who does not have this experience probably isn't very human.

The key word here is therefore "appropriate." For Switzer, the most important reason for self-disclosure by the minister is to enable the other person to have "the feeling of being a part of an authentic human relationship" (p. 87). He emphasizes, however, the importance of timing, noting that "too much self-disclosure too soon can hinder rather

than facilitate the other person's exploration," and he also stresses that it should be "linked in some helpful way to the other person's needs right at this moment... We must guard against the kind of disclosure that comes primarily out of the strength of our own need to disclose ourselves" (p. 87). Too much talk about oneself, especially if it occurs early in the process, can frighten the other person away. While one's self-disclosure may be intended as a way to express one's empathy, it can be misunderstood as an expression of one's own neediness. The other person may say to herself, "She needs me as much as I thought I needed her, and I'm in no position to help her. After all, if I didn't have troubles of my own, I wouldn't be here, talking like this." Self-disclosure can also be self-indulgent, and can make the other feel as though he, not the minister, is a captive listener. It may even cause the other person to censure her own thoughts and feelings because "a married woman who obviously loves her children as this person does couldn't possibly approve of my wanting to get a divorce and leave my children with my husband." In this case, the attempt to establish rapport on the grounds that "we are both young married women struggling to raise two young children" has not had the intended effect.

Switzer also mentions that self-disclosure may help the other feel more fully understood. In my own view, however, this is often better communicated through one's capacity to empathize and communicate this empathy than through the relating of a personal experience similar to the one that the other person is relating. To say, "I lost my mother when I was about your age" is normally not as helpful as using one's own loss as a means to enter the experiential world of the other. (Nichols' illustration of the client and therapist who had train sets when they were boys is illustrative in this regard.) Moreover, the minister's experience of losing her *mother* may be less comparable to what the other person is feeling than the loss of her *father* or her experience of greeting her dramatically altered brother on his return from military service overseas and realizing that she had "lost" the wonderful brother she had known before. The minister who discloses that she lost her mother "when I was your age" may also cause the other person to think or feel, "But for you the experience was long enough ago that you have come to terms with it. For me, it is still painful." Thus, what appears to be a common experience—loss of mother—is only superficially so.

Exceptions to this general rule are shared experiences that, when disclosed, are likely to create a special bond between the minister and the other person, such as their common loss of a child at a very early

age, or the suicidal death of a son or daughter, or the fact that both have a gay son or lesbian daughter. There are some shared experiences that, if not disclosed, would prompt the other person to say, "I cannot believe that all the while that I was telling him about my experience he did not share his own experience. Why did he hold it in?" If she discovered from a third party that the minister had had the same experience as hers, she might, if it had not been disclosed, chastise herself: "How could I have been so stupid—or insensitive—to talk about my problem to a person who apparently hasn't come to terms with it in his own life." Here again, the key word is *appropriate* self-disclosure.

Another consideration is the need of the other person to experience the minister in this context as "the counselor." For some parishioners, their anxieties will be increased, not diminished, by the minister's self-disclosure. To illustrate, I had been going to the same medical doctor for several years and we had developed a good doctor-patient relationship, much of it centered around some good-natured joking about which of us was in better physical condition. One day, however, he told me, more or less in passing, that his wife had left him and was subsequently placed in a mental health facility, and that he was now faced with the gargantuan task of raising four children, all under the age of ten. When I asked him if there was any hope of a reconciliation once she was released, he said, "No, she's got her demons. Even if she wanted to come back, I couldn't handle her and the kids too." Suddenly, our roles were reversed, and I was the one who was asking him the kinds of questions he had routinely asked of me: "So, how have you been?" "Any problems or symptoms?"

I found this role reversal rather disorienting, and I left his office feeling that I wanted to do something for him, but what would this be? Our relationship was strictly that of doctor and patient, and it seemed inappropriate for me to ask him—a person with whom I had no contact outside his office—if he wanted to go to lunch where we could talk about his self-disclosure further. I realized, during these reflections, that I needed to see him as the "doctor" and not as a person who was going through a very difficult period in his life. I am glad that he told me about these difficulties, and was rather flattered that he felt our relationship was such that he *could* tell me about them, but the experience also strengthened my conviction that the minister should keep a rather tight rein on the need for self-disclosure, as this can become a burden for the other person and also undermine, to some degree at least, his need for the minister to be "the counselor." No doubt, too, certain persons are more open to

hearing the self-disclosures of others, and this very fact—their own emotional availability to others—may well be a reason for seeking counsel, as they feel overburdened from carrying the cares and worries of others. (Other issues involved in “appropriate” self-disclosure are best reserved for our discussion in chapter 5 of managing boundaries.)

By issuing so many cautionary notes about self-disclosure, I hope that I have not implied that the minister needs to be tight-lipped and anal-retentive. Appropriate self-disclosure signals a willingness to be known as a human being to another person and the absence of a need to hide behind the facade of one’s pastoral identity or the counselor role. Nothing can be more maddening than the minister who affects the tone and demeanor of the resident psychiatrist and responds to the other person’s communications with a series of “hmms” and an occasional raised eyebrow. Appropriate self-disclosure can also be genuinely valuable to a person who is having to find her way through an experience she has never had before. Disclosing how one tried to navigate through similar uncharted waters can be a means of expressing understanding of what the other person is going through. It may also provide her some guidance, perhaps because it offers suggestions for how she might navigate these waters herself, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because there is a certain solidarity in the knowledge that she is not the first one—nor will she be the last one—to have this experience of not knowing where she is and where it may all come out. She will also be able to see the minister as one who appears to have survived a period of confusion and darkness and who seems to be relatively healthy, and this may, in and of itself, provide some encouragement. If such self-disclosure is appropriately understated (not “I had my dark times and, hey, I’m a better woman for it,” but “I managed to muddle through somehow”), it adds an element of solidarity (“I’m in this thing with you”) to the empathy that is already present.

*Confrontation.* Switzer points out that confrontation does not mean verbal shock treatment, accusations, harshness, or punishing types of statements (1979, p. 90). Instead, it is defined very precisely in terms of *discrepancies* that the minister perceives in the other person’s communication. For example, there may be a discrepancy between what the other person says and how she says it, a discrepancy that the minister may gently point out: “You are talking about being angry with your son, and yet, at least in this moment, you seem more perplexed than angry.” Or there is a discrepancy between what the other person identifies as his goals and the actions he is taking to realize them: “You



are saying that you want to move up the corporate ladder, and yet you confess that you are not doing the very things you would need to do in order to achieve this. You refuse, for example, to 'suck up to' the guy who runs your division." Another type of discrepancy is the other person's perception of herself and her actual achievements: "You continue to talk about yourself as a failure as a parent, and yet your children are doing well in school, and they seem happy and well-adjusted." Or, "You tell me about how intelligent your son is, and yet he is having a very tough time with his college courses." These illustrations indicate that such confrontations are not designed to catch the other person in a logical inconsistency—it is possible to be very intelligent and *not* be doing well in college—but to encourage the other person to take a closer look at what appears to be a discrepancy to another person, but which may have a very good explanation: "That's just it. My children *are* doing well, and yet I can't seem to take any personal credit for this. Instead, I tell myself that they have turned out well in spite of the fact that they had me for a mother. Why do you suppose I feel this way?"

While Switzer emphasizes the noting of discrepancies as inherently confrontational, it may also be noted that the third condition for effective listening, *concreteness*, may also be experienced as confrontational. We tend to talk rather vaguely about ourselves and others, and when we are deprived of this vagueness in the interests of greater concreteness, we may feel as confronted as we would when a discrepancy is pointed out to us. The husband who says that his wife is a perfectionist may feel confronted when the minister indicates that he is uncertain what he means by this. He may look puzzled ("I thought everyone knew what 'perfectionist' means"), respond somewhat defensively ("I thought it was obvious to anyone who has spent time, as you have done, in her presence"), or even lash out in anger ("You don't believe me? Spend a day at our house and you'll see what I mean"). Similarly, the wife who says that her husband "lacks ambition" may feel confronted when the minister asks her to say what she means by this: "What do you want me to say? That my husband's a lazy, good-for-nothing bum?" Here, the minister's request for greater concreteness may seem to have failed, but not necessarily. The minister now knows what he did not know before, that "lacks ambition" means that he doesn't apply himself, *not* that he is satisfied to work in the company's machine shop at tasks he enjoys and forgoes opportunities to move into a managerial position. Even so, when we seek greater concreteness, we need to be aware that this can feel as confrontational as when we point out a discrepancy.

Switzer emphasizes that confrontation is an "expression of love" because it especially seeks to help others become in touch with the reality of their own beings (p. 92). Helping the woman to truly experience herself as a good mother may prove difficult, but the fact that the discrepancy between her children's success and her perception of herself as a failure is now out on the table is a good starting point. The minister's confrontation in this case was truly loving, as her intention was to help the other woman see that she was being too hard on herself. Also, to the extent that she communicates her low self-image as a mother to her children, she places them in the same position as she has placed the minister, that of having to provide her continual reassurances that she is not the failure she proclaims herself to be. If her children feel vulnerable to failure themselves, they may secretly resent providing their mother the reassurances she appears to need—or crave—besides carrying the additional burden of proving through their achievements that their mother *has* been a good parent to them. Thus, as Switzer also notes, as an expression of love, confrontation not only helps to bring persons into "greater harmony with themselves" but also with "the social realities"—in this case, the children—which they influence and are influenced by (p. 92).

In a similar way, Ralph L. Underwood notes in *Empathy and Confrontation in Pastoral Care* (1985) that the three conditions of respect, empathy, and confrontation go together. Thus, "Respect is a moral connection that discloses how empathy and certain ways of being confrontive go together. Respectful considerate confrontation goes hand in hand with empathy" and "for all their differences, there is no fundamental contradiction when ministers who are empathic are also confrontational, so long as there is respect" (p. 90). It is easy, of course, to justify being inappropriately confrontational by claiming to be "speaking the truth in love"—such "truth-sayers" rarely love the other—or prefacing a confrontational statement by saying, "With all due respect." The confrontation being described here—the noting of discrepancies—is unlikely to lead to such abuses, however, because it is expressed not as a challenge, but as a query: "I see a difference here between how you perceive yourself as a parent and how your children have actually turned out. Do you see it too?"

When I was in my first quarter of clinical pastoral education in a very large, multibuilding mental health facility, I was talking with a patient who informed me that she had been hospitalized for nine years. Later in the conversation she made reference to her children, a six-year-old

boy and a three-year-old girl. Believing that herein lay the source of her delusional system, I seized on what I perceived to be an obvious factual discrepancy in her account: "If you have been here in the hospital for nine years, you couldn't have a six- and a three-year-old child!" My sense of being a local version of the prophet Nathan confronting David with the discrepancy between his words and his actions in the Bathsheba-Uriah-David triangle, and my perception of myself as junior psychiatrist, were both utterly shattered when the patient responded with obvious amusement: "You don't know much about this place, do you?" Then she proceeded to tell me about the underground tunnels that connected the hospital buildings and about the sexual activities that took place there between patients and members of the hospital staff. Ever since, I have tried to point out what I perceive to be discrepancies in other persons' communication in a very tentative and provisional way, for what may look discrepant to the observer may prove to be not only consistent but also an occasion for personal enlightenment. The minister who is careful in this regard has a right to expect that others will be similarly circumspect in their confrontations toward her.

*Immediacy.* The final condition for facilitating listening is immediacy, which refers more generally to how both persons are experiencing the relationship between them, but more particularly to the willingness of the helping person to use the present relationship—right here and now—to help the other person understand her own feelings and behavior in the relationship itself. As Switzer points out, "This requires a great deal of sensitivity, since the helping person must recognize expressions on the part of the other that in various disguised forms might be referring to the relationship between the two of them" (1979, p. 92).

For example, a parishioner might begin to be very critical of other ministers, noting that ministers like to be the "object of attention," but they never seem to have time to pay attention to anyone else. As Switzer notes, empathy alone may prompt the minister in this case to sense the other person's feeling that she does not receive the attention she desires and perhaps feels that she deserves. The fact that she has singled out ministers for special criticism in this regard, however, would suggest that she may well have in mind the very person she is speaking with at the moment. Thus, the condition of immediacy will lead him to recognize and comment on his impression that she may be feeling that *he* has not been paying enough attention to *her*, and that she may even be experiencing this neglect as they are talking together. Perhaps

she has felt that he seems distracted, or that he has not been very empathetic or respectful toward her. Maybe he has not arranged the social environment (for example, his office) so that their conversation was not subject to interruption. Whatever the actual case may be, his recognition that her comment has immediacy—not merely ministers in general or not simply his behavior in other contexts, but right here and now—and his communication of this recognition to her will enable them to focus on what is going on between them. Are her feelings, for example, justified? If he has been taking phone calls during the conversation, they undoubtedly are. If he has seemed distracted—thinking about the sermon he needs to write—her feelings are clearly justified. If, on the other hand, she left a message at his home saying that she needed to talk with him and the issue was urgent, yet has been talking about rather insignificant matters for twenty minutes or so, her feelings are not particularly justified. In the latter case, her raising of the issue about his inattentiveness allows him, in turn, to express his dismay over the fact that he has responded to her request for a meeting to discuss an urgent matter and instead she has been talking about what seem to him to be rather insignificant concerns.

It was something of an inside joke among those of us who were trained in the client-centered method of counseling that if we were ever stumped for something to say to the client, we could always fall back on, "That's what you're feeling *now*." We might have little if any clue to what the "that" in this instance might be, but at least our comment would keep the focus on the immediate. While this was a response of last resort, it makes the point that immediacy is important because there is always the possibility of the helping person's being "out of sync"—in thoughts and emotions—with where the other person's thoughts and emotions are at this moment. Sometimes (as noted in the previous discussion of impatience as a sign of disrespect) the minister is way out ahead, having already anticipated where the conversation is likely to be leading. Other times, the minister is far behind, still mulling over in her mind what the other person said several minutes ago. These timing or temporal discrepancies often occur in conversations between friends (where we can hardly wait for the other person to complete a story so that we can tell a story of our own) or between spouses (where the husband is still asking himself, "Now, what did she mean by that remark?" while his wife has already moved on to a different topic).

The fact that this is a common occurrence should be an encouragement to the minister to acknowledge her failure to stay in temporal sync

with the other person, and to ask him to go back to something he had previously said but which hadn't fully registered with her because she was still mulling over something he had said even earlier or about where the conversation might be heading. Instead of being disruptive, or a cause for resentment ("You're not listening to me?"), these acknowledgments and accompanying requests are almost always viewed positively by the other person, as they communicate to him that one *does* want to understand what he is saying. The opportunity to revisit his earlier comments may also enable him to explore them more deeply, to see some features in them that he did not see on his earlier account.

A different and perhaps less defensible—though understandable—type of immediacy loss is when the minister finds himself thinking about something unrelated to the conversation. In the case noted above, the woman who complained about inattentive ministers may have been aware that the minister was not listening to her but was thinking about something else entirely. She may have realized this when she asked a question ("Do you think I was wrong to speak to her that way?") and he didn't answer. Ironically, this problem has bearing on Switzer's acknowledgment that it is "not entirely clear to me as to how this condition may be effectively furnished with any regularity in preaching, especially right at the moment that it seems to be called for" (1979, p. 93). The irony is in the fact that parishioners often find themselves thinking about unrelated matters while "listening" to the preacher!

In both cases, the listener's distractibility may or may not be "meaningful." A parishioner may have tuned out on the sermon merely because there is something she considers more important on her mind (such as a report that she needs to have finished and on her boss's desk first thing Monday morning). Or she may have "tuned out" because the sermon topic, or the way the preacher was approaching the topic, made her "upset" ("What does *he* know about motherhood?"). Similarly, the minister's distractibility during a conversation where she is providing counsel may be because there is something more pressing on her mind (the funeral she must conduct this afternoon for a high school boy killed in a car accident). Or she may not be listening attentively because the subject or the way the person was approaching the subject stirred unpleasant emotions ("How can she talk so blithely about her plans for an extended vacation with her boyfriend in the Bahamas while leaving her children at home to fend for themselves?"). "Tuning out" is a mild form of dissociation, and dissociation is an available defense we all have

at our disposal when the situation is too threatening. What the minister owes to herself and to the other person is that she enter empathetically into her own experiencing in order to discover why she is having difficulty attending to this conversation: "Why does the other person's unconcern for her children not only evoke moral indignation in me but also the need to, as it were, escape the scene altogether?"

It is possible, of course, that the minister is neither distracted by some other more pressing concern or defending against the anxiety the conversation has evoked in her, but that she is simply thoroughly bored by this particular individual. She wants to be empathetic and respectful, but she finds the conversation dull and tiresome. There is a character in a Monty Python routine who believes that he is "invisible" because no one responds to what he has to say. What he does not realize is that the things he has to say are so dull and uninteresting that it is amazing the others do not leave the room altogether. A general understanding in psychotherapeutic circles is that if a therapist finds a particular client boring, this is an appropriate basis for referral, as this is not only likely to be fatal to the success of the therapy but also, and more hopefully, another therapist may find this individual interesting. As William James once noted, we believe in that which we find interesting and disbelieve in that which does not interest us (James, 1984).

The minister may not enjoy the luxury of referral, especially if the problem is that the parishioner's conversation is dull and tiresome. Ministers usually make referrals when they find that the problem is beyond their competence. A parishioner whose issues produce boredom in the listener is probably not experiencing problems that are beyond the minister's competence. Rather, she may feel that they are *beneath* her competence! I suggest, therefore, that the minister may want to become a student, as it were, of the problem of boredom, as this may provide insight into her own experiential world and perhaps that of many of her parishioners.

The psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel wrote an essay in 1934 on the psychology of boredom. He defined it as an unpleasurable experience of a lack of impulse and noted its connection with depression, loneliness, and restlessness. He also noted that boredom may be a state of tension in which instinctual aims are repressed. Prisoners and patients in long-term care facilities may become bored because of having to repress sexual desires. (Later, in the chapter on boundary issues, I will discuss ways in which ministers' lives are similar to those of prisoners and patients). Fenichel distinguishes between "pathological" and "normal" boredom,

noting that while in both states "something expected does not occur," the difference is that in pathological boredom this expected event fails to occur because one "represses his instinctual action out of anxiety," whereas in normal boredom it fails to occur because the external world does not give what "we have a right to expect." Thus, in pathological boredom, the inadequacy lies within, while in normal boredom, the inadequacy is external.

The minister who finds a particular parishioner boring is probably experiencing normal boredom, as the parishioner is apparently not providing sufficiently interesting material, whether because it seems rather trivial (she is describing her cat's sleeping habits, or he is explaining how he reduced the font size so that his paper would not exceed the ten page limit), because they have been over the same ground several times, or some similar reason. If, however, the minister is experiencing boredom where these reasons do not apply, he should consider the possibility that his boredom is pathological, due to the repression of instinctual aims. If this view of the matter seems overly psychoanalytic, consider the following story related to me by a preschool teacher. A four-year-old girl informed the teacher that she didn't want to go on the field trip that was planned for the following day because "field trips are boring." The teacher was about to tell her about all the interesting things they would see on tomorrow's field trip when a boy, overhearing their conversation, said to the girl, "Oh, you just miss your mama!" His comment was immediately followed by another boy's reassurance, "I used to miss my mama too, but I got over it." These boys knew nothing about psychoanalysis, but they had very perceptively put their finger on why the little girl was "bored" by field trips. Separation anxiety was behind her boredom, and the boys not only picked this up, entering into her experiential world because they knew it only too well themselves, but also assured her that she, too, could "get over it." Thus, the minister who experiences boredom while listening to a "tiresome" parishioner or student *may* be experiencing normal boredom—the other person is *truly* boring—but *may* instead be dealing with boredom that is more pathological, that is, due to instinctual repression out of anxiety (anxiety about what would happen if he did not repress the instinctual needs in question).

I realize that a discussion of boredom may seem to take us far afield from immediacy as a condition of effective listening. But immediacy, like respect, can often be best understood by identifying situations in which it is conspicuous by its absence. As Switzer observes in the case

of preaching, immediacy is not something that we can readily put into words. The times that a minister can interrupt the sermon to say, "I see a number of you smiling as though you know exactly what I am talking about," are relatively rare, and drawing attention to the immediacy of the moment may have the effect of undermining it. The counselor *can* say, "That's what you're feeling right now" on occasion, but if he said this often in the course of the counseling hour, the client would certainly become suspicious ("What is this, a favorite mantra of yours?"), and the immediacy of the conversation would be lost. The minister should therefore be attentive to signs—largely within herself—of the absence or loss of immediacy, and search in her own experiential world for the possible reasons for this.

*An interactive system.* The foregoing discussion of the seven conditions for facilitating effective listening indicates, much like the traditional model of the seven deadly sins, that they are not merely a list of discrete characteristics but an interactive system. Certain conditions reinforce others, and the relative absence of one or more of these conditions will affect the quality of the whole. The experienced therapist does not think of them individually, though she may from time to time take inventory on her therapeutic work in order to ensure that she has not neglected or allowed one or more of these conditions to atrophy. In the pastoral counseling literature, by far the most attention has been given to the first condition—the accurate communication of empathy—and there is a sense in which its absence *will* undermine the whole, thus perhaps justifying the general perception that it is the chief of the seven conditions (even as pride is often declared to be the chief of the deadly sins).

As we have seen, however, an exclusive emphasis on empathy, important as it is, can lead to a very skewed understanding of what makes for effective listening. In Underwood's formulation, empathy, confrontation, and respect go together, thus suggesting, perhaps, that in addition to viewing the seven conditions as a system, we should consider how certain conditions form different subsystems. I leave it to the ingenuity of the reader to work these out in greater detail, with the cautionary note that these subsystems are not static, but dynamic; that is, the fact that these three conditions, empathy, confrontation, and respect, may operate together does not preclude their being involved in other dyadic or triadic relationships, such as my own observation that there may be a strong link between confrontation and concreteness.



### Concluding Comments

In this chapter I have explored the anxieties that, if they go unrecognized, may inhibit good listening, but, if recognized, may actually contribute to effective listening. I have also discussed the attitudes and conditions that contribute to good listening. These certainly do not cover all the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect, positively or negatively, the creation of a good listening environment, but they do, in my view, make a strong case for the need to create such an environment. The assumption that lies behind this chapter is that one needs to create a listening environment that is potentially good or helpful in order for conversation to occur regardless of who the minister's conversation partner happens to be. In this sense, the listening environment sketched out here is intended to be generic. Of course, if some students find it difficult to learn in what others may consider an optimal learning environment, and if some students have special needs for which the learning environment provided them is inadequate, the same applies to the listening environment created by the minister. Some will find that the listening environment sketched here is not good or helpful for them, and some will find that it is inadequate for their particular needs. (The latter is usually discussed in the pastoral counseling literature under the heading of "referral.")

These exceptions and special needs, however, do not invalidate the claim that the attitudes and conditions presented here are conducive to a listening environment that will be helpful to the vast majority of the persons who have asked to be listened to. As in the educational environment, some will make more or better use of this resource than others. Among those with whom the minister works, some will never ask for it. Also, unlike the regularly scheduled worship service, class session, or committee meeting, the listening environment presented here has a more "occasional" use. Still, when we take a larger view of the minister as one who provides counsel—not only private one-on-one conversations but also brief, informal encounters in more public settings—we also make the case for a more expansive view of the listening environment itself as one that surrounds and permeates the larger organism in which the minister enacts her professional calling. In this sense, Switzer is exactly right to suggest that the conditions that make for good listening in the private pastoral conversation are conducive to good preaching. This application may, however, be broadened to

include the worship service, the classroom, the committee meeting, because the same values that inform the minister's counseling role should also permeate these other environments.

We need, therefore, to heed Nichols' warning that we are ever in danger of losing the "art of listening." Instructive in this regard is his own self-disclosure that the requirement of writing a book on the art of listening threw him into a state of panic and despair, as he realized that just as he began to feel that he was "learning to listen better," he would experience a "setback" that took him all the way back to square one: "But, fortunately or unfortunately, I had a commitment to finish writing this book, and so after a while of brooding in hurt silence I'd go back and try to talk to the person I'd quarreled with—only this time with a firm resolve to listen to his or her side before telling mine" (1995, p. 4).

It is frequently observed that women are better listeners than men. In her article "Female-Friendly Pastoral Care," Carolyn Stahl Bohler (1996, pp. 27-49) places listening at the top of her list of guidelines for counseling and then tells a distressing story about a role play in a counseling course in which a forty-year-old student, the mother of two teenagers, was relating to the male student who had been assigned to "listen to her" that she was three months pregnant and worried both about her own health and that of the future child. She told him about having consulted with various professionals, all of whom verbalized concern about everyone in her family but her ("How would the older children adjust?" "What would be the effect of another baby on her husband's work?"). Yet, after hearing about her resentment and sense of vulnerability—even fear of dying during childbirth—the other student offered to pray "for her" and instead of focusing on her resentment and fear, he intoned, "Lord, help this baby, in this mother's womb." He was "stunned" when she pointed out to him after the exercise that he "had not listened to her at all" (p. 29). Because women are perceived to spend more of their time and energy in a listening role, this is often treated as a professional liability, as if the capacity to listen is a weakness, not a strength, in positions of leadership. On the other hand, men often complain that some women do not listen very well, that they are confrontational in an accusatory way, or that they talk to them in a patronizing manner. And, of course, there are men who are very good listeners.

Some children—both girls and boys—have discovered that listening is their only viable role in a family of talkers, or have had this role assigned to them by a parent who needs "someone to talk to." No doubt, many

of these children are found among the ranks of ministers, who continue to accept the burden of listening to the troubles, trials, and tribulations of others. This time, however, they hope that they may be in a position to help other persons come to terms with their problems and not only, as when they were children, to listen helplessly. Could it be that the tendency of ministers to pray at the conclusion of a counseling session has roots in their experience, after listening to a parent pouring out her troubles, of recognizing their own helplessness and therefore asking God to make things better?

Nichols, however, suggests that friends make the best listeners because the relationship between friends is "voluntary and optional; you can leave if you want to, and therefore it's safer to be honest and take risks" (1995, p. 225). The novelist Henry James was considered by his friends to be such a good, fair-minded listener that a husband and wife would independently consult him about their marital problems, with full awareness that the partner would also be consulting him.

We can learn much from our friends' examples. In addition, it is possible to learn from those who have devoted their professional lives as counselors to reclaiming and refining the lost art of listening. Their experience has demonstrated that a good listening environment can be created—by anyone—and that good listening may be intentional, not happen merely by chance. As Noyce puts it, "listening is hard work," but this is true of any art in which one wishes to gain proficiency. In addition, this is precisely why a minister needs to create a good listening environment, so that the wheel does not have to be reinvented each and every time one is asked for counsel. In time, the attitudes and conditions for effective listening may, in fact, become second nature.