

Improv (for) life, listening for justice

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Whether we are facing personal conflict in our relationships, or leaning into the harder conversations of our society—like those around racial injustice and sexual identity—many of us struggle to listen to what needs hearing and speaking what needs saying.

Listening is a core competency for me as a pastor and chaplain, but I am finding listening also can be a revolutionary and democratic act: revolutionary in the sense that it can lead to transformation, and democratic in the sense that it is a responsibility that attends the right we claim to free speech. As [Jacob Needleman](#) sagely put it:

Inwardly, I have to work at listening to you. That means I don't have to agree with you, but I have to let your thought into my mind in order to have a real democratic exchange between us. And that is a very interesting work of the human being, don't you think?

I agree with Needleman's thinking, and I also know I find all kinds of ways to *not* listen and *not* let the other's thought into my mind, particularly when I disagree—or think I am going to disagree—with the speaker. (Of course, some “conversations” need to be shut down. But when they don't, continuing to engage can feel stressful or even scary.)

I've found help in a couple of places. One help comes from the [SAVI \(System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction\) approach to communications analysis](#), which suggests a way of engaging conflicted communication. In the SAVI approach, a controversial statement is met by the listener finding and naming three positives in what they've heard, and then opening up with a broad question.

This reminded me of the technique I learned at [DSI Comedy](#) for working with an improv partner's offering: three key ways of doing “yes, and ...” builds. To build on or heighten your statement (“We like ice cream!”) I can add a detail, emotion, or

consequence of your statement.

Detail: “Yes, we like ice cream, especially chocolate!”

Emotion: “Yes, we like ice cream so much, *we love it* more than anything!”

Consequence: “Yes, we like ice cream so much, and if we don’t get it, we’re not happy.”

As you can imagine, these are also ways to connect in a situation of conflicted communication, when you might be hard put to identify three positives about a controversial statement or one you personally disagree with. This is common for me in my chaplaincy work, where I often hear a theologically tinged statement that I can’t agree with (but which it would not be helpful to critique in that moment). It is also common for me in political conversations. Here are a couple of examples.

Many times when someone is in a crisis situation, their reliance on their faith background may lead them to say things like “I know this is part of God’s plan.” This can be heartbreaking when said in the wake of a life-threatening diagnosis, injury, or even death. But I can’t just disagree; that would be like taking away a patient’s oxygen. So, how can I engage? Right. Three builds and an open question or invitational question ... which might look like this:

“I hear you relying on God in this painful time.” (detail) “I am glad your faith is helping you.” (emotion) “This is such a tough situation; I might be having a hard time accepting it’s God’s plan.” (consequence) “Can you tell me more about how you are feeling?” (open-ended question)

I feel more connected to the person I am listening to—in the way Needleman describes—when I take this approach; I certainly have not shut them down or shut them out. Our conversation has a chance to continue; we may even get somewhere that may provide more comfort to the person.

This approach can work in situations of greater conflict in values, attitudes or behaviors, even situations where someone says or does something offensive or unjust. For instance, if you are in conversation where someone says something racist or sexist, one approach is to just call them on it. Sometimes the relationship (or lack of a relationship) may mean you need more nuance. Or maybe it’s just hard for you to speak up in these situations, and this structure can help you.

For instance, you may have heard comments like these recently: “I’m so tired of all this Black Lives Matter stuff, and crap about the Confederate flag. I mean, really, can we stop overreacting?”

If you wanted to use this technique, your reply might look like this:

“I can hear you’re tired of hearing about racial injustice.” (detail) “I can only imagine how tired people of color are of bearing the brunt of our racist society.” (emotion) “I see people—African Americans and trans people of color in particular—pay with their lives ... and I feel the need to respond, though I don’t always know how.” (consequence) “I wonder who you listen to about these issues?” (open ended question)

The point is to find places where you can identify a detail, feeling, or consequence in *their* statement, or in *your own* stance.

Which, of course, means you first need to *listen*. I did not know when I took my first class how fundamental listening is to good improv. In fact, it is the heart of the game. When the leader calls out, “Players, are you ready?” the unspoken part of the question is “to listen?”

And in listening, to hear each other into our truer, better, more joy-full selves.

Yes! And ... ?

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