

RiverLogic

Tools to Transform Resistance
and Create Flow
in all of our Relationships

DENISE BLANC



CHAPTER ONE

Choose to Be Present



CURRENT

The flow of water influenced by gravity.



*The rivers flow not past but through us,
tingling, vibrating, exciting every cell and fiber.*

John Muir

There are lots of names for presence but I am particularly fond of the word “nowness” which implies being able to fully inhabit this moment. “I am trying to learn to stay in the now, not the last now, not the next now, this now,” says a character in Anne Lamott’s book, *Bird by Bird*.

Since this book draws on lessons from the river, each chapter includes a river word. Using the word “current” for this chapter is fitting. Besides defining the flow of water and providing the feeling of presence with its movement, the word “current” also means happening in the present—meaning NOW!

So why is it so important to stay in the now? What gets in our way? What does it look and feel like when we are in conversation with someone who is fully present with us? These are questions I will explore in this chapter.

Now here’s a big statement that comes from my background as a coach, facilitator, and mediator. Here goes: *The quality of our communication is only equal to the quality of our presence.* If we want to strengthen our communication skills, then it has to begin with presence.

It is our lack of presence that has become a primary culprit for most of our communication breakdowns in organizations, families, friendships and community relationships. If you are wondering what exactly presence looks like, listen to the following qualities that may provide you with texture and

nuance: *authenticity, openness, curiosity, self-awareness, calmness, connection, candor, aliveness, and empathy*. Does anyone immediately come to mind when you hear these qualities?

The tricky thing about presence is that we definitely feel it when someone is present with us, even when we can't actually put our finger on what it is. It is likely that we sense a calm alertness in them and in their presence we feel understood, we feel seen and experience a strong connection. It is both noticeable and palpable!

And when we feel present within ourselves, well, we feel alive, calm, and connected; connected to ourselves, to others, and to our environment. Moments of full presence are remembered—maybe because they are so rare.

■ PAUSE

- *Take a few moments and reflect on someone in your life who models even just a few of the qualities listed above. How does it feel to be in conversation with this person?*
- *Now think of someone in your life where these qualities are absent. What does it feel like to be in conversation with this person?*
- *Finally, reflect on a time when you felt fully present in your life. What were some of the conditions: person, place, and context? How did it feel?*

Since this book explores riverlogic, I want to start by first looking to water for an experience of presence. This is not as crazy as it may sound since water constitutes over 70% of our hearts and brains, and takes up 71% of our earth's surface. Just hearing the sound of water, especially moving water, with its "white noise" can settle my jangled nerves and clear out mental clutter. Besides the sense of calm I often notice I have a little smile on my face. Being by moving water just feels good!

It turns out there is solid science demonstrating how water provides this quick shortcut to presence, shifting us into what marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols calls "Blue Mind" in his groundbreaking book of the same name.

“Blue Mind”, Nichols describes as “this mildly meditative state we fall into when we are near, in, on, or under water.” He provides powerful research pointing to significant cognitive, emotional, and social benefits that surface from being near water. But even without an ocean, river, or stream nearby, a small fountain in your office can also do the trick, explains Nichols.

SECTION 1: Choosing to live in the “Now” is just not all that easy!

We live in a world that seems to conspire against us in having this quality of presence. We live in a world filled with distractions and stress.

Distraction #1

Monkey Mind

The biggest distraction of all happens to live within. This distraction is often called “monkey mind,” named for the way our mind darts and jumps and races around—just like a monkey! Everyone should find these mental acrobatics to be very familiar. All one has to do is sit still and focus on your breath for one minute to observe our monkey mind on full display.

I was recently in a training class where I had to put up a finger every time I noticed a new thought. It was ridiculously hard to keep up!

■ **PAUSE**

Stop reading and sit quietly, noticing the flow of your breath coming in and moving out. Take three breaths, inhaling and exhaling, and notice the flow of air in and out of your nostrils.

If you are like most of us, it was probably hard to stay focused even for these three breaths. Did you notice your monkey mind? Could you even count how many thoughts you had during these three breaths? No worries, this is just what our mind does and we can all learn to tame this monkey mind—at least to some extent.

Our minds give us plenty to be distracted with. Research tells us that we

have an average of six thousand thoughts a day!

It's no wonder it is hard for any of us to be fully present. Our minds also move about four times faster than our speech, so we can (and do) think about a myriad of things while others are talking to us. We may be hearing, but it is questionable if we are really listening. They are different.

But not all thoughts are created equal. Some of our thoughts are just fleeting. We might become distracted just a few seconds and barely lose focus of the conversation, whereas other thoughts and stories can really grab hold of us, taking us in and through many rabbit holes.

The Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck calls this longer grab “our substitute life.” In our substitute life, we become so distracted that the person in front of us virtually disappears as we drift and drift until someone or something jolts us back to the present. But not only does the person in front of us disappear, we also disappear, we become absent, lost in thought and generally checked out. We're lost in our ruminations, fantasies, planning, and worrying. With so much going on inside of us, we can't really attend to our environment or anyone in it very well.

In our fantasies, we may have found ourselves building a relationship with someone we barely know, or we start to worry about a look that we thought our boss gave us in the meeting, or wondering if our friend is ignoring our calls, or maybe it is worrying about the persistent pain in our neck. We all have monkey minds but these gaps in our awareness start to add up and erode the quality of our relationships—not to mention our work performance and quality of life. Our monkey mind takes us into the past, the future—but never to the present.

Most of us long for more focus. It is unsatisfying to live with such split attention, and over time we might come to see that sadly, the large patchwork of our lives has huge swatches missing. Missing is all that time lost when you were too busy to listen to your children or your partner, or where you didn't notice that someone you work closely with was suffering or even that your own wellbeing was deeply out of balance. Our lack of noticing could be something as small as not noticing the first signs of spring and the burst of

purple flowers on our daily walk. Here is a simple sensory practice to start building more focus and presence:

■ PAUSE

Look at whatever is in front of you as if it's the first time you've ever seen it. Notice minute details. Allow yourself at least one minute to look carefully without your eyes or thoughts darting around. Look with fresh eyes and not thoughts like "I know what this is." Identify five qualities of this thing or person in front of you that you had never noticed before. This activity is a way of orienting yourself and can be used as a strategy to settle when you feel the flitting of your monkey mind. Take notice of feeling this focused presence, which is our ability to place attention wherever we want it.

Distraction #2

24/7 Digital Life

Another major distraction happens to be our digital life. Wallace Nichols, whom I just mentioned with his book *Blue Mind*, provides the term "Gray Mind" to describe the state we are in when we spend way too much time inside, on our screens, or consuming endless news cycles that leave us numb, lethargic, and depressed. Even more dire implications for our work life, according to Cal Newport in his books *Digital Minimalism and Deep Work*, is that our overuse of screen time can compromise our ability to focus on deep, cognitively challenging tasks. This experience of Gray Mind points to a dark side of technology.

As remarkable as our technological advances are, and this wonderful ability to stay connected globally, research has uncovered disturbing side effects of too much screen time. This state of digital distraction is affecting our ability to connect, concentrate, and communicate with each other. It also turns out that "fake popularity" or having multitudes of "friends" on social media cannot replace real friendships. In order to fully relate, we need presence. We need to look at each other—not down at our screens. We need to

listen to each other and energetically feel each other, but our distractibility, our devices, and distance are getting in our way.

I was working on this book during the global pandemic of 2020. Even with the support of online platforms that allowed us to keep work and relationships going while we were quarantining at home (for those of us privileged to be able to work remotely) many of us experienced levels of depression, loneliness, and discontent in not being able to connect in real time.

Personally, I found that although TV, radio, and podcasts provided endless learning and entertainment, I needed to make a concerted effort to turn them off. I found myself distracted, edgy, and fatigued from so much digital stimuli—but also addicted.

Our devices are “demanding, seducing, and manipulating,” says Tristan Harris, a previous Googler now involved with ethics of technology, co-founder of Time Well Spent, and a contributor to the scathing documentary *The Social Dilemma*. Additionally, people on social media are called “users”—just like drug addicts. In fact, the designers of the technology shared in this documentary that they had designed features precisely to keep people on their devices—to keep people hooked. “You may want to exert self-control when it comes to digital usage,” says Harris, “but that’s not acknowledging that there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to work against you.”

I remember a quote from the physicist Neil Turok that I heard a long time ago but have never forgotten. He said, “We are analog beings living in a digital world.” Think about it. As a tactile species, we like to touch and feel things. We crave art, music, and the natural world, which also helps our nervous systems to settle down. But most of us have become pretty addicted to our digital life.

With this addiction, we start to feel alienated from ourselves and each other. Anxiety disorders, addictions, depression, and out-of-control stress are on the rise with many living in a constant state of hyper-arousal. Nichols calls this “Red Mind,” where heightened cortisol levels and stress hormones surge through our system.

While working during the pandemic, my clients were struggling to find work/life balance because separation between home and work had become non-existent for the first time in their work lives. This became a constant topic of our conversations, and many shared their personal strategies for coping. Not surprisingly, common themes emerged, which included exercise, cooking, gardening, making music, making art, and being in nature. Yes, we are analog beings!

But many of us are definitely not living analog lives, and we struggle with focus and presence. Educators believe we have an epidemic of attention deficit disorders amongst our children, but I suspect this may also be true with adults. Matthew Crawford, a Ph.D. in political philosophy asks a fascinating question, “What if we saw attention in the same way that we saw air or water?”

If we did, wouldn't we try to do everything we could to preserve it, honor it, and develop it? Wouldn't we be looking for ways to improve this critical resource? As much training as we have all received in learning and amassing information throughout our years, we have received almost no training in the “art” of paying attention. This creates problems for us since attention is the primary ingredient we need in order to be present. It's also hard to be present when things are moving at such an alarming speed. And our lack of presence is definitely interfering with our ability to meaningfully connect with each other.

Distraction #3

Pace of Modern Life

It takes a real commitment to counter society's rapid pace and slow down enough to become mindful and grounded. I've certainly noticed how rushing becomes addictive—at least for me. Listen to how we talk: “I am crazy busy! I am slammed! Got to run. I am running late!”

I have watched with alarm as I wildly clean my house or rapidly brush my teeth. I began asking myself, So, what's the rush? Is it because I like the feeling of adrenalin? Is it to get the most done in a short amount of time? Or is it just a habit?

Cardiologist Meyer Friedman even has a name for rushing. He calls it “hurry sickness,” which he describes as a “continuous struggle and unremitting attempt to accomplish or achieve more and more things or participate in more and more activities in less and less time.” People with “hurry sickness” think fast, talk fast, and move fast. When we hurry, we make mistakes, we have accidents, we lose things, and we become myopic and self-focused. Lacking presence, we are also not in our bodies.

“Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body,” James Joyce writes in his collection of short stories called *Dubliners*. I always found this line amusing, perhaps because I could relate.

As a little kid, I was often visiting the school’s lost and found, looking for that one red mitten or my sweater flung off in class. Next to my name in my middle school yearbook was the unflattering inscription, “Lose something?”

Both Mr. Duffy and many of us likely share a few things in common. We are not in our bodies and all the forgetting, losing things, and bumping into things are symptoms. Although these issues can be problematic, there happens to be a much more serious side effect to hurry sickness.

It can cause a loss of empathy. A study done in the 1970s called “The Good Samaritan Experiment” is where I first learned about this. The study was composed of two groups of seminary students at Princeton University. One group they called the “Hurry Group.” They were told they were running late to give their sermon. The second group was the “Unhurried Group,” and they were told they had ample time before they needed to get to the sermon.

When the students approached their building, they saw a man slumped over, coughing and groaning. Of the Unhurried Group, 63% stopped to provide assistance, but only 10% of the Hurry Group chose to stop and help.

The implications of this study for our organizations, families, and lives are sobering. What happens when we are rushing so quickly that we ignore the suffering in front of us, with our staff, our friends, our families—within our wider world? Being stressed, rushed, pressured, task-focused, or just plain exhausted and overwhelmed, we are less likely to notice what’s going on with others, and this comes with a huge cost.

R.D. Laing, the great Scottish psychologist said, “The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change, until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds. Being in “drive mode,” we can end up displaying a lack of empathy, a lack of civility, and a lack of basic concern for our fellow humans.

By nature, we are an empathic species but this quality gets lost with all the hurrying, busyness and distractions. It would benefit us to start paying attention to where we are putting our attention. It is just this need that has prompted the rich field of mindfulness to become so ubiquitous in our culture. The word “mindfulness” is seemingly everywhere: in our schools, corporations, hospitals, the military, and police departments—even in our daily lexicon.

Practice: *We can all take on mindfulness practices with our daily activities: Walk slower, talk slower, take pauses between your sentences, eat more slowly, brush your teeth more slowly. Notice what you see, what you hear, what you feel, what you taste, and what you smell. Here’s a challenge: Choose one activity that you do daily and do it mindfully for five minutes a day for one week. Notice what you notice.*

Keep asking yourself: “What’s the rush?”

SECTION 2: Cultivating “Presence”

Mindfulness

“Choose to be where you are, paying attention on purpose and without judgment as if your life depended on it,” is how Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program, defines mindfulness. Let me try to unpack Kabat-Zinn’s definition in sections:

- **“Paying attention on purpose.”** “Attention is the building block to everything else,” says the neuroscientist Richard Davidson. But

without intention, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pay attention.

- **“Without judgment.”** Well, this is a tough one, since most of us are so caught up in our constant barrage of thoughts and judgments. What if we *choose* to let them go?
- Then there is **“as if your life depended on it.”** Well, what if it did?

Ellen Langer, a social scientist who has been studying mindfulness since the 1970s is a bit more restrained. She calls mindfulness “the simple act of actively noticing new things.” She goes on to say that everything is always changing and can look quite different depending on our perspective. So, even when something is completely familiar it becomes much more interesting with active attention.

Humans have an amazing superpower - the power of awareness. The Buddhist thinker Henry Vynar calls this awareness the “watcher” which is different from the “doer.” The watcher notices, “I just interrupted her again, I notice myself getting defensive. I feel my heart pounding.” When we watch our emotions, our thoughts, and feel our physiology, over time, we begin to influence the doer. By choosing to be self-aware we watch ourselves in action and can choose where and how we wish to pay attention.

Although simple, it is definitely not easy to become self-aware, but it is through the watcher that we can begin to cultivate presence. Thankfully, there are those rare humans who model this level of presence and awareness for us. They hold the belief that meaning comes from human interactions, so they choose to pay attention. By following the currents of conversation, they make the time to listen and focus; and in doing so, in their presence, we feel seen, heard, and appreciated.

Modeling Presence

Meet Konda Mason. Konda happens to be one of those rare people. She immediately came to mind when I decided to interview someone who models this quality of presence. First off, it is her alert gaze and her calm and confident demeanor, along with the sparkle in her eyes. She also holds dignity

and power without being domineering. And when speaking with Konda, she seems to focus on me and only me, even though she clearly has multiple competing demands for her attention.

Konda is a social entrepreneur, a social justice activist, and a spiritual teacher. When I first met her, she was the co-founder of a popular co-work space in Oakland, California. She is now an activist and teacher at a major meditation center in Northern California. Along with her many roles, she has been an accomplished filmmaker and Grammy Award winner—and it goes on and on. But it was not her list of accomplishments that brought her to mind, it was her quality of presence.

She described growing up in a family and community where there was lots of love and where everyone's mother was her mother, though it was also poor, Black, and underserved. She didn't discover racism until her family moved to an almost all-White suburb just a few miles away. Here, she experienced hatred for the first time, and some of her joy just flushed out of her as she was surrounded by epithets of American racism. But she also discovered yoga as a practice and a lifeline.

I asked Konda how she maintains presence in the midst of experiencing injustice or hatred or when managing challenging personalities in the workplace. She said, "When I hear my thoughts or hear words coming out in a way that are hurtful or unkind, I have a built-in monitor or navigation system. My internal alarm system goes off and this brings me back. My practice is about right speech, so sometimes I have to ask for forgiveness if I have said or done something hurtful. My path is about letting go and cutting others slack."

This book is about transforming resistance so that we can create the flow that can be available (but often isn't) in our conversational spaces. People like Konda point the way, but we all have an internal navigation system that can be activated and that picks up undercurrents of emotions and reads subtle signals. This navigation system is connected to the watcher, which helps us to monitor our behavior and also helps us to recover when we lose presence.

It is not easy to live in a mindful way—even when we want to. We will all lose it from time to time, but the path to recovering presence is also possible.

The following is a story of me really losing it on one particularly stressful day; but it is also a story (and lesson) of recovery and finding my way back to a place of calm presence—much to my amazement!

Losing it!

My plane had just landed thirty minutes late at the Dallas/Fort Worth International airport. I was traveling from San Francisco to the East Coast to facilitate a large program the following day, and had a connecting flight in Dallas. I noticed the anxiety building about the possibility of missing my connecting flight, arriving late, and not feeling rested for my big program.

Never having been to the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, I was shocked to discover how spread out it was. I was lugging a large shoulder bag, holding a book in my hand, and running as fast as I could in my new leather boots with heels. Whatever was I thinking?

Flushed, sweating, and desperately out of breath, I arrived at my gate ten minutes before my flight was scheduled to take off, and the attendant curtly informed me that I was too late to get on the flight and that the plane was now full. In a shrill, loud voice, even noticeable to myself, I wildly waved my boarding pass and demanded to get on the plane. I noticed alarmed, critical stares from those standing near the gate. The agent repeated that I was too late and the plane was now full. We faced off, glaring at each other. I noticed my right hand was scrunched into a fist. Was I intending to slug this woman? (Lest you think I was that type of person, I have never punched anyone in my life!) The voices in my head were screaming, “I deserve to get on that plane. I bought a ticket!”

I then noticed the book I was holding in my other hand, which happened to be *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama. The irony was impossible to ignore – even in my highly activated state. Immediately, I shifted and now in a quieter, more contained voice said, “Wow, you have a really challenging job. This type of situation must be hard.”

She visibly softened and offered me a wry smile and said, “Yes, it is.” We quietly looked at each other for a few seconds and then she said, “Here is a \$25

gift certificate. Use it anywhere here in the airport.” I took the gift certificate, smiled, and thanked her. As I walked away, I noticed a young mother herding three small children on her own and offered her my gift certificate. She looked surprised and then gave me a wide smile and effusive thank you. As I walked away, I felt lighter, calmer, and surprisingly happy, even though I had just missed my flight.

The unpacking of that story over many years has helped me to appreciate that we have the capacity to change our reactions if we choose to do so by pausing, paying attention, and interrupting the momentum of the moment. My shift began with hearing my shrill voice and noticing with shock that my hand was scrunched into a fist. I felt my hot and flushed face, sensed my spinning thoughts; but the real “pattern interrupt” happened when I noticed the book gripped tightly in my hand.

I was jolted back to my senses, recognizing the irony of the situation which helped me to regain composure, presence, and ultimately, my sense of humor. I discovered my internal alarm system that Konda had spoken about. I also named my feelings (anxious, angry) which helped me regain my frontal cortex, that had been temporarily offline. I could now respond and communicate with more clarity and presence.

Daniel Siegel, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and co-founder of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, calls this “name it to tame it.” And Joshua Freedman, CEO of Six Seconds, a global organization that researches and teaches Emotional Intelligence, calls this “feel it to heal it.” By naming and feeling I was able to regain presence. I was now more resourceful and able to calmly make decisions, which helped me to find another flight without too much delay or even extra cost. This ability to shift perspective to become more open and adaptable is an example of riverlogic in action.

“Energy follows attention”

I first heard this saying when I was briefly studying the martial art, Aikido. Wherever we place our attention, energy follows. I found my way to presence by feeling sensations in my hands, my chest, and hearing my voice. As I be-

came aware, I relaxed my hands, lowered my voice, and slowed my breathing. I noticed my accelerated heart rate, flushed cheeks, and my anger. Feeling and naming brought me back.

Andrew Weil Breathing Practice

This very portable breathing practice from physician Andrew Weil is sometimes called a “breathing tranquilizer,” useful whenever you want to bring on a sense of calm, particularly during and after becoming activated or whenever you want to regain presence and focus. Here’s how to do it:

- *Exhale completely through your mouth making a “whoosh” sound.*
- *Close your mouth and inhale through your nose for a count of four.*
- *Hold your breath for a count of seven.*
- *Exhale completely through your mouth, again making a whooshing sound to a count of eight.*

Dr. Weill suggests doing this for four cycles twice daily.

But “attention without feeling is only a report” explains the poet, Mary Oliver. She goes on to say that “openness and empathy are necessary if attention is to matter.” By including empathy and openness in the mix along with attention, I believe that Mary Oliver is encouraging us to experience life in a more heartfelt and full-bodied way – by opening ourselves to others. From my perspective, I believe she is implying that attention plus compassionate curiosity equals presence.

My initial shift at the airport came about as I began to pay attention to my physical sensations, which slowed them down. But as I opened to the situation, empathy also appeared; empathy for the attendant, empathy for myself, and empathy for the young mother I saw. This happens to be a wonderful byproduct of presence and it happens when we slow down, when we pay attention, and when we attend to our environment. It is what encouraged the seminary students to stop and be willing to help the person in distress.

Most people discover that instead of adding to their burden, when we respond with empathy, both parties walk away lighter!

We can all learn how to listen to ourselves, as well as each other, and change our reactions—if we choose to do so. Our emotions are not invisible. They have distinct signals, and we can develop the navigation system and antenna to read these signals. They show up in our body language and tone of voice when we choose to pay attention.

I was in a class with a meditation teacher who described this emotional exploration as “deep sea diving,” where we each have all this underwater terrain, and it is our job to discover the different textures and nuances in this terrain. Each of us has a particular body and behavioral style and we can learn to identify our individual signals. For me, it is often fluttering in my chest, rapid breathing, and swirling thoughts that tell me I am in the early stages of activation. Do you know your particular combination?

“Our behavior is contagious; strong emotions ripple out and affect others without anyone consciously knowing that is happening,” says David Brock in his book *Your Brain at Work*.

And this reminds me of the powerful quote from the late Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hahn who said: *“When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost. But if even one person remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.”*

This is the immense power of presence – it radiates out, impacting all those around us.

We each have the capacity to become aware of our thoughts, emotions, and actions. The process of awakening may first begin after we have lost it, but then we start to reflect on how we could have responded differently. With practice, we may start noticing while we are in the midst of losing it (me at the airport). At an advanced level, we notice and acknowledge the early feelings of activation immediately and make adjustments to a calmer presence before they even have a chance to progress. This is emotional intelligence at work!

We all get caught in monkey mind, hurry sickness, and in our digital world. Choosing presence requires recognizing and interrupting our patterns that make us less effective. The watcher who observes helps us to notice what we are doing and through the act of just noticing, we discover that we also have choices. Once we acknowledge them, we can learn to let our sensations and feelings just pass on through. Touch – Accept – Release.

I have been on a Tibetan Buddhist path for many years, and during important ceremonies we take vows and are given a special name. Without knowing anything about me, a teacher gave me the name “Nowness Current Warrior.” This has become my *aspiration*. I am a warrior on the path of Nowness!

The best approach to develop presence is sensory. We live in a high-octane world and need strategies that are immediate. Thoughts take us in and through many rabbit holes; and although naming our emotions is helpful, it can also further ignite the story, but sensations catapult us immediately back to Nowness. Touch, sound, sight, taste, and smell can help us settle quickly in our bodies – as can the awareness of our breath. As we develop our internal compass we learn to pay attention to the details of our experience; the rich concentration of NOW, this person, this environment, this moment.

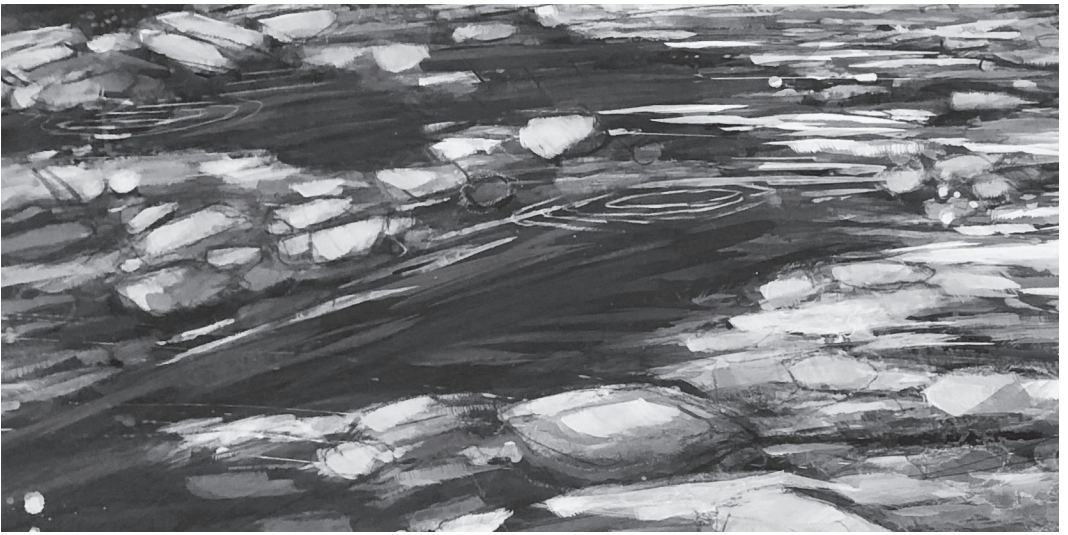
That is what happens for us when sitting in or near a river. Our senses become more acute. The water slowly moves or rushes by, reminding us that life is always moving and changing, and hopefully we choose not to miss it. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said in the 1400s, “You can never get in the same river twice.”

Presence becomes the powerful prerequisite for moving deeper into our conversational spaces and ultimately the gateway to discovering more connection, collaboration, and influence in all of our relationships. Next, we will explore how our presence affects our ability to listen with heart, curiosity, and full attention.

When you find yourself in a hyper-stressed state, you can ask: “What would I think, feel, and do if I were calm and fully present?” Then do it!

Chapter Summary

- The quality of our communication is only equal to the quality of our presence.
- Water, especially moving water, provides a quick shortcut to presence according to Wallace Nichols and his book *Blue Mind*.
- Paying attention allows us to notice nuance, texture, and undercurrents that help us to connect more deeply with ourselves and others. In order to be more present, we need to slow down and start paying attention.
- There are many distractions that interfere with being present in life, including our internal distractions with our monkey mind, digital distractions, and the pace of our modern life.
- The good news is knowing that even when in the midst of intense activation (fight/flight/freeze response), we can still shift to presence and learn to settle our nervous system.
- It takes intention and also self-awareness to settle and become present. It doesn't mean we will stay present all of the time, which is an impossible feat since it is the nature of the mind to wander and move.
- We all have more control and agency than we know. We can choose where, when, and how we wish to focus once we observe ourselves in action. Self-observation (the watcher) is what helps us shift to presence.
- Slowing down increases empathy and empathy strengthens our social fabric, encouraging generosity towards strangers and tolerance for others —especially those who think differently than we do.
- Analog activities provide pleasure, vitality, and joy. They balance the fatigue we feel from so much digital stimuli.



CHAPTER TWO

Listen with Heart and Curiosity



CONFLUENCE

Where two rivers meet.



*The river has taught me to listen; you will learn from it too.
The river knows everything; one can learn everything from it.*

Siddhartha, Herman Hesse

A friend who recently took a rafting trip to the Grand Canyon said that she will never forget how the guides stopped, sometimes for twenty minutes or more, and just listened to the river. What exactly were they listening for?

She said the guides told her that when the river appears gentle and calm, they know not to be fooled. They use all their sensory antennae to hear what they may encounter downstream. Realizing that if unskilled paddlers did not hear the rumble a short distance away, they would then be dangerously unprepared if they tumble into raging rapids.

My friend Kit, who has been canoeing rivers for many decades, responded thoughtfully when I asked her to tell me about her experience of listening when she is on the river. She said, “When I’m on the river, my ears open wide. I can hear how big the space is. I can hear little gurgles. I can hear what an eddy sounds like and how a rock is like a hole in the sound. It’s interesting, because I don’t consider myself to be a particularly good listener in other areas of my life.”

According to the Oxford dictionary, eddies are described as “a circular movement of water counter to the main current, causing a small whirlpool.” And according to my river guide friend, there is no end to the way eddies can trap or suck you in. “They run the gamut,” she explained, “from being calm pools to pulsating cauldrons of intense swirling water.”

Thinking of eddies started me wondering, “what if we could also develop our third ear to listen for eddies that may be swirling and gurgling under the surface as we communicate with each other – and with ourselves?” And by noticing the eddies, could we avoid getting sucked in and trapped? What I am calling an eddy in this context, is a habitual loop with a storyline, belief or behavior that has become so embedded, it leaves little room for any other perspective. When we are stuck in an eddy, thoughtful and curious listening would become challenging – at best.

Learning to recognize eddies in our conversational spaces requires intention, presence and practice. We must learn to let go of assuming that we know what the other person will say. We need to let go of preparing our counterarguments while they are still talking. And what’s really, really hard is that we need to let go of our judgments and biases. This chapter will explore how we can dive under the surface with our listening, in order to listen with heart and more curiosity.

SECTION 1: Challenging Our Mental Filters

We all have biases or filters which interfere with our listening. In fact, if you have a brain, you have bias! Since our world is so complex, our brains have discovered shortcuts to help us process complex information very quickly. That’s what a bias does. But these shortcuts also influence our behavior in more ways than we think. There are many, many biases, but notice how each of the following three biases become listening pitfalls. Each distracts us from listening to others because we are primarily listening only to the voices in our own head!

- **Confirmation bias** is where we only see what we want to see and ignore any evidence to the contrary. We give more weight to information confirming what we already believe, and simply don’t see any other truths. An example: You only read news stories that support your opinion. Here’s how it sounds from the voice in your head: “I don’t believe a word she is saying. I have lots of facts from

reputable sources that completely back up my position.”

- **Assessment bias** is when we make snap decisions based on already-formed ideas, leaving no room for differences. Here’s how the voice in your head sounds: “I agree. I don’t agree. That’s not true. They have no idea what they are talking about!”
- **Action bias** is our tendency to favor action over inaction—no matter what. We also focus on information readily available and jump quickly to conclusions. Here’s how an action bias sounds from the voice in your head: “This is taking so long. I wish she would stop talking, I think we know what to do, so let’s get on with it!”

Empty Your Cup

This popular Zen parable highlights our need to wake up to our assumptions, biases and filters in order to create more room for listening and new understanding.

A university professor came to a famous Zen master, Nan-In, in the late 1800s to inquire about learning Zen. The professor frequently interrupted the master with remarks like, “Oh, yes I know that.”

Finally, the Zen master stopped talking and began to serve tea. He kept pouring the tea until the cup overflowed.

“Enough, stop – no more tea,” said the professor. “My cup is already full.”

“Yes, indeed, I see that,” answered the master. “Just like this cup, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I teach you Zen unless you empty your cup?”

■ PAUSE

The following is a simple mindfulness exercise to help you “empty your cup” when you notice yourself distracted and unable to listen – and it incorporates listening!

Put the timer on for one minute. Let yourself get comfortable in your seat and close your eyes. Take three conscious, deep breaths, feeling your warm

breath move in and out of your nostrils. Listen to the ambient sounds in the room without naming them – just noticing. Now, listen to sounds outside the room – distant sounds. Go back and forth, close in sounds, and distant sounds. Now listen to your own breathing. After one minute, notice what stands out. What feels different? This practice brings you into the here and now. It is the optimal state for being open and able to listen with presence. It helps you to “empty your cup” – and it takes only one minute!

Interrogate Your Reality

“Interrogate your reality” is an expression that I first heard from Susan Scott in her book *Fierce Conversations*. I’m aware that the word “interrogate” may sound a bit harsh, but I believe we need to very seriously question our judgments and biases if we wish to deepen our listening skills. When left unquestioned, our biases can infect our relationships in harmful ways, contributing to deep divides and misunderstanding. They also lead to faulty thought patterns.

We have choices; instead of remaining captive, we can choose to become a more open listener by actively questioning our reasoning. The Nobel Prize winning physicist Arno Penzias was asked about what he thought contributed to his success. He said, “the first thing I do every morning is ask myself, “Why do I strongly believe what I believe?” He said “it is critical to constantly question your own assumptions.”

Of course, we can choose to stay stuck in our self-talk where we learn nothing new, remain disconnected, and refuse to understand where the other person is coming from (a common rocklogic approach.) Here, our habit is to keep proving that our thinking is right which reinforces our blind spots and we remain stuck in a self-reinforcing loop. But for those of us willing to interrogate our biases, here’s what it can sound like:

- *Is what I am believing even true?*
- *What is the evidence to suggest it is true?*
- *What are they seeing, feeling, and understanding that I do not?*

- *What could be their hopes, beliefs, and fears underneath the surface that would help me to understand them better?*
- *What is valuable about their perspective that I need to hear?*

If we have any hope of moving beyond our biases and expanding our listening to include heart and curiosity, it will require what Peter Senge, author of *Fifth Discipline* calls “generative listening.” He describes this as “the art of developing deeper silences in yourself so you can slow the mind’s hearing to your ears’ natural speed, and hear beneath the words to their meaning.” He goes on to say, “You listen not only to the music but to the essence of the person speaking.” This level of listening requires opening our sensory antenna or like Kit says “opening your ears wide.” It takes focus, sensitivity, and intention. It takes “emptying your cup!”

SECTION 2: Confluence – When Two Rivers Meet

Good conversation involves the ebb and flow of listening and talking. Listening alone usually won’t be enough. In fact, listening without any inquiry may come across as overly passive. The passive listener receives but gives little in return. The speaker isn’t even sure that they were heard—or understood. Unfortunately, most listeners just assume that they understand. “I know you believe you understood what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that what you hear is not what I meant,” said Robert J. McCloskey, U.S. State Department spokesman. So true!

A common practice to ensure that you understand the speaker accurately is called “looping.” Here’s how it works:

1. Reflect back what you heard the speaker say in your own words, using expressions like, “What I thought I heard... Did you mean? Let me see if I understand what you are saying...” Then follow it up.
2. “Did that capture it? Is that what you meant?”
3. Speaker confirms yes or no. Sometimes they will say, “Yes, but...”

- meaning you didn't completely get it and they will explain further.
4. Now, reflect back once again on what you heard.
 5. This continues until you hear an emphatic "Exactly. You nailed it." Or something similar.

The practice of looping ensures that the speaker's message is clearly received as intended. It allows the speaker to agree, expand or clarify what they meant. Clearly, we won't need to practice looping in every interaction, especially when the message is clear and simple and we know we heard it correctly. Instead, save it for when someone is clearly in distress, when there is confusion about what is being said, or when you or the other person has become triggered. It is especially useful when we are triggered because it slows down our reactivity by reflecting and asking questions. We activate our curiosity and become more present which will make us less likely to tumble into the rapids.

I remember one evening when I found myself in a very triggering conversation with Kristin who happened to be my political, cultural and ideological opposite. I was living away from my home during a six-month consulting project and sharing a home with Kristin and a few others. Conversations between myself and Kristin up to this point had been polite and cordial, but this evening was different. She made a flippant comment that clashed with deep-set values of mine and I found my blood beginning to boil. I was completely triggered by what she said and was about to respond by arguing, discounting her point of view, and questioning her facts, but thankfully I stopped myself. I realized this situation presented a perfect opportunity for me to "walk my talk." If I truly believe that listening does not have to include agreement, then I could listen with openness and curiosity and try to contain my defensiveness. I decided to practice looping with Kristin.

I reflected back to her what I understood her to be saying and the values and concerns that I sensed were underneath her words. I kept asking her if I had captured accurately what she meant and how she felt. And what

was really hard, I refrained from getting on my soapbox and spouting my own views. (I also needed to work with my breathing to calm my nervous system) It wasn't easy but every time I reflected back to her what I thought she meant, she emphatically responded "exactly." This went on for a while. The next morning, she said to me "Denise, that was a great conversation last night, keep talking to me!"

I have reflected on this conversation often, not because we changed each other's minds or built a close relationship. We did not. Instead, it was a moment in time that helped me to experience just how important the skill of looping can be, especially when listening across wide differences. In that moment I found I was able to transform resistance (mine) and allow Kristin to hear her thoughts reflected back to her with respect. I also gained more understanding as to why Kristen believed the way that she did – even though I still vehemently disagreed with her argument.

This ebb and flow from speaker to listener is powerful because it helps the speaker gain even more refinement about their message by hearing it played back. The linguist Gregory Bateson said, "It takes two to understand one." Just like there is a building of strength when two rivers meet and join to become one stream, there is a deepening of understanding when we come together as listener and speaker. We need each other to excavate the truth that may be lying just underneath and between our words.

Practice: *With a colleague, friend, or family member, practice listening for both content and emotion. Use looping skills to ensure that you heard them correctly. Try to listen under the words to hear intentions, fears, and hopes. Keep reflecting back until you receive acknowledgement that you heard them accurately. If not, go for a round two.*

Sometimes, though, you may not be ready to respond to what you are hearing, and it may take time to process or let their words sink in. Here, you can then say something like, "I'm hearing what you are saying, and I'd like to sit with it and then get back to you, if that's all right. It's a lot for me to take

in right now.” Advocate for a little extra time, but definitely provide a specific time when you will follow up.

And then there are times where absolutely no commentary or response is required. When someone is in deep emotional pain, just the quiet act of listening may be the most generous, powerful, and kind act you can offer.

Listening with Heart

As I thought of someone in my life who beautifully modeled generous listening, the image of Joanne Martin Braun came to mind. Joanne is an organizational trainer and senior teacher within Shambhala, an international meditation organization. I have known her for many years and have appreciated her presence and kindness in my life.

On numerous occasions as her student, I was witness to her remarkable listening skills. I remember a woman in a large group training who took up an enormous amount of airtime with her constant criticisms, unhappiness and interruptions. Many of us in the group found her frustrating and we felt captive to her constant complaining. After a particularly contentious morning session, we all wondered what kind of jiu jitsu Joanne had performed. When this person returned after a private meeting with Joanne, she was calm, open, and surprisingly engaged.

When I mentioned this example, Joanne smiled in recognition. She shared that in order to be a good listener, she is always trying to “hold space,” which she describes as a “body and environmental thing.” When I asked her what she does, she said that she gets very quiet. I even noticed myself becoming quieter and calmer as she spoke to me with her unwavering gaze.

This quality of holding space, I hadn’t thought of in relation to strong listening skills before, but the more I thought about it, the more important it seemed.

Holding space takes the role of a witness, someone who validates another’s emotional state while staying present with their own. Holding space is creating a heartfelt container, listening without shaming, judging, lecturing,

or problem-solving. I sensed this might be what Joanne offered to this person in our group to help her shift so significantly.

“Of course, I get hooked just like everyone else,” Joanne said. “You really can’t develop your listening skills without getting hooked. It’s this recognition of getting hooked that is actually part of listening, otherwise you are always trying too hard to control everything, which is really the opposite of presence and listening.” Joanne said. She also recognizes that it’s not always possible to be present every moment, “But we can still be compassionate and we do this by stretching our heart.”

By holding space, Joanne listened with all her senses and it was this eye to eye, heart to heart connection that allowed this person to feel seen and heard, I imagine. Daniel Siegal calls this “felt” experience our sixth sense. It looked like magic to the rest of us, but she was using her “sixth sense” – and listening with her heart!

Holding space

Practice: *Hold space with someone in your life who needs to share a difficult challenge, and is in emotional distress. Create an environment of trust and psychological safety by using the following guidelines:*

- *Become quiet. Let go of any agenda and be fully present to the listener and also with yourself – with your own feelings.*
- *Listen for feeling words. Notice tone, cadence and volume.*
- *Observe their body language, facial expression, and eyes.*
- *Ask yourself, “If I were having their same experience, how might I be feeling?”*
- *Listen from your heart, and let go of any need to problem-solve.*

“The success of language in conveying information is highly overrated,” says philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. People often code their messages so that real meaning can be masked. People also beat around the bush. By focusing on the cues listed above and checking in with the person, you

are more likely to deepen the conversation and hear/see/feel meaning under their words. When our listening does not include feelings, we miss a lot!

SECTION 3: Perspective Taking

Listening to Self

As I explore the power of listening, I return to the realization that it begins with self. Before engaging in dialogue with another, especially in what may turn into a hard conversation, it starts with the first person inquiry. We need to start with “what is going on with me?”

Recently, after experiencing an angry interaction with an old friend that challenged our many decades of friendship, my friend invited me to join her at a retreat center in northern California. We were going to repair our relationship in this tranquil setting.

From the outset, our connection felt “off.” At one point, I was sitting beside a creek with the ever-present sound of the water to calm my spirit (*Blue Mind*.) The setting allowed me to quiet down enough to hear my own voice. I was experiencing an undercurrent of tension between us that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

An undercurrent is a type of water current that moves below the surface. This accurately describes the quality of discomfort I was feeling. It was a feeling of walking on eggshells; careful, watchful and not fully able to fully relax – even though I was in a beautiful setting. As I sat by the river, I could explore the situation more calmly.

I wondered if there had been something I might have said or done to annoy or offend her. As I reflected more, I remembered her angry reaction that I experienced not too long before our trip and wondered if this might be underneath the discomfort I was feeling.

I needed more insight and to bring attention to what was going on with me, which no one else could really help. I’m a journaler and a coach, so I investigated by journaling and coaching myself with the following questions to see if I could become clearer:

“I” Perspective

- What is my perception of the situation? What story am I telling about what is going on? Notice that I said “story?”
- What am I feeling? What sensations am I aware of in my body?
- How is this situation impacting me?

By taking this time to explore, I bring more awareness to the table. Daniel Siegel explains in his book *The Mindful Brain* that “we need to be attuned to our own internal states in order to attune to others.”

This rich investigative work is an inside job. It starts with our own perceptual home base. Our personal take on any situation is uniquely ours alone. According to lore, the ancient Greeks recognized the importance of self-awareness and inscribed at the temple of Apollo at Delphi the statement “Know thyself.”

The problem for many of us, is that we are not trained in the subtle and not so subtle states of our emotions and physical messages. How do we decipher all the swirling, streaming, and surfing thoughts, feelings, and sensations when we are disturbed? Even to be able to respond to the question, “How are you feeling?” requires careful observation, investigation, and emotional literacy.

This work interests me, so I walk around with a list of Plutchok’s Emotion Wheel in my purse. (See Appendix) Am I feeling fearful or apprehensive? Is it annoyance or anger? They are different in their levels of intensity and require different responses. But what other feelings exist? Rarely, is there just one feeling. Learning to label what we feel gives us the information we will need to communicate authentically. It also helps us to relax our nervous system during or after a stressful conversation.

Few of us have ever been trained in decoding our emotional state. Yet, if I want to be open to others, I must first open to myself. I need to recognize my patterns, my emotions, my actions—and my reactions. For those of us who choose to become self-aware, this investigative digging is necessary. Our emotions provide critical data that allow us to see options and make choices.

When we’re caught in emotional reactivity, it is difficult to listen effective-

ly, either with others or with ourselves. It was Pema Chödrön, the Buddhist teacher who taught me that the best and the quickest way to interrupt emotional intensity and let go of the story line is to focus on the present moment.

Our breath is the most accessible tool for most of us. Just the immediacy of our breath brings us to presence, although, as mentioned in the last chapter, anything sensory will do. The trick is to keep ditching the story line or we will keep getting reactivated. That's what I was doing, when sitting by the river.

“We” Perspective

It was important to check things out with my friend before going too deep into my own process. There's only so far that I can go in understanding the situation from my own perspective. I have to step outside my first person frame of reference to see how the other person perceives the situation, otherwise it is too easy to create stories and make assumptions. I needed a 2-way conversation to check things out.

My goal was to ask a few big, open-ended questions and then just listen. We need multiple perspectives to try to understand what is going on underneath the surface.

I have discovered the best questions typically begin with the words “what” and “how,” because they yield the freshest material. My friend and I met a few days after returning from our retreat. I shared my experience of the tension I felt between us and asked:

- How would you describe our time together?
- How did you feel we were connecting?
- What would you have liked more of, and less of during our time together?

When we listen with heart and curiosity, we shine the mirror so that we get a clearer reflection of what may really be going on. The inside (our thoughts, feelings) and outside (their perspective) come together for more clarity and understanding. Although we typically know our own experience,

we can be surprised by the impact our behavior has on others or how others may perceive the very same situation.

My friend seemed generally confused by my questions. “I thought we had a wonderful time together,” she said. Upon further reflection, she said, “It seemed like you wanted to talk more than I did. I am used to spending time there by myself.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. How could I have experienced such a strong reaction when she felt everything was great? Was I reading the whole situation wrong? Much later, she admitted that something I had said and done in the past had really hurt her even though she thought she was over it. She admitted that it might have been lingering and affected our interaction although she wasn’t consciously aware of it at the time. The undercurrent was palpable to me, but not so much with my friend.

Undercurrents

An undercurrent is a sense we feel that there is something going on under the surface that is not being said. We often feel it as an internal pull that tells us that others’ behavior and speech are just not in sync.

Here are a few approaches for clearing the air when you feel undercurrents of tension.

- I am feeling some tension between us, do you also feel it?
- Do we need to talk?
- Is there something bothering you?
- Is there something I may have done to hurt you?

It is important to appreciate that the tension you feel may have little or nothing to do with you. Of course, it is always helpful to understand what might be going on with the other person but sometimes people are not ready(or interested) in processing with you what they’re feeling – or even in touch to know what it is. There is also a timing element to everything, and

sometimes people are not yet ready to take what is inside them out into the light to explore. Nevertheless, we can still hone our listening, sensing and observation skills. We can collect data (all feelings are data) and refrain from making interpretations or jumping to conclusions.

“It” Perspective

When we explore third person inquiry, we become objective, even detached. We share observable and specific data and this allows us to point to something we can both see or remember. With my friend in our conversation (although much later) we identified probable causes for the undercurrent of tension. We reflected back on a few specific events which had created hurt feelings. This made sense to both of us – even though she was not aware she had still been holding on to this hurt.

When we listen closely to what is underneath words, we discover deeper meaning. When we notice an undercurrent of tension it typically comes from small almost imperceptible movements that we may not even consciously be aware of that we see or hear. But we can learn to hone our observation skills which will help us strengthen our ability to listen underneath. We learn to listen with our ears to hear shifts and nuances in tone and tempo. We listen with our eyes for facial expression and body language. We notice when others tap their foot, clench their fist, when their eyes cloud over, or they blink back tears.

What others express with body language may tell us more than anything that comes out of their mouth. Interestingly, the Chinese symbol for listening incorporates the ears, eyes, and heart. St. Benedict talks about the “ears of the heart.” This is what I believe that Joanne was referring to when she spoke about holding space.

SECTION 4: Listening at Work

Listening skills are now gaining increased appreciation in the work world. In fact, listening skills are emerging as a core workplace competency,

especially for leaders. Research tells us that one out of four leaders has a listening deficit, according to the Harvard Business Review “Discipline of Listening, 2012.” Poor listening has become one of the primary reasons that many careers derail or work relationships fall apart. More and more business journals provide articles on how to improve this important skill set.

A Reluctant Listener

I coached a high school principal, whom I will call Mona. Mona was not succeeding in her role, even though she possessed outstanding knowledge about instruction, budgets, and student behavior. When asked, she assessed her listening skills as “outstanding.” In contrast, when I interviewed her staff, teachers, and colleagues they described her as “aloof, dismissive and often felt stonewalled, disrespected, and judged by her.” They did not feel she listened or even really cared about their feelings.

When I asked how she knew that she was a good listener, Mona responded that she was an excellent problem-solver and mediator and could quickly identify solutions to complex problems. Knowing how bright she was, I didn’t doubt that for a minute. But then I asked her if she thought others felt “heard” by her listening. Her puzzled look provided the answer.

Our coaching focused primarily on listening skills. She and I practiced together, where instead of responding immediately to my questions, she reflected back what she thought she heard. We practiced looping. She began to understand that her listening lacked empathy, openness, and curiosity. Even though she was curious about the facts, she wasn’t interested in anything else, especially when hearing others talk about their feelings.

Mona felt she could quickly assess any problem and find its solution, which was what she believed listening was all about. She didn’t appreciate what else was available if she explored what was underneath the words. In essence, her cup was already full. As a strong analytic, she discounted, dis-identified, and rationalized her own feelings, instead trusting data and her intellect over what she described as the “squishiness” of feelings. She described those who became emotional as being “immature.” Sadly, by not

caring about feelings, she was also missing a lot of data!

My client's willingness to practice paid off once she became convinced that listening to emotions would help her to be a more effective leader and could provide useful data. But she also began to genuinely appreciate the value of feelings, and began to appreciate how they could help her to connect with others in a more open and nonjudgmental way.

Towards the end of our coaching relationship, her demeanor became warmer, her emails to me were less transactional and more personal. She even began ending her emails with "Warmly, Mona" (so different from her original terse and matter of fact style.) Her colleagues noticed a change, and she started to build more trusting collegial relationships. Teachers also began coming to her for support, and she was invited onto a coveted leadership council. Her superintendent was delighted and recommended moving her to a larger and more challenging school district.

Mona had discovered the power of her emotions in listening, which helped her to be more inspiring, insightful, and ultimately a much more effective leader! Her primary personality remained quite private but in her willingness to become more open and adaptable she clearly modeled riverlogic!

Here's one last tool to put into your listening toolkit:

WAIT – Why Am I Talking?

Sometimes, we just need to stop talking. I have this acronym from Ron Siegal posted over my desk: "WAIT—Why am I talking?" If I want to hear from another perspective, then I need to be silent.

Not silent in a way that is absent, passive, or passive aggressive, but silent in a way that is focused and engaged. This is a greatly underestimated source of power as a listening partner, as a leader, as anyone who wishes to become a strong communicator.

We are encouraged in our culture to talk – and much less to listen. Many of us are uncomfortable with silence, so we fill the space. We barely allow silence to arise before we jump in. But if we could allow pregnant pauses, we may be surprised at what happens. The term "pregnant" makes sense because

below the surface, there is growing life and substance. If we could wait and not take up all the air space, the wisdom and insights of others could emerge. Some of the best ideas come from a long, long pause. As a coach, facilitator, and mediator, I have come to enjoy those moments where people start to squirm a bit. Then if I wait quietly and patiently, often the most powerful insights and ideas emerge.

In order to remember to pause, we can coach ourselves, saying:

- Let them talk
- Slow down there
- Suspend your judgments
- Respect what they have to say
- Take a few breaths
- Empty your cup
- Listen for what they care about; their intentions, their values, their hopes
- Wonder what they might be feeling in this moment

Listening is so much more than words. It takes skill, stamina, and presence to listen underneath to feelings, to listen past our filters, to listen to what is going on in our bodies and to track what is going on in the environment. We listen for what Senge calls the “essence – for who someone is underneath the noise.” We take our cue from the speaker; listening to them and not to our own internal chatter. And the more we can empty our cup (an intentional practice) the easier it becomes to listen.

Carl Rogers says, “It is astounding how elements that seem insoluble become soluble when someone is listening. How confusions that seem irremediable, turn into relatively clear, flowing streams when one is heard.” That is what is possible with generous listening: We can transform the resistance into flow in our conversational spaces. Next, we will explore how presence and listening skills can support us in problem-solving when we find ourselves in challenging situations.

Chapter Summary

- When we recognize that we are stuck in our cognitive biases and no longer listening to each other, we can practice pausing, quieting down. We can choose to interrogate our biases by asking if they are really true.
- Mindfulness practices and “emptying our cup” allows us to listen with openness and curiosity, and free from our biases.
- Learning to practice looping, we reflect back what we think we heard, and ask if we heard it accurately.
- We learn to be emotion detectors, able to read the waters, much like a river guide. Our emotions provide clues that help us understand what is going on underneath the surface.
- Learning how to ask ourselves open-ended questions prepares us to engage in a challenging conversation with others. The best questions that yield new information typically start with “what” and “how.”
- With deeper listening, we foster more insight into ourselves and others. When we listen actively, we help each other discover the wisdom within.
- There is more likelihood for flow and connection between parties when listening is open and generous. Listening is how humans, as different as we are, can better understand each other.
- “It takes two to understand one,” means that we need each other to become better communicators. There is an ebb and flow—listening and inquiry with each person supporting the other to understand.



CHAPTER THREE

Look For and Move Through Openings



RIVULET

A small river or stream.



*A river cuts through rock, not because of its power,
but because of its persistence.*

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

Water consistently finds cracks or openings. If rocks are porous, the water moves into and through the rocks. If it can't find a path around it, it flows over and eventually breaks down even the hardest of rocks to make an opening. Tributaries meet at the fork and connect, and the water then keeps finding the openings, moving and building in strength in its relentless effort to reach its ultimate goal—the sea.

While watching water move over and around the rocks at the Yuba River near Grass Valley, California, I first began musing on how humans can learn to be more like water and look for and move through openings when we find ourselves in a tight spot, especially in relation to our interpersonal challenges.

How can we discover solutions (openings) when we are stuck in a conflict? How can we find commonalities across our differences? How can we find creative approaches to our long-standing problems? How can we see the heart in someone who has been harsh towards us? How can we find these openings, even if it is just a crack? Because once we discover the crack, we might be able to open this crack a bit wider by activating our curiosity.

I have noticed that certain people seem more capable of extricating themselves from tight, challenging situations—they find openings—while others seem to stay continuously stuck. I wanted to understand what they are doing differently. I decided to ask someone skilled in consistently finding her

way through very tight spots and so I went back to Kit, my river guide friend, to ask her how she navigates through tight spots on the river.

When I asked her how she finds her openings, she looked puzzled, not exactly sure what I was asking. I explained that she must have to make choices to find her way safely down and through the rapids. “I call these choices you make, an opening,” I said. She nodded and then answered, “First, when I’m in the rapids, I pause and look out and all I am seeing are rocks everywhere.” She called this a “boulder garden.” “But then I start to look for micro-solutions. I see green water, where I know there is a pool below. I start to distinguish places I can go where I can move through, but sometimes I just choose the “chicken route” where I know I can get down without having to challenge myself too much.”

In reflecting on what Kit was saying, I heard certainty in her words that she knows she will absolutely find her way through the rapids, even in the most challenging runs. This chapter will highlight strategies that can help us to look for and move through openings when we find ourselves in a tight spot, especially in regard to our relationship challenges. And what I heard underneath Kit’s words, was her belief that there is always a way. There are harder approaches and then there is the “chicken route” but she knew she had options.

SECTION 1: It’s a Mindset!

The river guide knows that there is always a way to get through; often many ways. When she pays close attention, she starts to notice the subtleties in the water. With a deliberate pause, she carefully evaluates her choices. By slowing down, she expands her senses. At first, all she sees is danger and obstacles, but having developed a practiced eye, she is able to zero in on micro-solutions and finds an approach that matches her current comfort level. She has built keen observation skills that allow her to see these openings and options. It is a combination of sensory awareness skills which allows her to know how to navigate the rapids, but it is also a mindset, a firm belief that she will find a way.

“Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you are right,” explains Henry Ford. He is stating that we are not victims of our circumstances, but instead, we create our own reality moment to moment with our mindset.

In terms of mindset, people tend to fall on opposite poles. On one pole are those who are open and optimistic to possibilities – who live their life with a cup-half-full mentality, and on the opposite pole are those who display a more pessimistic outlook, seeming to expect the worst outcome and holding a cup-half-empty mentality. “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty,” says Sir Winston Churchill. Although we may lean towards one pole, it is also a spectrum so we will each have moments of both.

The river guide paired her optimism additionally with practical realism – which falls somewhere in the middle. She took note of the dangers and obstacles before making her decision. But she didn’t let these obstacles stop her.

My nature is to lean towards the cup-half-full approach, but not in the annoying, overly cheerful way where I turn anything difficult into something positive. It’s more an expectation that I will find an opening, so then, I do. I often hear from friends and family, “You are so good at manifesting – you always seem to always find a way.” I also suspect they see me as unrealistic since I am not appropriately daunted by some of the challenges which would cause them much more worry. It also means that I tend to live with more risk than most. But my half-full attitude comes in handy when searching for homes in a tight real estate market, uncovering creative work options, and especially in holding the belief that people can resolve even their most challenging problems – which serves me well being a mediator and a coach.

The Mayo Clinic defines optimism as “the belief that good things will happen to you and negative events are temporary setbacks to overcome.” The optimist is always on the lookout for what is possible, which increases their pool of choices. The pessimist sees the worst aspect of a situation and will see this as permanent (without options). “This is just the way it is. There’s just not enough to go around. It will never work,” is the negative, or sometimes hopeless voice of the pessimist. Whatever perspective we take becomes self-fulfill-

ing. “Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right!”

Please do not think that we all need to ignore hardships and just wear a happy face. In fact, I have real suspicion of people who refuse to explore the shadow sides of their nature or examine the potentially dangerous aspects of a situation. But even when things look impossible, an optimistic outlook allows you to keep exploring and prompts you to do something different; maybe to try something that seems counter-intuitive. Even a crisis provides opportunities if you are willing to look for the learning. The voice of growth mindset keeps asking “what am I learning and “what could I tweak or do differently?”

Dr. Martin Seligman, researcher, educator, and father of the field of positive psychology believes that pessimists can develop what he calls “learned optimism” by challenging their thinking and tackling their negative self-talk. The same is true for optimists, who can also learn to become more objective and neutral. I was sitting in a cafe writing this chapter listening to two older men in a lively discussion next to me. I couldn’t help overhearing their conversation. One man said, “I am not an optimist, I am a possibilist.” I had to look it up, and yes it is really a word. One definition is “a belief that possible things exist.” (I don’t wish to quibble, but this sounds pretty optimistic to me!)

The following exercise provides a way to shift perspectives in order to widen your thinking. It can also help to interrupt your “go-to” style so that you can start to think differently. Diversity of opinions helps us all to think more clearly. Expect that some of these perspectives may feel uncomfortable—this is a definite clue that you are stretching out of your comfort zone. You can practice this in a group, with your team, or just by yourself.

Think Differently: The Six Hats

Developed by Edward De Bono, this exercise can be used for any group or individual who wants to explore different points of view when addressing an issue or problem. It promotes collaboration and creativity and can help us shift out from rocklogic thinking.

Here’s how it works: Identify a problem or challenge. Distribute six paper

hats, or just paper with the color written on it, along with the descriptions. The instructions are to stay firmly in your own lane when in each particular point of view:

Black Hat: Negative, Pessimist

Point out what's wrong or what could go wrong.

Yellow Hat: Optimistic (but not unrealistic)

Explore possibilities, "What if...what else?"

White Hat: Neutral, objective (Realist)

Ask: "What are the facts here?"

Red Hat: Emotional

Share gut feelings, hunches, intuitions.

Green Hat: Intuitive, creative, possibilities

Think "outside the box." Ask questions and become curious to explore the many aspects of a problem.

Blue Hat: Cool, organized, controlled

Define the problem clearly.

I have used this exercise both alone and in groups many times to think clearly through problems. I live and breathe the yellow, red, and green hats, but realize that the white hat (realist), black (negative), and blue hat (cool, organized, controlled) are less familiar for me and that they open up options that I might not naturally consider. By putting on these hats, I slow down and am able to think differently. In fact, the black hat of the pessimist has some surprising benefits for me. By imagining possible negative outcomes, this perspective helps me to develop strategies should they be needed. It can also provide more protection from disappointment. (Taking a negative

perspective is not a problem for me since I really have no danger of ever losing my optimistic nature!)

I did this exercise recently when choosing whether or not to postpone my Grand Canyon rafting trip. I really wanted to go, but since the COVID 19 pandemic was still raging, I chose the blue hat and made my decision from a cool and practical position to postpone my trip based on objective facts, and the black hat by looking at what could go wrong if I chose to go during the pandemic.

Although these different perspectives can help you to think differently about a tough challenge, this exercise will not work when you have become so physically triggered by an interpersonal conflict that you can no longer even think straight. Few of us receive any training in knowing how to navigate the emotional waters of conflict, which makes it really hard to be rational and really easy to spiral out into survival thinking.

When we're in survival thinking, our nervous system becomes so overwhelmed and protective that our focus becomes only what helps or hurts me. As our fear thoughts swirl, we move more and more into a defensive stance. So just when we need creative thinking the most, our perspective and options tighten and narrow. Here, we will need resources to help us to interrupt this pattern. The best practice that I know, and you will hear me say this again and again, happens to be “the pause.”

SECTION 2: Pattern Interrupt

When overwhelmed, we tend to look for routine responses—grasping for old solutions that might have worked in our past, but are often not particularly helpful in the present. What if we could learn from the river guide?

The river guide takes a few moments to pause before making her choice to acknowledge the situation she is in. This proves to be a very good move whenever we find ourselves in a tight space. Instead of panicking we acknowledge that “yes, here we are in a tight space.” Pausing to slow down helps us to become more present to our surroundings and with ourselves. We

start talking to ourselves, which brings our frontal cortex back in action and slows the cascading of stress hormones in our system. Dan Siegel writes, “It’s the ability to pause before you react that gives the space of mind in which to consider various options and choose the most appropriate.”

The new brain research finds that our minds make unlikely connections between ideas, experiences, and memories when we rest or pause from intense focus. In the state of relaxed attention, the problem or challenge still takes up brain space but not necessarily on the front burner. This relaxed attention is the intersection between mental focus and mindfulness. Notice how really good ideas come to you in unexpected ways; on a walk, in the shower, even in a dream. (One of the case studies that I share in this book suddenly appeared while I was out riding my bike.)

When I say “pause,” it can be as brief as ten seconds, just stopping to take three deep breaths. It is when we break our intense focus that we can start to notice information and signals in our environment that we had not seen initially. We start to see the situation from new angles, and completely differently from what we had originally perceived. More openings become available as we widen our visual and emotional sphere.

As our perspective shifts, we start thinking more clearly, and not only about ourselves. We become more curious. We look out and ask, “is this our best option here?” and, “what are a few more options that I might try?” What might be another way? If none of the options are ideal, we select the least bad one. Now we are no longer stuck in a tight spot—we are moving! Pausing and perspective taking is a particularly good move if we want to develop our riverlogic!

Are You a Soldier or a Scout?

In Warren Berger’s *The Book of Beautiful Questions*, he shares a metaphor offered by Julia Galef, co-founder of the Center for Applied Rationality. She asks: “Am I a soldier or a scout?” She explains that the mindset of a soldier is to **protect and defend** against the enemy whereas the job of the scout is **to seek out and understand**. Scouts are always on the lookout for openings.

They become curious and ask good questions so they can help uncover new information and help the speaker explore their problems in new ways. Then they listen carefully. Sometimes, within this question-and-answer session, surprising openings appear.

I regularly use the questions below in my coaching practice. For example, I have been working with a very intelligent, data-driven senior leader who continually defers to others before making decisions, even small ones. He is new in his senior leadership role and since his decisions impact a lot of people, he worries he will make the wrong decision. He sometimes feels completely paralyzed or after making a decision, he second guesses himself ad nauseam. By learning to trust his gut, by asking himself questions, he found that he can be more decisive—even innovative—much to his surprise.

Practice: *Apply these questions either to yourself or in support of others to help explore solutions when stuck in a tight spot or to help when taking on something you think is not possible.*

- *What are one or two baby steps you can take?*
- *What's one option you have not thought of yet?*
- *Think of your challenge and ask, "If I couldn't fail, what strategies would I employ?"*
- *Then my all-time favorite question, "What else is possible?"*
- *Ask "**Where** are the openings?" not "**Is** there an opening?"*

Being a scout is not just for professional coaches or mediators. We can help each other to think more clearly and creatively. Remember that expression from the last chapter that "*it takes two to understand one?*" In the spirit of creating flow we need each other to act as sounding boards and to help us unpack our own thoughts. And we use our looping skills to make sure that we hear and understand others' perspectives as they were intended. We can all become better scouts with each other, but sometimes we may also need outside help.

When disagreements spiral out of control, it may be useful for a neutral

party to step in to mediate. If we end up in mediation, the mediator plays the role of scout, whereas if we end up in court, the lawyers and judge play the role of soldier since they are there to protect and defend. As long as goodwill has not been completely destroyed, starting out with mediation provides a low intervention and preventative approach. It also tends to be less expensive and usually less antagonistic!

Mediators listen to understand what matters most to both parties. They listen for underlying interests and values. Since they know that conflict is related to unmet needs they see it as their job to scout out and help to uncover these needs. And since they are not personally affected by the conflict itself, they are better able to listen from a place of neutrality. Knowing that solutions come from people thinking together, they ideally support both parties into moving into healthy dialogue while also encouraging active listening.

Being trained in the concept of win/win, certain mediators explore creative approaches that not only resolve conflict but can potentially transform it. Listening closely for openings or agreements, they encourage each party to share their truth, and then listen carefully so they can hear how their same situation is viewed from another perspective. They help to identify and remove the debris or whatever is damming up the river of communication so that there can be some movement and hopefully help parties to reach agreements. But beyond a short-term solution, they work to explore what is underneath the conflict, and address long-term change by supporting the parties to increase their skills.

A Mediation With Three Sisters

Several years ago, I mediated a dispute between three middle-aged sisters who were caught in a serious conflict over issues in dividing their parents' estate. In somewhat of a cosmic joke, their parents had left the three sisters two homes as their primary inheritance. The problem was that two of the sisters were currently living with their respective families in each of these homes. One happened to be coast-side and worth millions, whereas the other home was more modest. In order to distribute the estate equally, it meant that these sisters would need

to move out of their homes so they could sell the properties. The third sister did not wish to kick the other two out but didn't know any other way.

By the time they showed up for mediation, they were at a complete standstill, and their communication had become so fraught they were barely speaking to each other. When they did speak, it was not pretty. Their communication was filled with profanity, blame, and sarcasm. Their negative body language added further insult with the rolling of their eyes or derisive laughter when each other spoke. They were stuck in zero-sum thinking, feeling there was not enough to go around, which on the surface appeared to be somewhat true.

According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of conflict is “mental struggle resulting from incompatible needs, drives, wishes or internal demands.” These three sisters definitely fit the definition. From the outset there seemed to be a clash in needs. One sister wanted to sell all the properties, another didn't and the third sister was unsure of what she wanted. It left each of them feeling threatened, righteous – and stuck in a power struggle. (rocklogic)

After listening to each of them describe their situation, I heard something that each seemed to agree on. Each of them mentioned in their own way that their parents would be deeply saddened if they saw their daughters caught in such conflict. At their core, they each wanted to be a good person and in better times they had shared a fun and playful relationship with each other. What was also abundantly clear was that they also shared the same quirky humor, and even in the midst of conflict they could crack each other up. Underneath their caustic remarks and constant sniping, I sensed mutual respect and connection. I heard and saw my openings!

When I shared my reflections, they grudgingly agreed that they cared deeply about each other but didn't know how to stop pushing each other's buttons or how they could resolve this situation. They agreed they needed help. Although they came to mediation to figure out how to divide up their parent's estate, they also realized they had come because they needed significant help in how to communicate with each other. They all agreed that they didn't like who they were becoming, it didn't feel good to be at such odds, and

they didn't feel good about themselves.

As we worked together, each time I noticed one of them take a jab, I encouraged them to pause, to notice what was happening, and then to remember their intention and what they cared about in each other. We ended up pausing a lot during our first hour together. But the result was that they began to build awareness and even started to self correct.

They recognized that they had a lot of work ahead in order to learn how to communicate in a civil manner. But we had found our opening (something they each cared about) and this began to shift and lighten their communication. There was now more ease in the way they spoke to each other. They were finally ready to get down to work around the estate. I encouraged them to use the whiteboard in the office to start generating ideas as to how they could divide up the estate.

Interestingly, once we began this process, the one sister who lived in the expensive coastal home suddenly blurted out that since her kids were soon moving out of the house, she would consider selling. This news came as a bombshell to the other two sisters who had not seen this as even a remote possibility! From this point on, they began to make headway in figuring out how to move forward.

I watched them leave the office laughing, joking, and poking fun at each other. They had transformed the resistance and their communication was now flowing—at least for the moment!

If they can each remember to pause, stop their destructive patterns in their tracks, and remember to focus on what they care about, they will be able to stay in relationship with each other. They were encouraged to keep remembering how much they cared for each other and to continue appreciating each other's quirky humor. Even in our short time together they each had become more open, adaptable and willing to listen to each other. They had discovered the qualities of riverlogic!

These lessons are also true for any of us who find ourselves stuck in destructive patterns. If we can remember to listen for what we each care about, we may be able to stop destructive patterns in their tracks. Another great

quality, modeled by the three sisters, is access to their humor. When we laugh, we relax, and when we relax, we are more likely to hear, see, and feel the openings when they appear. But we also need the intention to move out of our rocklogic positions and be willing to explore new options. Not everyone comes with this intention!

The river is motivated to flow, that's why it finds the openings. The same can be true for us.

Yes, and...

When two strangers meet and feel motivated to connect, they become scouts on the lookout for commonalities “Where are you from? What do you do for work? What are you reading?” When traveling we may ask, “Where is home?” Notice what happens as we find those things that we share in common. Our conversation becomes more animated, maybe playful, sometimes deep. The cadence shifts: it is faster, warmer, even louder – there is more laughter. And, of course, most of us have also found ourselves stuck in situations with people where it is a painful struggle to find anything to talk about. We find our conversation is stilted, awkward—perhaps even unbearable. In those moments, we have a choice: We can give up or choose to persist and keep scouting for connection points. I happen to hold the belief that there is always a bridge if we choose to hang in there. It is harder when we hold a bias about the other, but bridges are almost always available. The following is a lesson in persistence that I have learned from studying theater improvisation:

The primary principle of improvisation is “**Yes, and...**” Whatever is offered to you, no matter how ridiculous, you take it, build on it, and offer it back. That is the primary rule. One person says, “Elephants make really great playmates.” You say, “**Yes and** (never “but”) they are really fun to play with, especially when they spray me with water from their trunks.” And they say, “**Yes, and** the showers are such fun, but I get so wet that whenever we play together, I have to wear my bathing suit.” OK, you get the idea. We keep building off each other.

This is also true in the rest of our lives where we are constantly giving and

being given “offers” which we can choose to take or block. Blocking an offer is pretty much ignoring the overture. Think about how we feel when we ask questions and receive only one-syllable responses, or worse, stony silence. Should we stop when it gets awkward, or is there another question that might yield more interest? If we believe there is always an opening, we may persist. We listen and look for a flicker and build on it. We become curious, stay patient, and listen closely. We are scouts and like the movement of water, we keep it moving.

Before sleep, I often reflect on the many offers that I had blocked during my day. Places where I could have inquired more but just didn’t, where I knew there was more to learn, and where I (or they) changed the subject and we quickly moved on. I see these blocks as a missed opportunity for deeper connection.

For example, I noticed a flicker across the face of my friend as she described her daughter’s intense anxiety issues that seemed to be getting worse through the pandemic. I regretted that I didn’t inquire more. When I was talking with a friend and asking her how she was, she said “OK” but I heard and saw something in her voice and body language that was not congruent with her words. She didn’t seem to want to talk about herself, but I still regretted not gently probing further.

Once we become aware we will start to notice the openings. But just because we notice it doesn’t mean we need to go in. Sometimes the timing is off and it might be best to just let it go. It is not realistic or even desirable for us to go through every opening we hear, but if we want to become more skilled as a communicator, it will happen in the openings.

■ PAUSE

Reflect on recent conversations with family, friends, staff, or colleagues. Is there a conversation that would merit a do-over? Were there openings in the conversation that might have allowed you to deepen your understanding if only you had asked about _____ but didn’t? It’s not too late for a do-over. You can revisit the conversation saying, “I remember

you saying _____. I wanted to ask more about it but we ran out of time, I would like to hear more if you are comfortable sharing” (or find your own words)

“Authentic Friending”

I taught a short workshop for youth aged fourteen to eighteen as part of a week-long camp in Northern California. After listening to the youth talk for a few days about their challenges making friends, I decided to create a workshop that I called “Authentic Friending” using the concept from social media. There were ten young people that signed up.

We all sat together in a circle and I asked for two volunteers to sit in the middle of our circle facing each other. I then asked them to begin to make a connection with each other as if they were meeting for the first time. The fourteen-year-old boy sat in front of a fifteen-year-old girl looking uncomfortable, with the rest of us in a circle around them. He began by asking her if she liked camp. She said “yes, she loved it”. He didn’t follow up on what she loved about camp. He then quickly switched and asked her where she went to school. She mentioned that she went to a private girls’ school. Immediately, he moved into yet another question, “What’s your favorite color?” It was starting to sound like an interrogation, and he was certainly not taking any of her offers. He was so focused on asking the questions, that he failed to really listen to any of her responses. The conversation wasn’t going anywhere, even though it could have.

I called a timeout and asked the young people assembled in the circle to share the offers they had heard. They all noticed that he had received several offers, but everyone agreed that the best one was that she went to a private school.

We talked about how much there was to explore with that response. He could have asked, “What’s the best part of going to an all-girl school?” or “What do you miss about not having boys around?” or “Do you feel better or less able to deal with boys, not having them as schoolmates?”

Any of these questions would help move them into a more intimate conversation. They have the opportunity to explore and learn from each other which can turn into a comfortable flow back and forth. When we use strong

open-ended questions we invite a deeper response, we show genuine interest, create understanding, and start to build rapport. We will notice it working because conversation then becomes fluid and easy. They are sharing with us – but we will need to listen, receive and build on their offers.

This is true in all kinds of communication—when we take and build on an offer, we create a bridge between ourselves and others. Sometimes these bridges open up all kinds of possibilities for connections and sometimes they lead nowhere.

Key components in listening for offers are **presence, curiosity, and persistence**. Presence allows you to listen closely, to relax, and notice tone and body language. Embedded in presence is also empathy, which demonstrates that you care about what they are saying. You demonstrate your interest by being curious and asking questions to better understand them, and with persistence you keep trying new avenues, especially if one does not work. The teenage boy was persistent, but he lacked presence and curiosity. He was also starting to become annoying!

The “Mother of All Interventions”

The **mother of all interventions** in mediation or really in any hard conversation, rests with our ability to acknowledge, validate, and legitimize another person’s point of view—even if we happen to disagree. This skill allows the other person to know that their thoughts, feelings and behavior are seen as coherent. They are able to relax because they feel seen, heard and respected. When someone feel respected, they may then provide you the space and opportunity to add your “AND” in a way that they are now willing to hear.

The process of legitimizing also provides needed ventilation to a heated exchange and can help to de-escalate the intensity of emotion with someone who has become seriously upset. You can acknowledge, validate and legitimize when others are activated, confused, even happy; really, whenever we sense strong emotions.

Here’s what it can sound like: (If we hear frustration) *“I can understand how frustrating it must have been to have been given so little direction when you*

were first hired,” or “It makes complete sense that you were so angry when your colleague threw you under the bus” or “I can hear how hard that was. From what you are describing it makes complete sense that you are feeling overwhelmed.” Ok, now you can add your “AND” which is your perspective on the situation.

When we validate, and legitimize, we are figuratively standing next to the person in order to see and feel the situation from their perspective. Of course if our reflection is off the mark, they will be sure to correct it.

Three steps:

1. Listen empathically
2. Validate emotion
3. Add “And”

Even with clumsy and unskillful attempts to connect, if our intention is to be a scout and to truly understand, the other person will often open up because they sense genuine interest and concern. The reason it works so well may be simply because when we acknowledge, validate, and legitimize we are demonstrating empathy, which at its essence is the ability to imagine what others are thinking and feeling. This is a surprisingly simple but powerful tool!

Micro expression

The river guide is on the lookout for micro-solutions. In relationships we identify emotions by looking for micro expressions. These tiny movements provide a potential opening in a conversation. Perhaps we see a fleeting smile, raised eyebrows, furrowed forehead or squinting of the eyes. “They can occur within a fraction of a second,” says Paul Ekman, the world expert in emotions and deception detection. “If you blink, you will miss it!” But if we pay close attention, we notice a flicker of involuntary facial movement, an emotion which has been suppressed but is being leaked unconsciously. According to Ekman, faces are the best indicators of a person’s emotion but we can also see a lot in body language when we become observant.

Whether overt or covert, by noticing these non-verbal tells in each other,

we are better able to read each other's emotional life. These micro expressions, often called the "window of the soul," become an opening. They provide a glimpse into what might be going on below the surface – which is not being shared with words and is often not even conscious.

As we share what we notice we help to make the invisible, visible. This can lead to a richer and more authentic connection if others are open to sharing with us emotionally. These observation skills are critically important for building our emotional intelligence – but we will never really truly know what is going on for someone else unless they choose to share it.

Practice: *Sit down with a colleague, friend, or family member. Allow yourself a generous amount of time. Ask them an open-ended question about something you know they care about: a project, their children, hobbies, an amazing vacation).*

You do not need to share what you are doing before you begin this conversation. Your goal is to notice three behavioral details that are specific and observable as they speak. For example, "You put your hand on your heart when you spoke about your son. I notice a lot of emotion in your voice." See if you can notice any micro expressions in their face. Share your observations and notice how this shifts the conversation.

By believing that there will always be an opening we are encouraged to persevere. The river never gives up. It is committed to completing its journey to the sea no matter how many obstacles it encounters along the way, and there will be many. Next, we learn how to work with forces, instead of fighting them to discover a path of least resistance and flow.

Chapter Summary

- Believing that there is always an opening is holding an optimistic perspective. By looking for micro-solutions we discover creative options.
- An optimistic view is a mindset, and even pessimists can learn to become optimistic.

LOOK FOR AND MOVE THROUGH OPENINGS

- We need presence to be able to see openings or new options. By pausing and taking a breath, we allow our nervous system to relax so that we begin to see possibilities. The pause provides the space for us to think and act differently.
- Sometimes it helps to shift perspectives to get unstuck and discover a new way of thinking. The Six Hats exercise allows you to take different perspectives for problem-solving.
- Depending on your mindset, whether you are a soldier or a scout, it will change your focus. The scout is seeking understanding, whereas the soldier is focused on protecting and defending. The scout uses questions to help you open up to new ideas.
- Open-ended questions encourage dialogue and connection and can uncover creative possibilities.
- Saying “yes, and” creates new possibilities. When we build on suggestions or offers, it allows conversation to flow. We can also block offers which essentially puts the brakes on conversation. It is always a choice.
- Being alert to micro expressions in body language can help to open up emotional insight and deepen the conversation.