# DEEP LISTENING

### “Explore Your Life’s Calling”: A Vocation for Life Retreat

April 2014, Spirit in the Desert, Carefree, Arizona

**Introduction**

Mary Rose O’Reilley, in her book *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice,* writesof the power of deep listening: “One can, I think, *listen someone into existence*, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish.” And in learning to listen well, one can also learn to be *listened to*, “to be able to stand being heard. It’s frightening because true attention… invites us to change.” She continues:

*Attention: deep listening. People are dying in spirit for lack of it. In [our] culture most listening is critical listening. We tend to pay attention only long enough to develop a counterargument; we critique the student’s or the colleague’s ideas; we mentally grade and pigeonhole each other….People often listen with an agenda, to sell or petition or seduce. Seldom is there a deep, openhearted, unjudging reception of the other. And so we all talk louder and more stridently and with a terrible desperation. By contrast, if someone truly listens to me, my spirit begins to expand.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

For these conversations,[[2]](#footnote-2) we’ll divide into pairs and take turns listening to each other explore substantive, potentially very “personal,” questions in depth. Listen to your partner carefully for the full time allotted, asking questions like the following and/or, if you choose, some others of your own. This is not intended to be primarily a two-way “conversation” (although there will of course be some natural “give-and-take”). Rather, devote all of your attention to your partner for the entire time, providing a safe, courageous space of attuned hospitality to whatever your partner wishes to share with you as s/he explores the landscapes into which the questions lead.

When the time is right, take a short break and then switch roles. The new listeners should again simply *listen* and *attend*, and the new speakers should use their turn to explore, however they wish, the terrain opened up for them by the questions. By the time you are finished, be sure to have an understanding with your partner about what you would like to remain confidential.

1. Please tell me about a key piece of the story of your life so far: what person or relationship, event or experience has been really important in your “story of self” and/or your “story of us?” What has that person, relationship, event, or experience taught you about who you are or what you have to offer to the world now?
2. What’s the larger “Story of now” to which your personal story connects and contributes? Where in your life – and in the world – do you see challenge? Hope? Choice? How do these affect how you “show up” in your life from day to day?
3. How do you typically respond to situations of waiting? Do you like to wait, or does it bother you – and why? When do you find time or create time to wait? What gift(s) can there be for you in waiting?
4. How about silence: is there Gift for you in silence, or is silence hard on you? For what do you need to listen, what voice/Voice do you need to hear, at this point in your life? How might you “turn down the volume” of your life so that you can hear and listen more deeply?
5. How would you describe your relationship with Time – for example, is it your “friend” or your “enemy?” A gift or a burden? Are you in control of your time, or does time control you? How do you tend to talk about the way you live in or with time: do you “spend” time, “kill” time? “make” time? “pass” the time? “take” time? “have” (or “not have”) time, “find” time? What might happen if you were to experiment with different ways of thinking and talking about time (e.g., “dwelling in” time, or “inhabiting” time)?
6. Among your many passions, commitments, obligations, and involvements right now, which are especially life-giving for you? How so? Which of them seem to be less life-giving – or even “life-sucking?” How so? Are there any that you might consider letting go or setting down in order to become more fully yourself, more fully able to be in the here-and-now, more fully alive? What would it take for you to be able to do that? What’s keeping you from doing so?
7. Perhaps similarly: What risks do you feel yourself being prodded to take in your life? Where is that (the “prodding”) coming from? What’s holding you back? When you hear the phrase, “Just go for it!” what is the “It” for you? What’s the worst thing that could happen if you were to “just go for it?” What’s the best thing that might happen? What step could you take that might make a *next* step possible (and the next, and the next…)?
8. What would you like your legacy to be (in your work, your family, your community – however you prefer to think of it)? How are you “living your legacy” now?
9. So, who are these times (in your life, and in the world) calling you to be, and what are they calling you to do? Author Gregg Levoy writes: *“The deep questions may not have singular answers but multitudes of them…[so] even the questions ought to be framed as if this were the case. Rather than asking ‘Who am I?’ we might ask, ‘In how many ways can I be myself?’ Rather than asking ‘Where is my place in the world?’ the question might be better put, ‘In how many ways can I experience a sense of belonging to the world?’”* What do you make of Levoy’s suggestion, of his way of asking these Big Questions?
10. What is a question or concern that seems to be tugging or whispering at the edge of your awareness these days?
11. What else would you like me to ask you? What is one question that nobody ever asks you – and you really wish they would?!

1. Mary Rose O’Reilley, *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998), pp. 17–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This exercise is influenced by, among others, Jim Keen’s “Lives of Commitment” workshop; Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994); Claudia Horwitz, *The Spiritual Activist: Practices To Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002); and Parker Palmer, *The Courage To Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)