

Chapter Four: The Serious Intention of Listening

I APPRECIATE THE PATIENCE of everyone who is still reading along on this exploration. There was a lot of necessary backstory to prepare for the real fun: The practical application of *Listening without Measuring*. Here we dive in to explore solutions, learning how to successively and productively UnMeasure. To kick that off, there's just a tiny additional moment of sharing I'll offer to smooth the path for the rest of our journey.

A Long Time Ago, in this galaxy, on this very planet, there was a guy named Moses who claimed to have heard a very specific message from an unseen presence called *I Am*.¹

"I Am" framed His conversation with the man, Moses, using a widely misunderstood term:

*Shema*²

Some modern religious cultures today translate it as "Hear", an inadequate decoding at best. A quick definition, based on its ancient Judaistic roots, follows:

Shema: An affirmation of God's singularity and kingship, its daily recitation is regarded by traditionally observant Jews as a biblical commandment.³

If you research its origins, Shema is both a command and verb which requires the full attention of the receiving listener and then expects a response. Not just any response, not just "uh huh", "okeydokey" or "Ten-four good buddy", but an unqualified surrendering of one's will and purpose, to another. Hebraic oral traditions and writings imply that whenever God wanted to get the attention of His "chosen people", this was the word He used. It was also the word He used when He wanted to emphasize that disobedience to whatever He was commanding, was an unhealthy option.

In subsequent chapters I'll drill further down into the depths of this command's meaning, but for now the best way to understand its importance is in context of its original Commander. Transliterated, it is best understood as follows:

"Hear exactly what I am telling you, do not misinterpret it. What I'm sharing with you is more important than anything anyone else you might want to listen to is saying. Do exactly what I am telling you to do without alteration. I am God; you are not. Do not forget what you have just heard me say, do not neglect to do what I have told you to do. Trust me, your wellbeing depends on it."

Now that may seem like a longwinded expansion on the definition, but this is by far the most imperative commandment word in all of scripture. Shema was, and is, serious stuff. Have you ever been to an orthodox Jewish home or synagogue? On the doorpost entering the threshold, you will most likely find fastened there, a small fitted capsule or box a bit smaller in size than an index finger. Upon entering and exiting the threshold, a devout believer will stoop to kiss the *mezuzah* in sincere reverence. Inside that container is actually a tiny scroll that bears the two most important commandments for any Jew, and Christian for that matter.⁴

¹ Exodus 3:13-14

² <https://www.alittleperspective.com/shama-to-hear-strongs-h8085/>. Transliterated spellings vary; Shema, Shama.

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-shema/>

⁴ Read Deuteronomy 6:4-8, Leviticus 19:16-16, Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:27 if you doubt me.

Paraphrased, the commandments read:

- **Love the Lord Your God with all your soul and all your heart and all your strength.**
- **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

These commandments are referenced in common by the word used to begin chapter 6, verse 4 of the book of Deuteronomy:

Shema

There is also a Greek word, Atenizo which is used in the same manner and where the English word *Attention*⁵ comes from. To say the least, if someone requests “Shema”, it is a meaning-filled moment. Someone who receives or rejects Shema is going to experience serious consequences on a magnitude we, in today’s “short-hand culture”, have difficulty grasping.

Suffice to say, if someone intends to “Shema” another, they had better be well prepared and of high authority in order to present their demand/command. Concurrently, the receiver of Shema had better think through and react with the utmost of respect and consideration toward the Shema “bestower”. All this because (if the bestower is indeed of high authority and purpose) the consequences will be life-creating; life-changing; or possibly even (in the case of refusing Shema) life-ending. If you read documents where Shema is invoked, it’s best to realize the parties were/are/should-be dead serious about what they are discussing. You have probably figured out by the lead-up of the first three chapters that Shema-invoked agreements have a name you are already familiar with:

Covenants

I would propose to you, and you are welcomed to argue, that Shema is the Great Covenant which all others gravitate toward. Therefore, Shema agreements and participation are not to be given or taken lightly. Moses knew this and by example, I’ve learned, if I ever personally encounter Shema, I need to pay attention.

So evolves the million-dollar question: Are you ready to Shema?

Where to Begin

There is a compelling question that launches every Shema encounter. How in the world can I trust the parties with whom I intend to Shema? In ancient times, the danger of aligning with, or combating the wrong entity, group or person was very real. And though we perceive now that we live in much more civilized and protected times, I believe our sense of safe harbor is false. Selfish pursuits lurk just under the surface of every social rendezvous and how each participant approaches said encounter can make or break the chances of long-term survival. Trust is at the heart of every Shema encounter.

Please, don’t take my dire explanation as a fatal warning. On the contrary, therein:

The question of trust creates the greatest opportunities for powerful personal relationships.

⁵ The kind of Attention with an exclamation point at the end that your schoolteacher spoke to wake you up in class when you were daydreaming. It was typically preceded by your name so the whole class knew you were daydreaming, and they paid attention to because they didn’t want to have their first name used next as an example.

So, whom do I trust? How do I know I can safely Shema with them?

Oh, that's easy, Cornelius. You measure them by the accepted social norms of your cultural and personal beliefs.

—That sure sounds like a good plan, except by Frictional Forensics it suggests you have absorbed nothing of the previous chapters. Go back and review, then let's raise the bar to the next level.

You First

Our friend Dr. Rogers was a good listener. His techniques and research prove that out. Yet his was a purposely clinical approach. Although his empathetic techniques offered real opportunity for dialogue, his true focus was on therapeutically gathering information, then “effecting changes in personality and behavior” (Rogers words, not mine).⁶ The clinician's ultimate goal was not to interact, but to listen for cues that would lead to a cure.

Danger! Warning: In whose mind is a cure necessary?

Sure, there are some of us out there who are really, REALLY mentally skewed and there is certainly a population out there that can be considered dangerous to themselves and to the rest of us “normal” people. But all I have to do is to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or watch *Clockwork Orange* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to be reminded of how we have over-responded to our societal fears and arrogance, mechanizing in an all too Western way, our industrial tendencies. And, as much as I'd like to think that, for the most part, those in charge of the psychological, governmental and community well-being consider most of their charges to be of equal standing to themselves; sometimes, possibly even most times, those who are placed in charge of defining *normal* have their own ulterior motives, having little or nothing to do with the welfare of those considered *problematic* in their thoughts and actions.

My purpose in raising this specter is not to argue for or against mental health and social intervention. What I am concerned about is that, based on my observations of culture today:

Society has come to identify all who do not think or act alike to be skewed and in need of fixing.

Whether you agree or not with the statement above, I'd like to offer an experimental opportunity, based on the following questions:

- **What if we were to listen in a new way, with a different priority?**
- **What if we start our Shema by assuming everyone else is of greater importance and qualification than ourselves?**

I know, right? Listen as if not just another person, but all those we encounter have something better to offer? Who believes that? As I said, this is only an experiment. I don't expect you to fully accept the idea that I might be offering something of greater desirability.

But if you were to be a willing participant, you would probably ask some really good preparatory questions such as:

⁶ <http://cultureofempathy.com/References/Experts/Carl-Rogers.htm>

- **Why would I want to listen differently?**
- **What are the rules to listening without bias?**
- **How do I start a conversation where I choose to listen?**
- **Whom should I approach?**
- **Where and When would be the opportune time to try the exercise?**

You probably have other questions you'd offer as well, but I hope the following suggestions begin a Shema-voyage for you from which you will never want to return.

Why would I want to listen differently?

You might ask this in a different way: What am I listening for, or what is the purpose of my listening? Reviewing the preceding chapters will remind of a number of good reasons for recalibrating our listening. If there is the possibility that we are all wrong, this will be a way to test our opinions, beliefs, and cultural actions. We may actually learn something new from those we listen to and, who knows, the world might be changed.

As one who had to intentionally restructure his own life-listening skills in order to walk an UnMeasured path, I can share that this approach has allowed me a more profound and rewarding way of linking practical listening skills with covenant concepts.

Listening Without Bias

This by far is the toughest hurdle to leap because real listening requires total focus and a complete mental *reboot*. We are going to have to prepare for and respectfully approach listening:

- **Seriously**—with one objective in mind; understanding the story-creator's⁷ origins
- **Hopefully**—with a desire for covenant (both parties desiring the exact same outcome)
- **Intentionally**—not abandoning the effort when we become uncomfortable or impatient
- **UnMeasuring**—not drawing marginalizing conclusions that imperfectly define the beliefs and behaviors of the story-creator

If I can keep these Shema conditions in mind as I approach a listening opportunity, what might change in my relational results? Only one way to find out.

⁷ Guess what; another new term: I'll embellish on this soon enough.

First Things First

I'll play along Cornelius, but where do I start?

—You're going to hate me for this one...

—***Listen.***

By this, I don't mean to wait for an opportunity to politely dial in to someone's explanation of current events. First, I must adjust my hearing, fine-tuning my senses to seek out deeper things. Deeper things are not opinions, but the things that shape opinions, the "history beneath or behind" the person who is sharing their comments.

Next, there is the privilege of ownership. Make sure you realize who it is that you are listening to. When someone begins to share with you, and you are patient enough in your listening, they will eventually start to divulge personal details. This is a good thing! If someone keeps spouting off about what others think and how others believe, etc., then the history they are sharing is not their own...right?

Listen, first to the original story-creator; listen then to others.

Story-creator? Cornelius, what and who is that?

—Yup, I'll answer that earlier footnote right now. At first glance, a simple concept:

The story-creator is you, me, anyone who has an origin and a history, which means, everyone.

Now that I know who I am to listen to, let's take my listening to the next level.

Can I listen without the intention of immediate response? Can I absorb without falling prey to the pre-bias of my own *agendized mission* of coercing/encouraging another to my point of view? Well, that seems not only impossible, but probably undesirable. What if other people, the ones I choose to listen to, have their own agendas, serious or not? What if they aren't hopeful towards covenant? What if they are hell-bent on measuring me?

That's the reason, so many times in my past, why I tried to hijack other people's stories. By that approach, I could either improve upon the content by interjecting my own thoughts, or I could improve the person I was listening to by planning a change in advance. It was a method for fixing someone else's psychological issues. I would hear their history unfold, then pre-interpret the perceived flaws within that I suspected were causing said issues.

We all know this happens, and that's why our dialogue with one another has become so guarded. Who wants to be changed by the edits of someone else's flawed history?

Well then what's the purpose of sharing at all?

—A reasonable question, but it won't take you to the destination you are seeking⁸. Try pursuing the answer to the following query instead:

Can we prepare another person to share their story with the seriousness of Shema?

Listening by Association

The word *community* has been tossed around a lot in this book. The social importance of a common association of people has been addressed by experts way smarter than me. But within community, there is a subset which I believe gets overlooked if not minimized entirely. Ironically, its definition is the underlying theme that drives most great epic tales, even above the concept of the *individual quest*.

Companionship

It can be between two or more, but it can never be as just one. As outlined in Chapter Two, marriage forms a uniquely spiritual Love by Covenanting two lives into one. Companionship is the Covenant-Life that results from two or more, regardless of heritage, sharing the common bond of purpose.

A marriage always involves companionship, but companionship does not require marriage. There are other words similar to companionship: *Fellowship*, and a peculiar ancient Greek form, *Philadelphia*. That last one bears an interesting history which I welcome you to research on your own time. One mistranslation often associated with it though, I'll take a moment to discuss:

Philadelphia is not limited to brotherly love. It is kin love.

And so surfaces another arcane word to whose meaning we have sadly lost touch. Kin typically refers to bloodline family but has been broadened throughout history to a meaning of *clan by close association*.⁹ This is a divergence from the more basic concept of community we hold today and is important, relative to Philadelphia in that it does not distinguish between male and female, young or old, family or group legacy. It is not gender, racial, ethnic, political, or geographical in nature.

Alright, Cornelius, where is this rabbit hole leading?

Companionship, kin love above and beyond the confines of a basic social unit, is the social lynchpin integral to Covenant Listening and requires UnMeasured understanding by the listener toward the story-creator.

Those of you out there who are already trying to improve your listening skills, like me probably struggle in asking another person to share their origins; what I like to call their "creation story"¹⁰. And then, like me you have as difficult a time hearing the person out without interrupting and without trying to immediately infuse your opinions and story into theirs.

So, try this exercise:

⁸ ..., grasshopper.

⁹ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/kin>

¹⁰ What they remember first, not to be confused with their "conception story": That's another book by another writer.

1. Find someone to listen to and ask this simple question: **“Would you mind sharing with me your origins—your story—from your perspective?”**

In exploring the way we listen, I’ve come to realize that most of us, when asked to share “our story”, begin in the moment—what is happening right now. Some of us will reluctantly share pieces of our past and hopes for our future but few, even when encouraged, know how to begin where it all began; from our first moments in time as best we can recall them, without retreating straight back to the safety of our carefully crafted front-page news talking points. It’s important in the listening to ask the right question at the very start and make sure the story-creator is aware of your interest in their beginnings rather than just this moment in time.

Note: Listening in this way takes great practice, great perseverance, and no small amount of humility.

Cornelius, of whom should I ask such a thing?

—My answer may surprise you. I recommend you ask someone you think you know really well: a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a best friend. Why start there? Because it may help you discover how well you don’t know who you think you know.

2. Next (this is the hard part): **Shut up**. If you can master this part, you will begin to see the change in what people share with you. They will become more and more honest in their portrayal and become more than curious about whom this very patient person is who actually cares to hear the story of another. If the story-creator is someone already close to you, they may frequently in-fill with, “but you already know this,” or some facsimile. Don’t say a thing; just wait for them to continue.

People may talk for a long time, but eventually they will need to take a breath.

3. In order to make sure you have listened well, do a **Hearing Check Summary**. This is crucial and involves a very important component in non-judgmental assessment. When asking the person if you heard them correctly, use similar language to the following:

“So, what I hear you saying is... (you are...; you were...; you are becoming...)”

This keeps you focused on who they are defining themselves as, not on how you view them.¹¹ Also important, **Avoid adverbs** such as “think, believe, like, hate” whether it involves the story-creator’s telling or your reaction. This is about listening. Adverbs smack of opinion and measured interpretation.

Now that you have opened your mouth, be ready to close it again. Why? The story will continue with the story-creator’s clarifications (what they perceive you did not hear correctly). So:

Shut up: Let the person respond for as long as they want.

When the story-creator is through...

¹¹ Some of you may pick up on the irony that this is where the joke on Dr. Roger’s approach may insert itself (the guy jumped anyway). Remember mine is not a therapeutic approach and the feedback step in this UnMeasured Relational Listening Method is crucial in identifying your hearing ability, not the story-creator’s coping ability. Keep reading, there’s more explanation to follow.

Thank them sincerely for openly sharing.

And whatever you do...

—**DO NOT offer or suggest things they should or might do differently.** Remember, that is the job of therapists and you are learning here to be a listening-companion in life.

Finally:

4. **Be prepared to offer your story (only if invited to share).** Explain that you would appreciate their listening without interruption, doing a Hearing Check and not offering any opinions for change (just as you modeled for them). But be warned. They may not want to hear your story. They might try to listen, but then insist in offering opinions/manipulation of your story. Thank them and politely end the encounter. Don't be offended. This is an unusual relational approach that some are just not ready to try.

Alert:

This *UnMeasured Relational Listening Method*¹² is going to take practice and patience.

You will most likely not “get it right” the first few times around.

The only way to get it right is to keep trying to get it right!

All of this takes time. I know, our society is not a patient one abounding in availability to fully know our companions. These moments however will be worth the expense. Practice is going to be your best friend and patience your sharpest tool. You will most likely not “get it right” the first few times around. Keep trying! If you will endure with this approach, you will find a change within yourself, if not the people around you. Even the most impatient and disinterested of you (count me as the former-foremost in that category), will suddenly want to seek out new listening opportunities. You will desire it because you will have discovered who others really are. They will discover who you really are. Most important of all...

—***You will be personally transformed.***

I won't go into what I mean by transformation right now. It's great topic-matter for an upcoming chapter, so continue to stay tuned in and...Shema! To help you in this moment to prepare for these relational-listening adventures, I am supplying a summary page of the unique listening techniques listed. You can easily copy and carry the methods around with you to help remind how every relational-listening encounter should be approached.

¹² Mine.

UnMeasured Relational Listening Method*

Find someone to listen to and ask this simple question: “Would you mind sharing with me your origins—your story—from your perspective?”

- **Shut up:** Let the person talk for as long as they want.
- **Hearing Check Summary:** “So, what I hear you saying is... (you are...; you were...; you are becoming...” Avoid adverbs such as “think, believe, like, hate”.
- **Shut up:** Let the person respond for as long as they want.

When the Story-creator is through...

- **Thank** them sincerely for openly sharing.
- **DO NOT** offer or suggest things they should or might do differently.

Be prepared to offer your story (only if invited to share). Explain that you would appreciate their listening without interruption, doing a Hearing Check and not offering any opinions for change (just as you modeled for them).

If they do not want to hear your story or insist in offering opinions/manipulation of your story, thank them and politely end the encounter. Don't be offended. This is an unusual relational approach that some are just not ready to try.

**This UnMeasured Relational Listening Method is going to take practice and patience.
You will most likely not “get it right” the first few times around.
The only way to get it right is to keep trying to get it right!**

I hope the cheat-sheet becomes a handy tool for you, but none of this will really succeed without one critical preparation:

We must demonstrate a reverent Shema-sensitivity in our readiness to receive the story.

How do I start a conversation where I choose to listen?

Starting well is so important and critical to the success of Shema. First of all, *get the idea that you are going to have a conversation out of your mind*. In the best form of listening, my job is to...listen. Listening is not about my history or my adventures, it is all about the other person's story:

Having someone else become trusting of you enough to gift you with their “real” story is the most beautiful part of UnMeasured Covenant Listening.

Story? What do you mean? Are you suggesting I ask the person to tell their autobiography, rambling on about things I may disapprove of or have no interest in?

—Yeah, I understand. I clung to that kind of arrogant and assuming attitude once. Admittedly I still struggle with it, but in “shaking off” my own self-importance when I listen, I discover humility. Through honest listening to others, I have come face to face with my misperceptions of life and of those who live it with me. I have come to realize that most of the measurements I have used to size-up others were actually weapons of destruction used to build up my own worth at the expense of another person's worth.

And this is allowing me to I acquire another skill—*patience in the moment*. Because I now realize that my time and my story are not the most important issues on the planet, I can listen with an UnMeasured ear. I can compare without valuing the histories of others, leading toward an appreciation of what all of us have had to go through to arrive at our current condition.

Too Many Choices?

Indeed. These newly founded attributes prepare me with the necessary mindset to properly listen, but now come two bigger challenges:

5. **Whom should I approach?**
6. **Where and When is the opportune time to try the exercise?**

Patience in Each Moment

So, Cornelius, how is listening in this manner working for you?

—I would be lying if I said I have perfected these techniques. But step by step I discover I am hearing more because I'm listening more acutely. I'm even listening more patiently to the objections and challenges thrown at me by naysayers.

I recently had a conversation with someone about how I hear God. Does some booming voice thunder in the sky above? Is there some whisper in the wind? I responded with this:

“Who am I that I would attempt to limit God to using spoken language to communicate?”

I’m able to speak to people through the pages of a book, I know others who communicate by paint applied to canvas. There are so many angles to this. Why should we restrict listening to receiving auditory signals? What about all our other senses? Ocular observation is a type of visual listening; touch is tactile listening; smell listens to the odorous world we occupy¹³; taste listens for flavor; the nuance of body language hints at our comfort or discomfort in any given situation. And spirit (wow, did I just throw a curve ball your way?) listens for the unknown to become known.

Listening takes an open mind: It requires alertness to every avenue of awareness we possess; It takes acceptance that each of us effectively communicate and receive messages in unique languages, spoken or portrayed through astounding and artfully creative pathways.

And then there is this consideration:

During the conversation mentioned above, I suspected by the question itself, that the inquisitor was doubtful I could actually hear God sharing a message with me. Wouldn’t that be presumptuous, if indeed such a being exists, why would He, She, It, converse with me? How do I know the “voice” I hear is not from some other source, perhaps even from something diabolical or even a deviant source I’ve made up on my own?

In other words, it is the question of validity. Is my story based on fact or fiction; good or evil, value or squander? I can’t answer that for you. My story is my story; yours is yours. Each of us has to peer deeply within to determine the validity of the reality we perceive. If someone invites us to share that deeper existence, UnMeasured story-creation needs to be shared with reverence not only to our own wellbeing, but in consideration and respect for the wellbeing of the listener:

Like any social quests and personal disciplines; Listening and Story-Creation alike; Covenant and Shema are practices to be chased and continuously improved upon. They are not trophies to be won and displayed as fulfilled accomplishments.

I can tell you that in my developing of this approach, I have been blessed beyond my wildest dreams. Later, I’ll highlight a few of my own listening experiences, but will share for now that I’ve learned more and been taught more about the beauty of human relationship than these pages will ever be able to describe.

¹³ Please shower as best you are able for the benefit of those listening to you on this level.