

## STEP TEN: TALKING AND LISTENING

When we practice Step Ten with another person, there are two parts to our interaction. We talk about what is happening with us, right here and right now; that is the first part. The other person listens. That is the second part.

We were tempted to say there that the other person "simply listens," but there is nothing simple about listening. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that listening is not *easy*. It's simple enough. Listening involves just listening -- not thinking about what has been said, not analyzing or criticizing, not attempting to "help" or "fix" the other person, not thinking about what we are going to say when the other person stops talking, but just listening.

We've already seen that Step Ten is concerned with being aware of what we are thinking, feeling, and doing right here and right now. When Step Ten practice starts to become routine, we find that acknowledging these feelings, thoughts, and actions, and sharing them with God as we understand God, is often sufficient. But sometimes it isn't. Sometimes our emotions in particular are so strong that we feel the need to share them with somebody else.

It's usually best -- for reasons we will consider in a moment -- to do this with another person rather than in a meeting. But if we do decide we want to share what is happening right now with another person, we should choose carefully. For -- as we said above -- we will want to do this with someone who is really able to listen. And people who can really listen are much rarer in Program than we tend to believe.

We live in a society that wants to "fix" people, to "help" them, to "make the world a better place." That these are reasonable goals for us seems so self-evident that most of us have never stopped to think the matter through and determine whether they *are* reasonable goals. And -- regardless of whether they are or not -- too many of us carry this sort of thinking into Program. As a result, we too rarely listen to people who want to talk out their Step Ten and too frequently start thinking about what we can do to help them with the "problems" that we think they're talking about.

A wise friend in Program once said, "A complaint is rarely a request for help." If we take this saying and modify it to cover Step Ten, we might phrase it as follows: "When someone genuinely does Step Ten with another person -- that is, when she *truly* talks about what is happening to her right here and right now with another person who is *truly* listening -- that is *never* a request for help."

If I ask you to listen mindfully to me, but then I talk to you with the intention of seeking help from you, I am certainly doing something, but it isn't Step Ten. Step Ten is about sharing our present thoughts, feelings, and actions. It is never about seeking help from another person, for the reason that another person cannot help us. If he could, we wouldn't need God as we understand God and we wouldn't need a 12-Step program.

*What?* we may respond. *Doing Step Ten isn't helpful?*

But that is not what we said. Of course doing Step Ten is helpful -- if it weren't, none of us would do it. But the help doesn't come from the person we are sharing our Step Ten with. It comes from our Higher Power, *as a result of* sharing that Step Ten with another person.

So when we practice Step Ten with another person, we don't require her to be some sort of an expert with regard to whatever supposed problem we think we have. We only require that she *listen* -- listen mindfully, carefully, thoughtfully, but without judgment or criticism, without a desire to "fix" us or "help" us, merely with a desire to hear us in compassionate humility.

Now for a question. Is it easier to be the talker or the listener in such a Step Ten exchange? There is no question about it. It is far harder to be the listener. And the reason is this: There is a much greater burden on the listener to be focused than there is on the talker.

If I ask someone to listen to me while I do Step Ten, it's reasonable to assume that something out of the ordinary is happening to me. Perhaps I feel impelled to do something I suspect is unwise. Perhaps my feelings are more than I think I can handle. Whatever it is, I feel the need to open up to another person. And as a result, I may well start talking about things which have nothing to do with the "here and now." I may start blaming myself or other people for some perceived "problem" I think I have. I may start analyzing the past to find out how I got into this state. I may start dissecting the future. When I talk about these things, I am not really doing Step Ten, but it's understandable that in the middle of some unpleasant feelings or thoughts I may wander away from the present.

But if the person who is listening to me follows these false trails I am tempted to pursue, then all is lost. What then happens may be a debate, a counseling session, amateur therapy, a discussion, but it is no longer Step Ten. While it may be understandable that my feelings and thoughts are driving me to talk about the past or the future, if the person listening to me

succumbs to the same temptation then that is no longer the practice of Step Ten.

It follows that -- when we are in the role of listener -- we must be vigilant. We may hear the talker wandering away into the past or into speculation about the future, and we may note that mindfully, but it is not our job to correct her, guide her, judge her, or help her -- merely to listen to her.

A little earlier we mentioned that, when we feel we must share our thoughts and feelings, it is wiser to do so with one person rather than in a meeting. And the reason will now be clear. It's difficult enough to find one person who is prepared to listen mindfully to what we have to say. The chances of every person in a meeting being able to listen mindfully are for all practical purposes zero. And remember, if just one person fails to listen mindfully in that meeting, when he shares it will almost certainly be about what was going on in his mind when we spoke. In other words, it will be crosstalk -- heavily disguised, often enough, as words of encouragement, of advice, of judgment, of assistance, but crosstalk nonetheless. And crosstalk is the death of a 12-Step meeting.

As we practiced the first nine Steps, many of us thought how hard it was to share the things we found we must talk about. And that was certainly true. But when we begin to practice Step Ten, we find that the hardest thing is to listen mindfully when others speak. To have enough confidence in a friend in Program to be willing to say anything to her is indeed a great gift. But to be so well versed in the practice of Step Ten that we are able to listen mindfully to another person is a greater gift.

One last note: How is it possible to learn this skill of listening mindfully, without judgment or criticism? And the answer, happily, is simple: Go to any 12-Step meeting and practice listening with awareness, without judgment, to all that is said, no matter how outlandish it may seem to you at first. There can be no better practice for our role of Step Ten listener.