



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אָבֻדִּי

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## “Encounter” and the Art of “Listening” in formulating the role of Language

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**Project:** Words that Open and Close Hearts

**Published by:** Within Your Gates: The Forum for the Universal Vocation of Jerusalem

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### Obedience:

The word 'obedience' comes from the Latin root word *audire*—meaning ‘to hear,’ to ‘hear through,’ to ‘harken,’ to ‘pay attention to,’ to ‘listen attentively.’ Obedience is about listening deeply, even though our normal usage of the word, in an extended sense, implies ‘obeying,’ being ‘subject to,’ or to ‘serve.’

‘Obedience’ in Hebrew is: *shama* (שָׁמַע). It also means to hear, to listen, to give attention, to understand, to submit to, and to obey. There is only one word in Hebrew for obedience, and it is this word *shama* that is generally translated as “hear.”

Why do I begin this reflection with this word? I grew up in a family that was all about “obedience”—obeying and doing what we were told to do with no “back talk.” And, like many, I also experienced parents who would speak in anger without listening while “over-talking” the other(s). As a family, we had to learn to *listen* to each other, especially after these more unpleasant moments. What became most meaningful to me was the importance of listening to the personal experiences shared and, in return, of others listening to my personal experiences. What I learned (and still now) is the reverencing of the ‘holiness’ of the other and myself. We grow together in our personal sharing.

When I entered the Jesuit order at the age of 19, as we reflected on what the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience were all about, my novice director, quite fluent in Latin (as well as ‘acute fluency’ in being obeyed!) mentioned that “Obedience,” in the context of our vow of obedience, was all about “listening,” “hearing,” and “taking to heart” what was being said. In a Jesuit context, our way of life is all about being “missioned” to a particular task, assignment, institution, or ministry. Being “missioned” means that there has been an ongoing dialog (an “encounter”) in which something is being shared with me, and I am invited to “share

back” what is stirring within me as I “listen.” A mutual, honest, sincere, and transparent conversation, based on mutual trust, that is meant to determine the “best way of proceeding”—how to make the “best use” of gifts and talents. I would “listen,” and then my religious superior would “listen,” and vice versa. A mutual exchange—All for the sake of greater “effectiveness” and the building of trust and mutuality (“One in heart, mind, and Spirit”). Knowing where each other is “coming from” is an essential element in all of this. That is why the word “encounter” has such significance to me—the ‘wanting’ to learn from each other, to grow together, to connect with the other in meaningful relationships that impact others around us. For me, “encounter” and “obedience” (in the above context) are our mutual lifelong travel companions.

Of course, each of us has had experiences of attempted “encounters” where we were asked to listen to the other, but without a mutual desire on the part of the other to listen to us in return. It creates difficulties we have to process—and vice versa. We’ve also experienced “monologues” (perhaps ‘diatribes?’) rather than true “dialogues.” Again, this leaves things we have to process within. Yet it does not diminish the importance of the art of listening.

The “Listening” involves not just “hearing” but “listening” at a deeper level—to what impact this exchange has upon me (or them) internally. Sometimes, I become aware of being defensive because I do not want to “listen” to what I am hearing, or it is challenging me out of my “comfort zone,” or leading me in ways/directions that are unknown or “fearfully disturbing” to me. In effect, that means I have to take a step back and reflectively and prayerfully ask myself, “Why is this unsettling to me? Why am I disturbed by this?” I have to admit to myself that I want the other to agree with me! Honest reflection and the sharing of these “stirrings from within” have been helpful for me in recognizing my resistances to “listening.” Of course, I also have learned to ask myself, “If I become defensive in not wanting to listen to others, am I also resistant to listening to the ways that God is speaking to me?”

When I became a superior, a novice director, a formation director for other Jesuits, I had to remind myself that “listening” meant more than just the “other” listening to me. It meant I had to listen attentively to the other and what the other was experiencing and sharing (part of their sacred story!). This was especially the case in dealing with some in my religious community (or in “formation”) whom I simply did not like, did not trust, or would strongly disagree with. Yet what became important was the need to “listen”—attentively, carefully, lovingly (perhaps the most difficult). And in my dealings with young men in formation, giving “constructive” feedback (“growing points”) presented challenges to me (and them) in “how” to say things carefully, lovingly, and attentively for the sake of personal growth. It was also an encouragement to receive with an interior openness what was being said. (“All is gift; how do

I receive this ‘gift’”) The challenge and invitation was (and is) in sharing with respect, reverence, and dignity for the other how to “process” what is at work within and around us—finding the right “language” to speak in ways that “open” doors of conversation rather than “close” doors in defensiveness.

As a director of a large school system, I recall once presenting some very difficult financial matters to the larger community in a way that came across as, “here’s the problem and here’s what I’m doing to remedy the situation.” The feedback unsettled me and caused me to think, “Why won’t they just accept what I’m saying?” Most sobering to me was when a very good friend approached me and gently said, “Are you so sure of yourself that listening to what we are saying is not important? Can you hear and listen from our perspective? Is there no mutuality in this common issue?”

So, what’s my point in all of this? My father frequently would say, “You have two eyes and two ears and one mouth. That means look carefully, listen carefully, and then speak carefully—with purpose.” In most societies, communities, and nations, there are very diverse members, gathered from different backgrounds, cultures, and languages, seeking to find a “language” that bridges divisions. We can hear words or phrases that disturb and unsettle us. And we can also respond in words that disturb or unsettle. Yet we know that is not our “mission” or “task at hand.” Therefore, a deeper level of reflection and reverence for the other is important as we seek to “see” and “listen” to all that surrounds us and to discern: what is the voice (word) that I (as well as ‘we’) must speak with purpose--lovingly, honestly, intently, disarmingly, and in faith, and with reverent dignity for all—to those around us, and from there to all around us. Clarity of vision and purpose, hopefully, will give us the language we need to speak that allows others to listen and to hear. “May God who began this good work, bring it to fulfillment.”