



## **Sacred Listening: Nine Ways to De-Center the Self and Reimagine Relationship in Hawai'i's Diverse Context - The Rev. Canon Andrew Arakawa**

Have you ever been in a conversation and realized you were only half-listening—more focused on what you might say next than on the person in front of you? It's something many of us do without meaning to, even as we express a desire for deeper connection. In the diverse, multivalent context of Hawai'i, where layers of culture, history, and identity meet, listening isn't simply a tool for dialogue – it's sacred. It is the first act of genuine relationship and a powerful pathway to healing and transformation in our communities.

In *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Marc Cortez explores the complexities of what it means to be created in the image of God (Imago Dei), pushing beyond reductionist views. His relational model resonates deeply: "That is, human persons are fundamentally relational beings – related to God, to other humans, and to creation – and it is this relationality that truly images a God who is himself a relational being."<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams adds to the above in *Being Human*: "To think of myself as a body [an enfleshed human being], to be conscious of myself as a body, is to be conscious of other people's consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

As relational beings, our ability to listen is foundational to forming meaningful connections. Yet, in a society shaped by hegemonic (dominant) structures, speaking often takes over, reinforcing individualism over relationships. Lisbeth Lipari, in *Listening, Thinking, Being*, reminds us that true communication emerges in the interplay of self and other and that genuine dialogue requires suspending egocentricity in favor of openness to the unpredictability that emerges in relationship.<sup>3</sup>

How are we listening? Here are some ways to de-center ourselves and develop a deeper sense of listening and attunement to one another individually and communally.

### **1. Practice Active Curiosity**

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<sup>1</sup> Cortez, Marc. *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2010) 24.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, Rowan. *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018) 11.

<sup>3</sup> Lipari, Lisbeth. *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014.

- Shift from “I know” to “I wonder.” Approach each conversation with the mindset that the other person has something unique to teach you.
- Ask open-ended questions that invite deeper sharing, rather than steering the conversation toward your own experiences or opinions.

## 2. Embrace Silence and Pause

- Allow space for silence in conversations. Resist the urge to fill every gap with your own words or thoughts.
- Use pauses as opportunities to process what has been said, rather than planning your next response.

## 3. Attend to the Presence of Others

- Focus your attention fully on the person speaking—make eye contact, notice their body language, and listen for tone and emotion, not just content.
- Imagine, as former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams suggests, that being aware of your own embodied presence means recognizing the full consciousness and reality of the other.

## 4. Suspend Judgment and Interpretation

- Hold off on evaluating or interpreting what you hear. Notice when you are forming judgments or rehearsing rebuttals, and gently set those thoughts aside.
- Practice “bracketing” your assumptions—acknowledge them internally, but don’t let them dominate the listening space.

## 5. Acknowledge and Welcome Difference

- Recognize that people have their own inner world, history, and perspective.
- Be open to the unpredictability and even discomfort that can arise from engaging with viewpoints or emotions different from your own.

## 6. Reflect Back and Clarify

- Paraphrase or summarize what you’ve heard to ensure understanding, and invite correction: “What I’m hearing is... Is that right?”
- This not only confirms your attention but also gives the other person space to clarify or expand.

## 7. Cultivate Humility and Vulnerability

- Admit when you don't understand or when you're struggling to listen well. This humility can deepen trust and relationality.
- Be willing to let go of the need to be right, impressive, or in control of the conversation.

#### 8. Engage in Self-Reflection

- Regularly reflect on your listening habits. Ask yourself: "Am I truly present? Am I making space for the other, or centering myself?"
- Consider journaling about your conversations to notice patterns and areas for growth.

#### 9. Prioritize Relationship Over Agenda

- Let go of the need to "win" or persuade. Focus on connection, understanding, and the shared experience of dialogue.
- Remind yourself that the goal is not agreement, but deeper relationship and mutual recognition.

*"Listening is the art of spiritual hospitality. When we listen to another, we offer that person a space where he or she can be heard and accepted"* – Attributed to Henri Nouwen.

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**The next installment of *Growing in Grace: Formation Perspectives* will be from The Rev. Dcn. Erin Richardson Severin.** Erin is a transitional deacon and a graduate of The School of Theology at The University of the South --Sewanee. She recently received The School of Theology Prize in Theology and Ethics.

*Growing in Grace – Formation Perspectives* seeks to cultivate a community of lifelong learners as disciples of Christ within our diocese. The articles will offer resources, share formation stories, and give updates on the Waiolaihui'ia Center for Ministry. Please reach out if you have story ideas or resources that can add to this ongoing conversation. [aarakawa@episcopalhawaii.org](mailto:aarakawa@episcopalhawaii.org).