The Art of Listening

Harvey Jackins

I AND A GROUP OF MY FRIENDS have, for about thirty-one years, been trying to develop and expand and improve a system for people relating to each other helpfully. For the last eleven years our efforts have gone beyond the city of Seattle and in that time have spread to nearly every state in the Union, nearly every large city in the United States, most Canadian provinces, and about thirty-eight other countries. We've had an explosive expansion. Our understanding of the subject continually improves. There are new developments all the time. It's challenging to stay on top of what we are learning.

There are many ways of approaching what we have named “Re-evaluation Counseling.” One way is to ask you to look at what happens whenever people are together and have a chance to talk, at any time when they're not completely preoccupied with their jobs or other activity. If you will think back to the coffee-shop or picnic table or similar situations, you will remember that people are, everywhere and at all times when in the presence of each other, either trying to be listened to—talking every chance they get—or waiting patiently or impatiently for a chance to interrupt any other person who is talking and start talking themselves. Think about this. You will find that whenever people are together, they're making an effort to be listened to, and are very seldom listened to because the person that they are trying to get to listen to them is waiting desperately and impatiently for a chance to be listened to himself or herself.

SOMEONE MUST LISTEN

If we were to encapsulate what we have learned to do in a sentence or two—and there's much more, there are many complicated applications that come from it—it is to explain to people that what they are trying to do all the time, this trying to be listened to, is a very profound process. It will have profound results if it ever gets a chance to operate and it will operate, if they will take turns. They need to just take turns, and agree, “Yes, I will listen to you and really pay attention to you for a while, if you will give me a chance to do the same thing later on.” We call that “Co-Counseling.” The awkward word “counseling” meant “giving advice” to most people when we first started using it, but it has now come to have a good deal of the meaning we’ve used for it in the intervening thirty-one years, which does not mean “giving advice” at all, but basically listening and paying attention.

This inherent process that we’re all equipped to use has been, in general, frustrated, simply because it takes another person outside of ourselves really paying attention while we talk and think about ourselves, and re-experience the distresses that we have accumulated, for it to work.

OUR ESSENTIAL NATURE IS FINE

The reality seems to be that human beings are essentially quite wonderful, and they climb their way back to practicing that wonderfulness whenever they get a chance. It’s true that we’ve inherited a physiological get-up from our pre-human ancestors that has a lot of instincts and physical determinants in it, but we’ve also developed a mind, an ability to think, that is almost unique in the kingdom of life on this planet. (Some of us assume, of course, that we have older brothers and sisters somewhere out there in the Galaxy who will arrive in a space ship any day now and give us a hand, but they haven’t gotten here yet.) This ability to think is quite remarkable.

Harvey Jackins, a founder of the Re-Evaluation Counseling movement, wrote, taught classes and led workshops aimed at using the tools of listening and emotional release to assist people's efforts to build a rational society.


The Art of Listening
We define "intelligence" as the ability to come up with a brand-new, accurate response for each new situation, never use an old response for a new situation, because a new situation is new, and if you try to use something that worked fine for a previous situation, it's not going to quite fit the new situation, which never occurred before. There aren't any identical entities in the universe, not even two electrons are absolutely identical, and so two environmental situations for a human being will never be exact replicas of each other. There will always be something new. When we're functioning on this particular human ability, this flexible intelligence of ours, we're quite capable of taking in all the information of a situation, comparing it with the information from past experiences that we've understood, noting the similarities, noting the differences, putting together a response that is similar to what handled similar experiences in the past, but is modified to allow for the differences in this situation, and, being exactly accurate, handling each new situation well.

This ability seems to spring out of the colossal central nervous system we have. No one yet really knows how it works, but we're creeping up on it. Scientists who have spent their lives examining the central nervous system are beginning to get some vague idea. It's worthwhile noting that of the forty billion neurons (forty billion or so—I don't think anybody's counted them exactly) that each of us possesses, only a few hundred are occupied in bringing information in to the central nervous system from the sense organs, from the excellent battery of sense organs we have. Only a few hundred of these neurons bring information in, and a few hundred more transmit orders out from the central nervous system to the glands and the muscles. The rest of the forty billion sit there and talk to each other. There's a tremendous interconnection. We're very complex. We're all justified in feeling quite good about ourselves, because the goofiest mistake we ever made was really an enormous triumph of complex behavior. There's nothing simple about us.

**OUR INTELLIGENCE CAN BE INTERRUPTED**

This ability to come up with fresh, new answers, this rational human intelligence of ours, gets interrupted by situations of stress, of painful emotion, or of pain. Any kind of physical hurt or emotional hurt interrupts this, to a greater or lesser degree. Under those situations, the information coming in from the environment, which ordinarily is handled very easily and in great volume by our tremendous intelligence, doesn't get sorted out, doesn't get understood, doesn't get compared and contrasted with what we already know, nor filed away to be useful information. Instead it congeals, and this unvaluated information becomes, in effect, a recording of what went on during the bad times, and this recording persists. It includes the ineffective behavior, the distressed feelings, and the shutting down of our thinking.

We have the abilities to take such a distress recording apart—that's the principal message I have, how to take it apart, (or how to encourage its being taken apart, since the process is quite spontaneous and inherent), but since this recovery ability, the recovery mechanism, the healing process is usually interfered with by social conditioning, the congealed, not understood information from a distress experience instead remains a recording of bad feelings and a compulsive pattern of behavior. When reminded of it enough (the folk saying goes "It reminds me too much of"), by similarities in a new situation we are thrown into a repetition of the inability to think that the original hurt caused, and so we act rigidly, unsuccessfully, uncomfortably, and, usually, unwarily in the new situation. This allows additional distresses to accumulate and mount up.

**PEOPLE ARE GOOD**

This notion of the distress recording, the congealed results of an experience of distress that was not allowed to be taken apart and re-evaluated, is a very simple but very profound explanation of all the things that have puzzled us about people. Each one of us knows—and I remind you of this—that he or she is really a good person. You have been told you're not, and in the presence of fresh criticism you get to feeling you're not, but in your heart of hearts you know you're a good person, that you've always done the very best you could, and that is true. Each of us knows that he or she is much smarter than he or she can often show, that he or she has a lot of intelligence that doesn't come out in the tension of the final exam, or the upsetting situation, and this is true. I now tell you that what you know about yourself is also true of everyone else. This profound knowledge that you've hidden to escape ridicule; that you're a good person, that you always do your best, and that you're much smarter than you sometimes act or than people think—this is true, not only of you, but of other people as well.

**THE RECOVERY PROCESS**

This wonderful nature of ours that gets obscured in this way would resurge, can resurge, and will resurge, if particular processes are allowed to take place. These are what we call "discharge." "Discharge" is a general word to encompass some very profound processes that are dependably characterized outwardly by tears, by crying, by trembling, by laughing (in many forms), by angry storming, by yawns, by non-repetitive, eager talk. These processes melt the rigidities of the distress patterns and turn its contents back into the useful information they should have been in the first place. These processes also free this tremendous intellect of ours, this flexible behavior of ours, to operate. Any discharge—any tears, any trembling, any laughter,
any storming, any yawns (yawning is the dependable indication of the release of physical distress)—tends to move us back to functioning on our original nature, which is that of a genius-sized intelligence and a very good person and (more and more we're realizing this) a very powerful person. The powerlessness with which most of us feel infected (“I can't,” “I wish I could,” “I have to wait,’ and “Somebody will tell me I can someday”) is all acquired. We're all conceived, and most of us are born, with a sense of being able to do anything. This is closer to the actual reality, and only the social conditioning has obscured this—the tremendous amounts of oppression that are ladled upon us systematically.

**ACCIDENTS AND CONTAGION**

The distress patterns that we acquire, the inhibiting fences that get built around us, come partly from accidental hurts. There are such things as slipping and falling and hurting oneself. In greater volume they come from the contagion of this distress. The person who was hurt is pulled by the resulting distress pattern in some situations to hurt someone else. The little boy who was beaten by his father is pulled, when he becomes a father himself, to beat his son in the same way and pass the hurt on. There's a certain contagion in the distress.

**SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION ALSO**

More and more as we explore the phenomenon, and find our way out from under these intimidating loads of distress, we realize that there's also a systematic process of imposing hurts operating in this society. An oppressive society systematically places hurts upon people in order to condition them to fill certain rigid, submissive roles, or, in some cases, certain dominating, oppressive roles.

We've learned in the last few years, and can now state with great confidence, that no one would submit to being oppressed if distress patterns were not first installed. We would not permit being placed in any of the roles of oppression (and we're all oppressed—we're oppressed as workers, we're oppressed as women, we're oppressed as children, we're oppressed by racism, we're oppressed by many other oppressions), none of us would accept a role in any of these oppressions except that we were first hurt as children so early that we were unable to resist and the groundwork of distress patterns was laid in for imposing new oppressions as we grew older. More than that, and this is very hopeful, no one would play an oppressor role otherwise. No man would act in a sexist way to women, unless he had first been hurt and then manipulated into the other end of the oppression. No aristocrat would ever condescendingly mistreat the common folk if not first mistreated while young. (In England this shows up very strikingly. The young aristocrats are sent to special schools and deliberately hurt there to prepare them for their roles when older. It's always easier to see in somebody else's society than it is in our own.)

**MANY ARE LEARNING**

This great weight of distress patterns that has limited us and has frustrated us and that hangs over us like a pall—every once in a while getting us down real hard, and then lifting somewhat again as we climb out again and function—always limiting us, always making us feel that we must accept some limited role in society because we're female, or because we're young, or because our folks worked with their hands, or whatever the oppression is—all this can be and is being thrown off by an increasing number of people at this point. Since Re-evaluation Counseling spread beyond Seattle, we have reached in some fashion—through fundamentals classes or lectures or support groups—about a half-million people. It's been a very rapid development.

We've transcended many barriers. We had no written literature to start with. Now there are twelve or thirteen books. We publish twenty-five magazines irregularly. There is a special magazine for women, a special magazine for working-class people, for blacks, for Latino/as, a magazine for people of an Asian inheritance, a young people's magazine, one for mental health workers—I think there are copies of that one on the table out there. It's called Recovery and Re-emergence, and it exchanges information among Reevaluation Counselors who are working in the mental health field.

We've learned a lot; but all we've learned rests on this fairly simple rediscovery, and all the progress is based on this foundation—if at least two people will take turns, and one or more of them will listen, remarkable and good changes will take place with the person who is being listened to.

**CONTENT IS UNIVERSAL**

Every time we take Re-evaluation Counseling into a new country or across another language barrier or begin to work in a new culture, we are likely to be told that this “doesn't fit into our culture.” It's true that some of the trappings that we bring in from the United States culture...
don’t fit—we’re often unaware of them until the new people point them out and help us peel them off—but also it’s true that the fundamentals are universal. I was told very seriously that we could not reach Arab people by talking about the need for men to cry, because Arab men don’t cry. (There’s a certain point to that warning, because talking about Re-evaluation Counseling is often not the way to communicate it—you want to demonstrate it instead.) I have given about twelve Arab men their first counseling session, and ten of them cried very hard the first time.

The content of this healing relationship is universal. All humans are human. The cultural differences are interesting and rich, but any divisions between us on the basis of culture are completely unjustified. All of us are very, very human. I remember working as a counselor in the developing years of Re-evaluation Counseling, when many of my clients were women, as they opened up and told me all about themselves. With growing surprise I realized that women are just like men. I had never suspected that before! We’re engaged currently in trying to break down the barriers that have developed between men and women, and are working to achieve closer friendships between women and men. Women are listening with amazement as they discover that men are just like women!

If you can just listen, that’s good. Beginning Co-Counselors often cannot listen well, because of the internal pressure to talk themselves. When it’s their turn to listen, they say, okay, go ahead, but are still very inattentive (demonstrates bad attention). Often the persons they are “listening” to are so desperate to be listened to that they pretend the other person is listening, and they have a great session! Later when better listening is needed, the second person has had a session and is not quite so inattentive, and the process improves. Co-Counseling is a sort of a mutual “take-turns” bootstrapping process. You can’t lift yourself by your own boot straps but you can take turns lifting each other. It works, and of course it works in larger groups than two, but for the economy of time most Co-Counseling is done in pairs, switching roles between the first person who is listened to and the second, who listens. That’s about what it amounts to.

**PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE**

We’ve tackled some very tough and complicated problems along the way. One was that we had to satisfy ourselves of the generality of the recovery process. For a period in the early years of Re-evaluation Counseling I accepted very distressed people as clients. I had to guess as to how to handle them and made many mistakes, but I learned a great deal. Basically what I was trying to find out was is there one kind of people who get put in mental institutions and another kind of people who can handle their lives? I had to find that out in practice. Theory wasn’t enough. I’m very pleased to know, as I’m sure all of you already intuitively know, that there’s only one kind of people. The person who seems to be in another strange category is someone who has been hurt very deeply, someone on whom a large load of distress has piled up, who has been, and often continues to be, oppressed very seriously. Given enough help (the word enough is important) anyone is able to climb all the way out to elegant functioning. Make that statement is fine, and I make it very positively. Doing it, of course, is another question, because it takes a lot of resource to support someone making a long climb back. This is no news to you who work in the mental health field.

**CO-COUNSELING IS A SORT OF MUTUAL “TAKE-TURNS” BOOTSTRAPPING PROCESS. YOU CAN'T LIFT YOURSELF BY YOUR OWN BOOT STRAPS BUT YOU CAN TAKE TURNS LIFTING EACH OTHER.**

**HOW TO COUNSEL**

We can say much more clearly now than we used to what it takes to be an effective listener for someone whom you wish to help (one-way), or with whom you wish to exchange help (two-way, as in Co-Counseling). It’s very simple to say, and I’m pleased that I can say it this clearly after thirty-one years of saying it in many other ways. If you wish to help someone that you’re going to listen to, plain listening is fine, but there are distresses that take a little more than that, and the more you can do past that the more effective you will be.

You (a) pay enough attention to them, that you notice accurately what the distresses are. One of the ways of finding that out is to ask, “What’s bothering you?”, and then listen and they’ll tell you. They’ll never fail you. “What about yourself would you like to change?” “(Sigh) Well, no one ever asked me that before, but,” and they will tell you.

If there is an inhibiting pattern in the way of them speaking out clearly to you, you can simply look at them, and the expression on their faces, the one that they wear when they’re not crying or laughing or discharging in some other way, will tell you about their distress. It’s a perfectly familiar expression, but it’s not theirs. It’s an expression of a chronic pattern that has grown there from the distress that has become chronic. It may be like this (demonstrates) or whatever, but, whatever it’s like, it will tell you something.

Look at the posture. Apparently the natural posture for a man is very close to this (demonstrates). How
many men do you know who stand or sit like that? Most of them have been beaten down to a submissive posture. A few of them are stuck in defensive postures (demonstrates). How does a woman stand? Something like this (demonstrates)—I don't quite have the build for it, but you can guess. Yet, how many women stand so proudly? If you see one like that in a crowd once in a while, your eyes are drawn to her almost immediately. Almost all of us in our postures tell the chronic distresses that we bear and try to resist all the time. There are other clues in a person's appearance as well.

So, (a) you pay enough attention to the person to see what the distresses are. (b) You think, "How could those be contradicted?" That's demanding. You must actually think about him or her. Think, think. How can these distresses be contradicted?

(c) You contradict them. Just that. You contradict them. The person will discharge. He or she will talk eagerly, decidedly, alively. (Not "blah, blah, blah"—that kind of talk is just the rehearsal of a pattern with words in it). They will talk eagerly, alively, or they will begin to laugh, they will begin to cry, they will begin to shake, they will begin to yawn—something will begin to happen if you do that. If these things don't happen you haven't contradicted the distress enough, that's all.

For many situations, simply to be listened to with interest and attention is enough contradiction. When was the last time anyone did that for you? Often discharge begins to occur simply with that. Beginning Co-Counselors sometimes have marvelous results with each other just by managing to keep their mouths shut for a little while. There's more to learn also, of course, and we're learning more all the time.

**ATTITUDES TO ADOPT**

There are certain additional, general things to learn, if you're going to be a good listener/friend (and I assume you are at least considering the possibility.) There are certain general hurts that people have suffered from that can also be contradicted generally. There's a certain battery of attitudes that, if you can adopt them, will make you a more effective listener and friend than if you just sit there and clench your teeth to keep silent. These may be hard to adopt at first, but if you even try to act as if you held these attitudes, it will help. It will bring you out of some of your own ruts, and it will make you much more attractive and appealing as a listener to the person that you are listening to.

What are some of the attitudes that we can extend toward the person that we are listening to that will generally contradict their distresses? One of them is approval. I now look approvingly at you. Which of us ever felt very hurt while someone was approving of us? It may happen but it's not common. Another is delight. I shall be delighted with you. Who was ever hurt at a time when someone was delighted with them? (Voice from audience: "Not me!") I won't say that I won't find an instance someday, but I haven't found one yet. Take an attitude of respect. Listen as if the person's words and what they have to say and how they are feeling are worthy of full consideration. Almost all distress carries with it disrespect. Certainly all the oppressions, which probably put a majority of our distress upon us, all carry disrespect at their core.

In working with teenagers, the internalized oppression which takes place with every group that has been oppressed was so heavy that we were looking for a way of interrupting it. (This first occurred with a group in England, but it's worked with every group of young people we've tried it with since.) We asked them to make a promise to each other, and the wording is, "I solemnly promise that, from this moment on, I will never again treat any young person including myself, with anything less than complete respect." We've never had a group of young people together where more than two of them have made that promise before everyone in the group started crying, got their arms around each other and sobbed. Lack of respect is a crucial element in the mis-treatment which young people endure.

It's also at the heart of every other oppression. What's at the heart of sexism? A woman being treated without respect. What's at the heart of racism? The non-white being treated without respect. What's at the heart of ageism? The elder being treated as a cast-off. "Oh, grandma, now you just go sit down." Lack of respect.

So, if, as a listener, you can adopt an attitude of full respect, let the person you are listening to feel that whatever he or she has to say is important, you will be more effective. What you hear should be listened to with respect, because either it will be thinking, and everyone's thinking is worthy of respect, or it will be some distress that the person is trying to voice in order to get it out there where she or he can see it and begin to take it apart, and that's very deserving of respect, also. If you can adopt an attitude of respect and keep adopting it until it becomes second nature, becomes a good habit, then your listening becomes more powerful.

**CONFIDENCE FOR THEM**

What else? What other hurts are so general that we can set up a general attitude to contradict them? How about confidence? How about being confident that the person you're listening to can attain what he or she wants? The person says, "I wish I could and you say, "I think you can do it. I think you're just the person who can do it." If you maintain this attitude, can't you imagine the lift that will give? Very few people have had much confidence expressed in them. Even our beloved parents, who wanted so desperately to give us the best start in life they possibly could, had been so hurt themselves that
often when they want to express confidence and support to us, they instead gave us warnings. “Don’t go too far,” and “Don’t stick your neck out,” and “Try to get a good, steady job and hold on to it,” and statements like that. We got their fears instead of their confidence. So, if you can express confidence, if you say to the person, “I know you can do it, I’m sure you’ll succeed,” it’s going to help almost every time.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

What other attitudes can we helpfully adopt? I think high expectations is one. Over and over I hear from clients, “I wasn’t expected to do anything. I wanted to become a nuclear physicist, but everyone told me it would be a waste of time because I’d just get married and have a family anyway.” So I offer the expectation—“Now your family is grown, you can go back to school and be a nuclear physicist if you want to. Don’t you dare settle for anything less than what you want.” I express that kind of attitude.

COMMITMENTS

On the drive up from Fresno, I helped someone practice a commitment. The commitment is a very powerful tool. It has to be just the right commitment. It has to be the person’s own commitment. This commitment was: “I solemnly promise that from this moment on I will never again settle for anything less than everything.” Sounds a little ambitious, doesn’t it? But try it a few times. You’ll be amazed at the thoughts that come winging through your head. In your role as the listener, in your role as the good friend, remember to have high expectations.

(Not reproaches! They’re already too plentiful. “Why didn’t you get a higher grade? Only an A +? Why didn’t you get better than that?”) Offer instead the confident expectation “If you want it, you can get it, and I’ll back you all the way.” “You’re not sure you can think well enough? I know you can think. Can you do what you want to? Yes, you can. There’s no question about it.”

If you remember that your goal is to be a good listener/friend and remember what a powerful force listening is, and if you then think of the attitudes you always wished some-body had taken toward you, you’ll know what to do. You’ll know the attitudes that your friend is waiting for. Confidence, respect, delight, safety, approval, awareness, reassurance that the person has always done his or her best, natural physical contact. Commitment. “I’ll be with you. I’ll stick with you. I won’t abandon you no matter how hard the going gets.” That may feel like an awful load, as if you listen to five people and you commit yourself, then you may have to be washing everybody’s dishes next week—but it’s not the same thing. If a pattern comes in to demand that you wash the dishes to prove you’re really with them, you say, “I’m sorry, that’s not what I really meant. I’m for you, not for your dirty dishes.” The danger isn’t as great as you may feel it is.

LOVE

There’s a big attitude which we’re all going to be awkward and scared about at first: love. Love. If you can look at the person you’re listening to with full, warm, unabashed love, then all kinds of things become possible. Something happens (and I suspect some of you at least already know about this) when you listen really well to someone. As he or she opens up and is crying just as hard as he or she can, the real person shows. It’s as if a screen rolls back with the tears or the laughter or trembling, and you really see the person, and you find yourself falling in love. That’s good. Don’t be scared. Be careful, but don’t be scared. Don’t be afraid to fall in love with each other. We have rules in the Co-Counseling Community that if you meet people as a Co-Counselor you do not go into business with them, you do not try to sell them life insurance, you do not romance them, or go off and marry them. But love them, yes. Love them thoroughly. The attitude of love improves your listening. Most of us are suffering from an inadequate chance to express love. Most of us are pent up with love that we don’t have enough opportunity to express. It will be good for you.

The need to love is a much bigger rational need even than the need to be loved. Our culture emphasizes people needing to be loved, and that’s real, but it’s a small thing compared with the need to love. If you don’t really let your love out, you’re going to turn sour inside. So add the attitude of love to your listening. Work at
it carefully, cautiously. Don't confuse it with doing each other's dishes. Just keep it what it is, just love, and it will improve. Some of you are mental health professionals, I'm sure, and you've been trained to sit on the other side of a desk and not get “involved” and I don't want to invalidate your training, but if you can have this overall attitude of love, it doesn't matter. You can stay on your stepladder if you have to and still love them, and everybody else you call them, is going to know the difference right away. They're going to be emboldened to pick up their feet and walk right out of the swamp with great speed compared to what they would do otherwise.

Generally, I don't talk to people about one-way listening. That's a special problem. Generally I talk to people about exchanging this relationship, and that's the way I want to talk to you, too. Because, even if you have big case loads that you're working on, you won't do this very well unless you also have a supportive peer relationship with someone else. If you get interested in Co-Counseling and want to learn to do it, you can pick up any of the magazines here. (There's lots more that I didn't mention—there's Heritage for Native Co-Counselors, there's Colleague for university and college faculty Co-Counselors, there's Classroom for teachers in the primary and secondary schools, and there's a lot of others.) But you won't become a Co-Counselor out of a magazine alone. What you read is interesting, but you need to set up a natural relationship with someone else on a peer basis. Do it with another worker in your field. Do it with a neighbor. Just agree to take turns listening. You'll do it sloppily to begin with—everybody else did that, and I don't know why you should be an exception—but it will get better, and something that you've needed all through your life will begin to become a reality. I do not say to you that it's “easy.” I do say that it's simple, but the simplicity continually gets obscured by the distress itself and by the re-stimulation which ordinary living piles on us all the time and by the lonely little oppressions and the discouragements. It is simple, however, and, persisted with, it makes a huge difference in a person's life.

WORTH DOING

Co-Counseling has been outside of Seattle for only eleven years, and its been a very hectic eleven years. I've worn myself frazzled trying to travel all over and do workshops and lectures and get Co-Counseling Communities started; but it has been very satisfying. In the last few weeks I made a long trip to the East Coast. In two of the workshops I did—one was for Jewish leaders and one was for women leaders—I noticed a phenomenon. A lot of the people at each of those workshops were “old-timers.” They were competing a little bit as to seniority. “I've been co-counseling nine years,” and “I've been in ten”—like that. These people had changed profoundly. This was so plain. These people were in charge of their lives, had complete confidence in their associates, knew what they were about, and were ready to tackle some problems that most of the population is simply too numb with terror to think about, such as the fact that we have to eliminate all nuclear weapons or we're all going to be dead in about twelve years. These people were actually able to think about that. They knew how to discharge their fears and were making plans to insure that their grandchildren had a chance to live.

So I would encourage you to explore Co-Counseling if you can. Explore it through the literature. Do it through participation in the Co-Counseling Community if you can, but if not, use the knowledge that I've reminded you of this morning that you already know.

You've always known everything that I've told you this morning, but it's been obscured. Hang onto it and put it to use, and organize it to the extent that with at least one other person you make some kind of commitment to take turns listening, and to try to improve your listening.

It won't work like a magic wand. Just when you start to feel very much better because of your initial successes, you will decide on some level to bring up a deep distress and see if you can handle that, and for a while you'll feel all frazzled because you've got more in the frying pan than you can fry; but, if you persist, life will get more meaningful. You will regain a much better perspective. You will regain again the picture you had when you were young of the way life should be. You will re-acquire some confidence about making your life that way. You will take full advantage of this wonderful, beautiful life that we have a chance to live. You will not live so much of life absorbed by the distress, or let so many days and hours go by in fogs and funks and discouragements and despair and confusion and terror. You will take charge. More and more you will take charge of your own lives. Just incidentally, you will be much more effective mental health workers.

REALLY LIVE

It's our life. We haven't been told that. We've been told the opposite, but our lives belong to us. I sometimes say to advanced students, “There are no 'should's' in the universe.” Sometimes they look at me with horror and ask “If I don't have 'should's' to guide me in what I do, how will I know I'm doing the right thing?” But there are no “should's” in the universe. Your own intelligence is quite satisfactory for guiding your life. You're not obligated to anyone. I thought for years that I was obligated to my children at least, and I couldn't get past that. Then one day, after some co-counseling, it occurred to me that anything that my children needed done for them by me, I would do because I wanted to. I didn't have to be obligated.

There are no “should’s.” It's your life. Take charge of it. Have fun.