

Centre for Ecclesial Ethics Symposium May 2022
Listening for a vigilant and vulnerable Church
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Moral Imagination

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'What happens to me, to us and our Church when we attentively listen - through your own experience and the lens of moral imagination'.

What does happen to me when I listen attentively?

- I think (in a more focused way than in a casual-type of listening but distractions are always an issue).
- I interpret
- I feel
- I picture things

Picturing is at the heart of my listening. Throughout the listening process I consciously and unconsciously involve my imagination (a faculty that produces images in my mind by connecting my mind, with heart and experience).

We think through pictures all the time, when we are awake or asleep. If I were to say that 'a snake is slithering in the grass in the garden outside', you might not believe me, but if you listened to what I said, you would most likely picture a snake in the grass. Or, if I were to say, 'nails are scratching the board behind me' you might even have an unpleasant sensation. This is the power of imagination.

I realise that there is a constant traffic of pictures in my minds when I listen (to others or to ourselves). I might picture a nice cup of coffee to boost my mood or generate a mental picture of my rabbit Beau to bring a sense of peaceful relaxation. This happens even when I try to listen attentively. I am more a visual person so this focus on picturing might not be the same for you. But, when listening to the stories this morning; each account for me is marked by an image. I *pictured* Andrew from Sue's stories. I imagined the silence as an empty space waiting for something to happen and then pictured Andrew's calmer breathing when his mother returned to that space. I still see your faces more than I remember your voice. I imagined Kate from Vincent's story and pictured her speaking of her 'pain as a tone of bricks' (I saw the bricks in my imagination).

It might well be that the pictures that emerged in my mind well in line with the message of the of your accounts. But, I am also aware of distractive images. When I am tired or preoccupied, the quality of my listening is diminished, the images in my mind are probably out of sync with what is being said. My preconceptions might alter what I see internally. Distortions are a big topic for those who study imagination. I also found myself escaping from some of the pictures in the stories I heard.

If we agree that picturing-while-listening is something worth exploring than perhaps considering the idea of moral imagination could help us to contain or even direct attentive listening.

Please note that I have in mind a type of imagination, not any imagination and definitely not fantasy even if a free-mind-wandering is natural, important and what makes us human. My focus here is 'moral' imagination.

My favourite description of 'moral imagination' is by Mark Johnson (*Moral Imagination*, Chicago University Press, 1993, p.187). He identifies the following components of moral imagination:

- 'self-knowledge about the imaginative structure of our moral understanding, including its values, limitations, and blind spots',
- 'similar knowledge of other people',
- 'the ability to imagine how various actions open to us might alter our self-identity, modify our commitments, change our relationships, and affect the lives of others',
- 'the ability to imagine and to enact transformations in our moral understanding, our character, and our behavior'

So, in line with these four components of the moral imagination, there seem to be four conditions of attentive listening:

- Self-knowledge or self-awareness or as Jane Leek put it 'self-listening'. Without being aware of our moral composition including our strengths, gifts, virtues, vices, biases, preconceptions, values, identification of blind spots, etc, we cannot properly engage in attentive listening.

Questions: In developing self-awareness as well as ecclesial/collective-awareness, what images distract us from seeing things. How do we address racism, genderism, foreignism and various phobias in order to listen more authentically to others? What blind spots stop us noticing things? What kind of ecclesial imaginaries influence our visions? These are big questions but we have to engage with big questions even if it is to check what exactly we are asking.

- Awareness that other people have their own structures which can be similar or different from our own. This second point emphasises that we are connected even if different, we are inter-dependent. When I listen and picture your world, I know that you are likely to do the same to me (unless you are distracted by a smell of coffee or some other thing). Tina Beatie said that when she listened to the people she accompanied, she imagined herself in their stories. Moral imagination is a deliberate act as practiced by Tina and other speakers.

Question: What does it mean for the Church to become truly interconnected and interdependent, especially in the climate of polarisation? What does it mean, ecclesially and ecclesiologically, to enter into each other's stories? I think we are trying to do this here.

- Attentive listening, inspired by moral imagination, is open to modification or alteration. After listening to you, I might change my view on how I see you, your work or ministry, and how I see myself and how I see the Church. I think all our morning speakers emphasised how impacted, challenged or healed they have been through listening attentively to those they accompanied. I think all you without knowing exercised moral imagination.

Question: what does it mean for the Church to alter and modify views and imagine inter-dependence?

- Attentive listening, thanks to moral imagination, is open to enacting transformation.

Question: what does it mean for the Church to enact transformation as a result of attentive listening/moral reimagining?

Summary and Conclusion

- What I am trying to propose is a deliberate use of moral imagination to get us moving from the staleness of certain types of images we carry with us individually and collectively.
- Moral imagination as a concept could be useful for examining how we listen 'to, with and as' (to use Tina Beatie 's distinctions) and 'who for' (as Clare Watkins suggested).
- Moral imagination has something to do with a deliberate search for what's not obvious, even what is not said or clear, visible, or is pushed to peripheries.
- Moral imagination can help us to articulate shifts and movements that take place in the process of attentive listening.

So, finally, when I listened to you in the morning, I felt that my eye-sight and heart-sight most of the time were in harmony. I felt the power of an ordinary human closeness; a properly boundaried closeness, at times awkward but still closeness, a type of closeness that is in tune with the humanity of other people. For me, this room has become a moral and holy space in which you helped me to mobilise my moral imagination. And, I thank you for this.