

A Reading Guide to Tracy Balzer's *A Listening Life*

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Concerning the Guide

This guide is designed to aid in further, deeper reflection on *A Listening Life*, as well as the informing scripture behind each chapter. As the book and study guide are of a shorter length, the reader is encouraged to take time with each chapter and avoid a fast consumption of the text.

You will notice a certain liturgical flavour in our guide. We designed this guide with a pattern in the hope that a rhythm for study and reflection would create the space and freedom to meet God. First, a passage of scripture sets a tone of listening and reverence. Second, we provide thoughts for reflection on the specific chapter. Our study guide offers a chance to chew on what Tracy offers in her book— through journaling, conversations, etc. Finally, we offer ideas for concrete application as a tangible means to practice listening. Avoid the tempting luxury of keeping ideas in mind without ever putting them into action. Applying what we know of God requires a certain amount of risk, and through this risk we learn to trust Him.

Paying Attention

The Word of the Lord

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her."

Luke 10:38-42

Reflect

Tracy points out that it is both important and possible to make space to listen to God, even during our busy schedules. She talks about our need to find "thin places" where we can listen to the voice of God.

Practice

Go find your favourite quiet place—your front porch, your room, or your favourite lawn chair. With this chapter and Luke 10:38-42 in mind, practice *noticing* the world around you. Meditate on your daily need to listen to Jesus' voice. Search for spaces in your mind and your heart where you can make room to hear God in your life.

Wonder

The Word of the Lord

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? Psalm 8:3-4

Reflect

Tracy says wonder is discovering “God’s Wow.” Listening to God through general revelation inspires reverence and fills us with wonder at the truth God reveals in His creation.

Practice

How do you perceive general revelation and special revelation? Do you consider one more important? How is God’s word in conversation with your daily experience? Allow creation (general revelation) to inspire awe and wonder in you. Go outside, take a telescope or a large blanket, lie down, and watch the stars. Allow their beauty and power, to reveal “God’s Wow” to you.

Illumination

The Word of God

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

Matthew 17:1-8

Reflect

In the chapter’s second half, Tracy tells the story about a piano tuner. Tracy relates how she “watched and listened to all of those dissonant, jarring notes, sounds that produced precisely the opposite effect on my soul that I’d been hoping for.” Ultimately, the off-key notes illuminated truth. Could the dissonance in your life reveal truth?

Practice

Keeping Tracy’s experience in mind, try to be attentive to moments of illumination. Sit in your kitchen or on your back porch. Visit a nursing home, a neighbourhood park, a cafeteria, a church denomination you don’t usually attend. Spend some time looking and listening for truth.

If you found illumination, what was your reaction? Recall Tracy’s discussion about Peter’s need to *do* something in response to Jesus’ transfiguration. Did you have an impulse to do something with the new truth, to make it productive? As Tracy concludes from God’s response to Peter in the mountain top story, the point of illumination is to “listen to Jesus. If there’s something more to be done, you’ll find out soon enough.”

Pain and People

The Word of the Lord

*Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.
Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
Psalm 62: 1-2*

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.
1 John 4:16-19*

Reflect

Tracy writes that pain muffles her ability to hear God: “I hear only garbled syllables, and I am numb.” She writes that losing a baby and discovering her husband’s MS brought out “big questions in my life.” She talks about being “functional but fearful,” only able to pray “*Lord Jesus, take away my fear.*” How do you talk to God when you are in crisis?

Tracy muses that sometimes “coming and sitting, silent but present” is often what we need when we are in pain, or it feels like we cannot find Jesus. How do you respond to people in pain? How can you practice listening and carrying people who are in pain?

Practice

Our fears—about the future, God’s goodness, sin, or relationships—often muddle our ability to see and know truth. We often do not know what we fear.

Reflect on your fears. Write out a list of your unspoken or unnamed fears.

Remember God’s promises in scripture (or look them up) and write down a few next to the list of your fears.

Tracy writes that people often “decode [God’s] words in the midst of my pain.” Reflect on the people in your life who have been “shoulders and prayers of determined friends” in your pain.

Next to the list of fears and promises, jot down a few ways the “global clan of souls” has affirmed Truth in your life.

Persistence

The Word of the Lord

“By standing firm you will gain life.”

Luke 21:19

Reflect

Tracy uses the imagery of a growing tree to show how being steadfast and patient may bring more gifts than instant gratification ever would. However, patience is not always easy—doubt, confusion, and anger about faith hinder our pursuit of God. She reminds readers “a listening life is one that resists the easy draw of superficiality and digs past the surface.” What do you see as the surface of spirituality? What makes faith difficult in your life?

Practice

Fasting is a spiritual discipline central to Christian faith. God often calls his people to fast, and Jesus spent forty days in the desert fasting and praying in preparation to face Satan’s temptation. Regular fasting is a way to practice persistence, especially if you have not fasted consistently or at all in the past. Consider picking a day a month (or a consistent time) to fast, preferably from food for 24 hours. A partial fast is a fast that eliminates only certain foods or limits the amount of food you eat. A normal fast is no eating and only drinking water. An absolute fast is a complete fast from food and drink. If you have not fasted before, ease into fasting. Our culture is obsessed with self-gratification. Denying our appetites creates a space for us to listen to God.

Sacramental Living

The Word of the Lord

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

*Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal
knowledge.*

*They have no speech, they use no words;
No sound is heard from them.*

*Yet their voice goes out into all the earth
their words to the ends of the world.*

Psalm 19:1-4

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

Luke 19:37-40

Reflect

Tracy writes, “God often speaks to us about invisible, intangible truths via visible, material means.” She notes that we are often eager to compartmentalize life—in reality, God’s presence and image permeates everything. God chooses to reveal himself to us in tangible ways. Tracy muses, “If a sacrament [specifically the Eucharist] is the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible reality, then perhaps we are not the only ones to speak when partaking.” God speaks to us through the world around us—people, creation, and culture. Tracy says “All creation will declare the glory of God, one way or the other.”

Practice

Tracy talks about taking time to notice life around her. She says that in Jesus, “The transcendent and heavenly became earthbound, present and solid, speaking and sleeping, eating, weeping, bleeding, dying.” Think about your daily, human life. Think about the daily life of Jesus—fully God and human—experiencing life as you do. Notice Jesus’ humanness—his toes, favourite food, and fatigue. Imagine Jesus’ as a teenager—the starting beard, the acne scars, his cracking voice. Remind yourself to notice conversations, people, and the nature around you. What does your ordinary, human experience reveal about Jesus as a man? As God?

Possessions

The Word of the Lord

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Matthew 6:19-21

Reflect

Throughout “Possessions”, Tracy mentions various ways giving up something valuable can feel like a waste or without reward. Tracy challenges readers to think about what they’ve actually gained by removing certain possessions from their lives. She says these possessions act as “distractions” that may hamper our ability to practice listening. What three physical things would you save from your house in a fire? How attached are you to your clothes, cute dishes, or decorative knick-knacks?

Practice

It’s hard to start eliminating things, so start small. Examine your closet. Which clothes are simply taking up space? Do you have sweaters you have not worn in three years? Do you need four pairs of running shoes? Pick ten things you do not use and donate or get rid of them. If you want to, move on to your bedroom, then your bathroom, and then to the house itself. Eliminate the non-essential. As you clean out your possessions, reflect on why are you holding on to specific items, especially if you never use them. Does this item come between you and your walk with God?

Silence and Stillness

The Word of the Lord

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

Mark 1:35

Reflect

In her chapter on Silence and Stillness, Tracy says, “Repentance. Rest. Quietness. Trust. Scripture is clear that these are at the root of salvation and strength.”

When you think about sitting in quietness, without even speaking to God inside your head, do the day’s tasks press in on your ability to listen to God? Or, as Tracy quotes Kierkegaard, “become nothing before God, and learn to keep silent”? Who wouldn’t want what Jesus found in his frequent retreats into silence and solitude? Tracy says, “The point of being silent without activity is that it teaches us to release control of our lives.” Doesn’t it make sense to let the God of the Universe take care of our lives?

Practice

Take some time out of your day, whatever amount, to keep silent, still, and to “do nothing.” Try not to move, try to silence your inner dialog, and allow yourself to release all of yourself to God, especially the tasks and worries that will threaten to press in. Jesus often retreated to be alone and in solitude. Use some set aside time to find out why.

Ancient Voices

The Word of the Lord

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.”

Hebrews 11:1-2

Reflect

“Ancient Voices” is about listening, but listening in a way about which we don’t often think. Tracy points out that we often allow our circumstances to turn absolutely inward, with regard only for our desires, needs, and wants, and that we do not always have people around us to help us get out. To get herself out of the “vortex of self-absorption and anxiety, the enemies that were conspiring to draw me from the love of God and the exhilaration of life,” Tracy turned to a counsellor and to the words of past saints. Have you ever read anything by an “Ancient Voice” like Thomas à Kempis or Teresa of Avila? Do you think these perspectives could hold any import towards contemporary faith?

Practice

Tracy references Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, and Thomas Kelley. Many in our time found a great help from these past saints. Read something the saints or a modern writer has written. As you read, consider underlining or marking favourite passages. Then, go back and ask, “Why was this specific passage meaningful to me?” Did it speak to a need you had? Did it resonate in a deeper spiritual place?

When Listening is a Gift

The Word of the Lord

“The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen”

1 Peter 4:7-11

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”

James 1:19-20

Reflect

Tracy talks about “feeling like a crocheted doily.” She questions whether what she has to offer is really meaningful. Contemplate where you find value. What ways do you feel God has specifically gifted you to serve the Body?

In addressing “*spiritual* poverty,” Tracy talks about the need for an “anamchara, Gaelic for ‘soul friend.’” We need friends who will listen and provide discernment outside of our “limited perspective.” When we are tied up in “spiritual knots,” friends who simply listen offer a valuable place for God to work: “The act of slowing, of focusing, of looking the speaker in the eye, conveys the compassion of God, and there is an awareness of the Holy in the room.”

Practice

Practice listening. Notice how you respond when someone starts talking to you. Put down your book, phone, or the dishtowel. Avoid asking “why” questions—questions that make people feel like the need to validate their feelings. Try “what” questions—allow people to simply tell their stories—practice listening without attempting to “fix” the problem.

Compassion

The Word of the Lord

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”

Romans 12:9-16

Reflect

In this chapter, Tracy connects her frustrating experience in an Irish prayer labyrinth to her “apparent inability to walk the maze of faith with these who were so vocal about following a different route.” Although Tracy wants to be unified with these believers, the contradictory perspectives in prayer labyrinth distract her ability to be fully connected. How are you at walking beside people with whom you disagree?

At the chapter’s conclusion, Tracy says, “But I could be content in knowing that by walking the labyrinth, they, we, were all facing God. It would seem that in facing God, the only way to walk is God-ward.” Are you satisfied if those in your life are walking God-ward, but are not taking your theological path?

Practice

Tracy confesses her exasperated thoughts about the man jingling change in his pocket with every step in the prayer labyrinth. Do you have a Change-Jingler in your life right now? Someone whose every move annoys you? How could you tangibly walk in compassion beside that person?

Take a walk alone in a local park, re-seeing it as your prayer labyrinth. Dedicate your walk not only as a focused time of prayer, but also as a time to walk the same path as the distracting bike-riders and joggers and young children who are journeying along with you.

Journeying

The Word of the Lord

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’ Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’

Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day... On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” ...

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.’”

John 6:51-54, 60, 66-69

Reflect

Though Tracy’s chapter on Journeying is full of community and contentment, she acknowledges that “not all journeys are that way.” Sometimes difficult journeys obscure Tracy’s “wonder of resurrection life.”

When Jesus’ followers heard him proclaim that he is the bread of life, many of them left Jesus and turned back from their journey because they could not accept his message. Whether your life includes international travel or daily travel between your job and the grocery store, whether you have a close community of friends or feel alone, whether you easily believe Jesus’ teaching or wonder “who can accept it,” how can you hold on to Peter’s question, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” as you journey with God?

Practice

Read Hebrews 11 and contemplate the lives of people throughout history who haven’t deserted Jesus even though they never saw the fulfilment of God’s promise while on earth. How were they able to continue following God and what was their reward for doing so? Consider how you can rely on others’ faith as encouragement when your own journey is overwhelming. Then take time to write down at least two instances from your own life when another person’s closeness to God has brought you closer to Him.

Humility

The Word of the Lord

“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

Proverbs 3:5

Reflect

In “Humility,” Tracy saw the Sisters met at St. Ben’s characterizing humility, “Lifelong learners inspire me with their attitude towards life and faith.” She continues later, “Lifelong learners know that spiritual transformation does not happen in a year or a decade, but in the span of a lifetime. No matter what we might understand of God, he is always more.” We understand that we do not know everything—humility is accepting that other people may know something more than us.

Does anyone like being around a Know-it-all? People who think they know everything about every situation stifle others’ contributions to whatever is at hand. Tracy seems to characterize humility as a constant pursuit of an attitude of learning, the opposite of a Know-it-all. Does your life posture include this look-before-speaking attitude? Or do you refuse to ask questions and speak first?

Practice

For a week, try to refrain from asserting your will in a situation. Rely on God’s “understanding”. Instead of speaking or acting first, wait, listen, and allow others to have their own “knowledge” rule the situation. This will help you truly know that not only is your own understanding limited, but also that God guides us along our paths through other people.

Author Interview:

Q: *A Listening Life* is not your first book. How did this one come about?

The first book on Celtic Christianity had to do with a specific realm of input into my own life. But this book is more a response or result of an overarching theme in my life. I've always had a sense of a call on my life to listen to God and to people. As simple as that is, it informs everything I do. Because I feel like listening as culture proceeds and there is so much sensory input, most of us have a hard time listening because there is so much noise in our life all the time.

Q: Can you talk more about always having had a sense of listening?

It really is rooted in a time in my life where I felt like, "Okay, I've been to Christian college, I've grown up as a Christian, I don't know everything about the bible or Christianity, I'm walking around with a lot of information— but was feeling like there was more to a life with God than just knowing a bunch of stuff. I became aware of a deeper longing I had for God himself and my own patterns of prayer, the way I've learned to pray or not to pray in church. We do a lot of talking, which God is good with—he wants to hear us—but we don't leave much room for him to speak. If we are going to be so big on a relationship with God, we must allow space for God to speak to us. I wanted to learn to be more receptive. I've been very aware of different teachers and people God brings about at just the right time who have taught me about the value of silence, which has just been huge. I just keep learning more and more and encountering people who teach me—and seeing in scripture how listening is a very real part of life with God.

Q: Were you more naturally inclined to make space to listen to God than most people? Is it something you can share with others?

This was not the Holy Spirit wrestling me into this perspective— it was very natural. Whatever your temperament is, your background—all of those things come into play with how much this is natural or foreign to you. I know not everyone is going to feel as natural or strongly about this as I do. But I feel it is strongly worth considering. I don't think anyone would argue our lives are not mostly noise, frenetic, and active, or that we don't really say even in church, "Okay, what does God have to say about this?" I'm not even at all suggesting that we stop to listen and God speaks in a loud, booming voice. It's not about that. It's more about giving God the opportunity for God to do what he wants with us. So, listening teaches humility. The world doesn't revolve around me. I can stop and pay attention for a while rather than feel like I have to do everything. There's just a lot we can learn from this posture.

Q: You talk about humility a more of a posture we should take, rather than a way we talk about ourselves. Humility is not assuming we know everything—could you talk about this more?

Humility and teachability are the same thing: being willing to let God and others shape you and

being willing to change. It's a relinquishment of our own plans for ourselves, in a sense, to say, "Someone else, and certainly God, might have better ideas here, so I want to know what those are." It's also a way we submit to others and to God. The ultimate example of humility is Jesus emptying himself and taking on the form of a slave. So that isn't so much a teachable part, but a laying aside of our own agenda. It isn't Jesus saying, "Oh, don't look at me, I'm just a guy." That's kind of a false humility. What humility really does is say, "I'm going to lay aside who I am for your good." It's acknowledging there's always something more to learn. And a willingness to say, "my agenda may not be the best one for this situation." Listening is essential for humility, because you must listen to other people's ideas.

Q: So a listening life is a humble life? A God-guided life?

When we think about it, what is happening when you listen to someone talk? You stop talking so you can hear someone else talk. When you are listening well, you put aside your own agenda. You aren't thinking about what you are going to say next, or wishing they would hurry up so you can say your important thought. You are present. It almost seems passive to some extent. You give that time to the other person. And so, a listening life is an exercise in putting yourself second or third and not putting yourself in the center all the time.

Q: When were you introduced to the idea of silence?

I went to a school very much like JBU— interdenominational—and enjoyed learning about other Christian traditions. Silence doesn't really tend to be an evangelical tradition. It set me on my own discovery of faith. Prayer was always really important to me so that was a natural inroad. But really, I didn't encounter silence as a spiritual practice until my mid-thirties. And that really came about because I had attended a journaling workshop by an author I really respected. Later on, she led a silent retreat. So much of the practices made sense to me. That was a really pivotal time for me. I knew that this would be an important part of ministry for me in the future, whether professionally or lay ministry.

Q: You talk a lot about rhythm of life. Do you have a habit built into your week or life? Do you practice silence regularly?

The Benedictine tradition has been important to me, especially the pattern of morning and evening prayer. It's a very rhythmic tradition. Silence, is whenever I can get it. I really do believe that small bits of silence through the day and through the week, snatched when you can, are really valuable. Even if the only result is that I stop thinking that I can manage it all, that I am doing well on my own, independently. My other rhythm is a funny one because it's not one I had ever dreamed I'd be a part of. I love to travel and take people on pilgrimages. I realize it's actually a luxury through JBU, and some of the work that I've done. But I love to take people on journeys where they can really get away. It's like taking students to the monastery and they encounter a silence that just rocks their world. It's certain moments throughout my year, those key moments, that force me out of my world geographically that I find really helpful. I realize it's not common that you get to do that. One of the reasons I like to take people is so they experience silence so profoundly, that they realize they don't have to leave their context, even though you have work hard at it. There are places right around you. That's why Jesus says, "Go

to your closet!” Everyone has a closet.

Q: Why do you have to work hard at it?

Because everybody else—your whole life— is telling you that it’s such a waste of time. What, take fifteen minutes to *do* nothing productive? Even as Christians, we take so seriously what God has for us to do that we try to go out and *do* all of the stuff. And that’s really important—we want to be obedient to that—but if we are always doing out of our own very shallow resources, it doesn’t often turn out very well. We see pastors melting down all the time because they are so busy. They start to believe their own press—that they can manage it all. Humility is important. It says, like Jesus, “So you’ve had a full day of ministry, now this evening. I have to go up to the mountain to be with God.” I’ve got to remind myself who I am, who he’s calling me to be, and this is all about his power, not mine. That removal of yourself from the frenzy, from the stress, from other expectations, is to convince yourself that you have permission to withdraw. God says, “No, I want you to listen to me.” Isaiah 55 is just a great chapter for this. Come, buy bread and wine without cost, and listen to me to find life for your soul. The word of God is what energizes us to do what he wants us to do. It is a bit of a battle. You have to work hard to say, “It really is okay, it really is okay to do nothing in the eyes of the world, but to connect with God in a way that reminds me who I am, who He is, and what it is He really wants me to do.