



Beyond Understanding

OTHER WAYS TO PRACTICE LISTENING

WHAT'S WRONG WITH "UNDERSTANDING"?

"Understanding" denotes "mental grasp." *Comprehend* comes from the Latin *comprehendere*: to seize, literally to take together. Understanding is a logical and worthwhile goal for any dialogue based on the exchange of *ideas*. Consider, however, that in the moment of receiving testimony or personal narrative, centering "understanding" as the only or highest goal privileges an analytical, cognitive form of meaning-making that risks veering into colonialist possession, based on an arrogant presumption that what the other shares of themselves and their life *can be* grasped, seized, taken, and made sense of *by us*. We often make comprehension the necessary precondition for compassion, trust, and belonging: in order to extend full humanity to the other, we think we must *first* understand or make sense of their culture, their experiences, their forms of expression, or their choices. We often use the quest for understanding as a way to avoid deeper emotional engagement with a person and the painful or bewildering story they (re)present, finding consolation in intellectualization and reducing human complexity to a cause-and-effect sequence or a data set to be analyzed. On the flip side, we may, striving for humility, use the awareness of our inability to understand as the pretext for abandoning any effort to receive the other's story at all: we couldn't possibly understand, so we won't even try to listen. **What are other ways we can think about and practice receiving another's story that prioritize connection, compassion, and recognition of humanity over the need to understand?**

A FEW OTHER POSSIBILITIES:

IMAGINE

To form a holistic concept of what someone is sharing, calling on all of the senses to attempt to live into their story and experience it as they describe it, without claiming full knowledge or understanding.

BELIEVE

To accept and affirm what someone is sharing as true, valid, and real, without demanding a further burden of proof, even (especially) when what they share is unimaginable or incomprehensible.

WITNESS

To be deeply, fully present for someone's moment of disclosure or discovery, especially of pain. This is the most simple (not easy) act of accompaniment: only presence, attunement, and attention are required.

FEEL

To fully experience (without claiming empathy) any emotional and physical sensations that arise while receiving someone's story, resisting dissociation and numbness and exercising full affective range.

RESONATE

To seek or discover points of resonance between the other's story and my own, recognizing that even a powerful sense of affinity is partial, not comprising comprehensive understanding or identification.

REMEMBER

To remain deliberately mindful of the cultural and ancestral history in which someone's individual story is embedded, especially against dominant efforts to erase, revise, or forget this history.

QUESTIONS TO THINK + TALK ABOUT

When have you experienced (or consciously practiced) any of these alternatives to understanding? In what contexts? What was the effect? What were the challenges? Which resonate particularly with you that you would like to practice?

What other ways of listening and receiving can you think of to add to the list above?