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**LEADING WITH THE EAR:
A SKETCH OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ROLE OF LISTENING IN SHAPING
THE CHURCH INTO A LEADING COMMUNITY**

by
Aaron Perry

The tragedy is that our eternal welfare depends
upon our hearing and we have trained our ears not to hear.
~A.W. Tozer

Presenter's note: This is a modified version of "The Phenomenological Role of Listening in Shaping the Church into a Leading Community," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 47:2, 165-178. Another modified form of this paper is published in *Developing Ears to Hear: Listening in the Spiritual Life, Pastoral Ministry, and Theology* (Emeth Press), edited by Aaron Perry.

Where there seem to be gaps in this paper, the other published versions of this paper should present fuller accounts.

Introduction

I have four goals in this presentation.

1. To have us think freshly about listening.
2. To believe that listening is worthwhile—an act of leadership.
3. To believe that listening is a Christian act.
4. To leave here intent on listening.

This paper is a sketch. It is not a fully formed argument, and as such contains presuppositions which should be declared. First, I presume religious diversity will grow and that the world will not cease being religious. Second, I believe that Christians should seek to pray, work, and speak for the conversion of people of other faiths and of no faith to the way of Jesus.

My sketch will progress along these lines. First, I will offer a description of listening utilizing the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Nancy. Listening allows something that is other into the self and, in that practice, provides the context for the possibility of relationship. Second, I will examine how listening is an act of leadership by accessing the emerging future using Otto Scharmer's matrix of change, Theory U. Third, I suggest why listening is a Christian act and fourth, how listening can be formative for the church, especially churches in the Wesleyan tradition. I will then offer suggestions how listening can shape the church to become a leading community in a religiously diverse world, opening this as an avenue for further exploration and critical engagement.

What is Listening?

[Briefly describe phenomenology and Husserl]

What does it mean to listen? Jean-Luc Nancy argues that listening is an action that discovers a secret. He asks, “What secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?”¹ Thus, listening is the practice that enables hearing. To hear with the ear, one must listen, just as to smell with the nose, one must sniff.² However, listening and hearing have a special relationship. In hearing, there is understanding, “as if ‘hearing’ were above all ‘hearing say.’”³ Thus, Nancy believes, listening means straining toward a *self*—though not necessarily a specific, individual self. “When one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something that identifies itself by resonating from self to self...”⁴ This participatory nature of listening clarifies its difference from seeing. Visualization includes an object, a reflection. Sonority is methexic—participatory.

To be listening, then, means to enter this sharing.

This description—to be in the space of sound and to be filled with sound—means that there is a double opening in the practice of listening. There is an opening both in the self and around the self. Thus, openness applies not only to the listener, but also to the speaker. Nancy writes, “Perhaps we should thus understand the child who is born with his first cry as himself being...the sudden expansion of an echo chamber.”⁵ This echo chamber of the self is exhibited when Nancy writes that “[s]ilence’...must here be understood not as a privation but as an arrangement of resonance: a little...as when in a perfect condition of silence you hear your own body resonate, your own breath, your heart and all its resounding cave”⁶

This double opening, of self reaching for self, means that listening is the context for the possibility of relationship. The open self strains toward the other self in the space made by sound that encapsulates them both. In the sound, as one listens, there is a straining toward a meaning, otherwise secret, but now made public. A self is open to another self in the openness of the sound in which one listens. So, how can listening in this act of double opening be an act of leadership? For this question we turn to Otto Scharmer and *Theory U*.

How is Listening an Act of Leadership?

“We live in an era of intense conflict and massive institutional failures, a time of painful endings and of hopeful beginnings.”⁷ So starts Otto Scharmer’s massive exploration of the social technology of presencing, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*. Scharmer wants to learn not only what leaders do and how they do it, but the inner source from which they operate.⁸

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 6. “Être à l’écoute, ‘to be tuned in, to be listening,’ was in the vocabulary of military espionage before it returned, through broadcasting, to the public space, while still remaining, in the context of the telephone, an affair of confidences or stolen secrets” (4).

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 1.

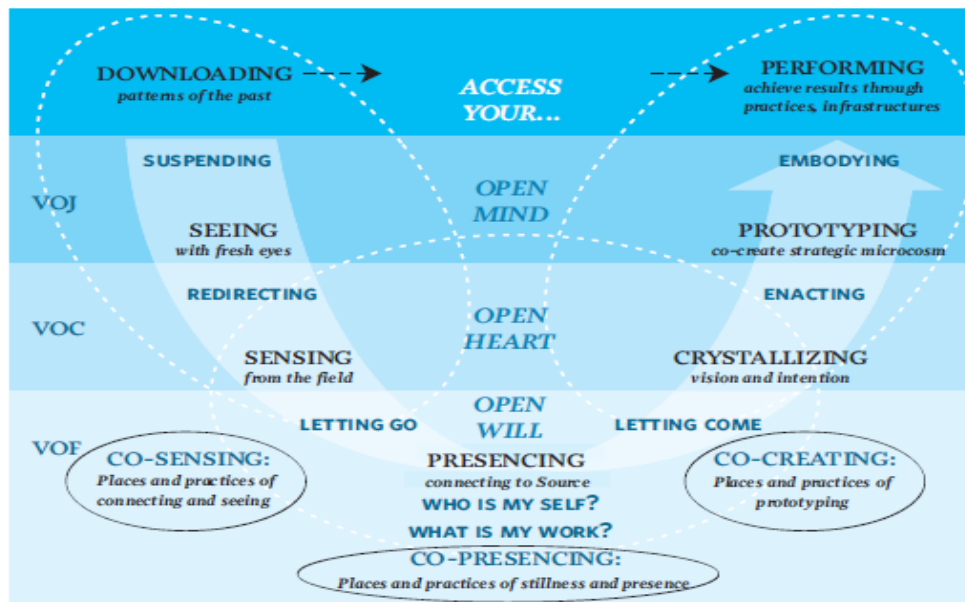
⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

[Jose Bautista illustration of leadership matrix]

Scharmer believes that the “essence of leadership is to shift the inner place [of operation] both individually and collectively.”⁹ This place is the field structure of attention, of which there are four: I-in-me; I-in-it; I-in-you; I-in-now. So, the work of leadership is to shift from a perspective of I-in-me to other, more robust places. He illustrates these four structures of attention using the example of listening. So, there are four types of listening that correspond to the field structures:

1. Downloading (I-in-me): This listening confirms previous judgments; it says, “Yeah, I already know that.”
2. Factual listening (I-in-It): This listening is open to new or contrary data; it says, “Ooh! Look at that!”
3. Empathic listening (I-in-You): This listening is open to the other as a person. It looks into the “story of a living being, a living system, and self.”¹⁰ It says, “Oh, yes, I know how you feel.”¹¹
4. Generative listening (I-in-Now): This listening is open to the emerging field of the future. The listener’s will is open to new understandings of the self and vocation in this listening. It says, “I am connected to something larger than myself.”¹²

Here is a diagram of Theory U, a social field theory that helps to shift these places of operation.¹³



We lack the space to explore such a complex diagram, but for our purposes, let me offer the following thoughts. First, the left side of the U is meant to produce deep observation. To access the future, there must be a cessation of simple downloading. Instead we must see from different fields—I-in-It and I-in-You. These are the movements of Seeing and Sensing. To enable these

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ This phrase is unfortunate because of its colloquial status and arrogance. One can never know how another feels, although this type of listening seeks *as much as possible* to know what the other feels. The listener who understands that this search is unending understands the constant strain to meaning which is listening.

¹² Scharmer, *Theory U*, 11-13.

¹³ Ibid., 45.

movements, Scharmer utilizes three gestures, suspending, redirecting, and letting go. We suspend judgment to see; we redirect our senses to come from the field, rather than simply from ourselves; we let go of fears that might be holding back the moment of I-in-Now, the movement of presencing. Presencing is a movement that is a combination of being fully *present* in the moment and *sensing* the future that wants to emerge, hence “presencing.” In this moment we “step into...our authentic self. Presencing is a movement where we approach our self from the emerging future.”¹⁴

The right side of the U is about the new project, product, movement, organization, etc. that emerges from this movement of presencing. Once one has let go of fears, one can let come the future that desires to emerge. This gesture allows the crystallizing movement, where ideas begin to take shape, before there is prototyping, and, ultimately, performing.

It is important to note that Scharmer does not believe the U is a mechanical, linear process. Rather, “it works as a matrix...as an integral whole.”¹⁵ Theory U is not a strategy for change, but a description of the movements and gestures that access of the deepest source and highest future from where leading individuals and communities must act.

There are two further aspects to the U that are essential for our purposes. First, on the far left are the initials VOJ, VOC, and VOF. Scharmer describes these as enemies that block one’s access to the U: They are the Voice of Judgment, Voice of Cynicism, and Voice of Fear.¹⁶ They correspond to the center aisle, which are the three instruments available to individuals and communities that allow one to perform the gestures and movements of the U. These instruments are the Open Mind, Open Heart, and Open Will. The Open Mind allows fresh seeing and suspending of judgment; it is the ability to access intellectual intelligence. The Open Heart allows empathy; it is the ability to access emotional intelligence. The Open Will is the ability “to access [the] authentic purpose and self,” through gestures of letting go and letting come.¹⁷ It is spiritual intelligence.

The three voices are enemies to these instruments because they keep them closed. The Voice of Judgment closes the mind and blocks access to creativity. The Voice of Cynicism closes the heart and denies the “vulnerability” of the self by distancing the self. The Voice of Fear closes the will because it threatens the very self. There is fear of alienation, ridicule, and even death.¹⁸ Scharmer does not believe that these voices should never be listened to, but that these voices can block one’s progress to the authentic self in the presencing movement where there is connection to the Source. Joseph Myers’ approach to these voices is better, however. Myers believes that everyone has a voice of judgment, cynicism, and fear and that only by listening do we discern the actual nature of these voices. So, before one disregards these voices, one must first learn what they sound like through listening.¹⁹

[Personal application: WHAT DO I SOUND LIKE WHEN I AM JUDGING? WHAT DO I SOUND LIKE WHEN I AM CYNICAL? WHAT DO I SOUND LIKE WHEN I AM AFRAID?]

¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹ Joseph Myers, telephone interview. March 11, 2010. Myers’ work is especially helpful for leadership and listening in the local church. See his, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) and *Organic Community: Creating a Place where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

Scharmer also has concrete practices of listening that engage with Theory U. In the movement that follows presencing, one engages in co-creation. One of Scharmer's concrete practices is to engage in conversation with others who play important roles in this field. He writes, "I as a listener need *to build a space for the 'Other'* within myself. It is this inner space that creates the possibility for my counterpart to come into appearance—rather than just myself with my preconceived ideas." So the practice here is about intentionally building that space for the 'other' within us."²⁰ In the practice of conversation, one creates space in the self to listen to and hear from the other. This resonance with Nancy is deepened as one of Scharmer's interviewees describes his leadership work as facilitating this *opening* process.²¹

Scharmer believes conversations utilizing the deepest form of listening enable creation and a new world.²²

These practices of listening and conversation allow leaders to be open to the emerging future that is opening to them.

What Makes Listening a Christian Act?

So, listening can be an act of leadership when it enables access to the emerging future. But what makes that description Christian? Let's examine this question with some reflections on reading Scripture from Eugene Peterson's *Eat This Book*.²³

Listen to this description of reading from Peterson. He writes, *Hagah* is a word that our Hebrew ancestors used frequently for reading the kind of writing that deals with our souls. But 'meditate' is far too tame a word for what is being signified. 'Meditate' seems more suited to what I do in a quiet chapel on my knees with a candle burning on the altar. Or to what my wife does while sitting in a rose garden with the Bible open in her lap. But when Isaiah's lion and my dog meditated they chewed and swallowed, using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines: Isaiah's lion meditating his goat (if that's what it was); my dog meditating his bone. There is a certain kind of writing that invites this kind of reading, soft purrs and low growls as we taste and savor, anticipate and take in the sweet and spicy, mouth-watering and soul-energizing morsel words – 'O taste and see that the LORD is good!' (Ps. 34:8).²⁴

This is the kind of reading that changes a life, engaged with words that are meant "*to get inside us, to deal with our souls, to form a life that is congruent with the world that God has created, the salvation that he has enacted, and the community that he has gathered.*"²⁵ Hence, Peterson believes that reading is *eating*, taking into the self. The danger with words is that they can be read otherwise: words can become "propaganda or [be] reduced to information, mere tools and

²⁰ Ibid., 383. Italics added.

²¹ Ibid., 314.

²² Ibid., 298.

²³ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ Ibid., 3-4. Italics added.

data.”²⁶ When we read like this, “[w]e *silence* the living voice and reduce words to what we can use for convenience and profit.”²⁷ Peterson says that words spoken and listened to “are intended to do something *in us*....”²⁸

This connection is reinforced in Peterson’s discussion of John the Divine and the angel from Revelation 10. John is about to write, but the angel tells him not to; instead, he must take the scroll and eat it. Peterson writes,

The words in the book had just been re-voiced, taken off the page and set in motion in the air where they could enter ears.... The preaching angel had just gotten them off the printed page, and now John was going to put them back again. No, says the heavenly voice – I want those words out there, creating sound waves, entering ears, entering lives. I want those words preaching, sung, taught, prayed – *lived*.²⁹

Notice Peterson’s language: creating sound waves, entering ears. The context of sound and hearing is the context of singing, teaching, praying—hearing creates the context for appropriate relationship to Scripture. In this relationship, Peterson says we are “to *listen* for resonances, echoes, patterns” in Scripture.³⁰

This phenomenon of double opening is displayed in Luke’s gospel. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus travels with two companions, whom he discovers are *talking* about everything that has happened (Luke 24:14). Yet in their discussions, they are downcast. They do not believe what the prophets have *spoken* (v. 25), because they are slow of heart. Heart refers to the “inner commitments, dispositions and attitudes”³¹ of these disciples, evidently *closed* to the work of God. They have not believed because they are not *open*. Yet Jesus explains what was *said* in the Scripture concerning himself (v. 27). After Jesus breaks the bread and disappears from their sight, the two companions say to each other, “Were not our *hearts* burning within us while he talked with us on the road and *opened* the Scriptures to us?” (v. 32). That the effect on the heart is mentioned in connection with Jesus *speaking* lets us know that listening is important, but even more important for our purposes is the description of Jesus’ action with the Scriptures: he *opened* (*dianoigo*) the Scriptures. Here is the first of the double opening of listening. Luke places the second just a few verses later. Jesus appears among the disciples and confirms that he is flesh and bones. Luke then says, “Then he *opened* (*dianoigo*) their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (v. 45). Here is the second of the double opening for there to be listening: the Scriptures are opened and the disciples’ minds are opened.

Thus, the Christian approach to Scripture can be examined as a practice of listening, a phenomenon of double opening—of the self and of the text. This discovery also grounds listening Christocentrically, since Jesus is the one who opens both mind and Scriptures. How can this practice be communally formative?

²⁶ Ibid., 11.

²⁷ Ibid., 11. Italics added.

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ Ibid. 37.

³⁰ Ibid., 47. Italics added.

³¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 854.

How does Listening Shape the Church?

[Shift into church practice and hermeneutics.]

Openness is a key theme to Gadamer. For Gadamer, as for Nancy, listening is about being addressed by the other as a self—to let the other “really say something to us.”³² Thus, Gadamer writes, “[A]nyone who listens is fundamentally open.”³³ Merold Westphal calls this openness a “vulnerability to the voice of the other.”³⁴ Such vulnerability is exactly what enables there to be a change when engaging Scripture. This vulnerability of the reader means that the text does not (just) have a meaning to be mined, but also poses questions of the reader. The reader does not probe the text; the text probes the reader.³⁵ In this practice, Gadamer suggests not that the reader *answer* the text, but that the reader learn to ask their own questions.³⁶ Thus listening is a practice of interpretation that allows a conversation to develop. In this conversation, as it spreads to other interpreters, presuppositions can be challenged, replaced, and affirmed from the text.³⁷

Now, consider the nature of the Scriptural text as an address. Peterson writes that language is God’s mode of communication and that God’s subsequent bestowal of language on humans means that humans can “respond, answer, converse, argue, [and] question” God.³⁸ God is the “initiator and guarantor of language *both ways*.”³⁹ Now, if Scripture is a living voice, from the one who assures language both ways, then we can see how Scripture is a conversation partner.

Here we can see how interpretation and performance are knit together. Westphal writes, “All performance is interpretation *and* all interpretation is performance.”⁴⁰ Thus, if listening is a hermeneutical practice, then one performs Scripture in this action. By listening, the church not only accesses the text to know its meaning as it is opened, but performs the text and becomes the community the text is creating.

Westphal agrees with Gadamer that a text held in such regard by enough people that it founds a community and helps to sustain it is a classic text.⁴¹ As texts “found communities, are sustained by communities, and in turn sustain communities,” their interpretation is “a communal affair.”⁴² Thus, Westphal describes the church as a “a communal conversation” around

³² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 355.

³³ *Ibid.*, 355.

³⁴ Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 115.

³⁵ Peterson writes, “The act of eating the book means that reading is not a merely objective act, looking at the words and ascertaining their meaning. Eating the book is in contrast with how most of us are trained to read book – develop a cool objectivity that attempts to preserve scientific or theological truth by eliminating as far as possible any personal participation that might contaminate the meaning. But none of us starts out reading that way” (*Eat this Book*, 20).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁸ Peterson, *Eat this Book*, 103.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 103. Italics added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 118.

Scripture.⁴³ If Christian Scripture is accessed by listening and is meant to shape a community, then the hermeneutic of listening becomes formative for the church.

The Church as a Leading Political Community

I believe the trace of this sketch is important for churches in the Wesleyan tradition because of its history in the class meetings and its intentionality to develop practices of conversation and listening. As such, churches in the Wesleyan tradition are appropriately positioned to be leading communities.

I declared at the outset my assumption that the world is becoming more religious. As these religious communities, founded by religious texts, share common public space, they will and must engage with one another. These smaller listening communities, as they provide more intimate settings, can create the context of relationship with other religions by being open to the other.

As such, the church, as it becomes a community of listeners, is not just communal, but also *political*. With the Wesleyan tradition of societies, we must reclaim the political nature of these smaller communities while exhibiting an openness to the other faith adherent. While Wesley's societies were originally developed with the purpose of discipleship in the Christian faith, the name society itself was common, noting any assembling together.⁴⁴ The societies also served as means of providing funds. These two points can come together in contemporary expression. In my own leadership of small groups in the local church, we have made this a practice, as well, by supporting the common good through micro-loans in developing nations.⁴⁵ We attempted to be an expression of the society in modern by specifically gathering for the benefit of the common good, but without divorcing this intention from our personal piety and discipleship through giving. Likewise with listening: just as listening was described as the practice of Scripture, it is an act of discipleship; as it embodies the gospel to an adherent of another faith, it is an act of evangelism.

The most pressing concern is that a contemporary expression of the societies would lose their distinctive Christian character. This is always a concern and one Wesley needed to address as members were not walking properly in their faith. However, an intentional openness need not discount the Christian character where people of other faiths are invited and welcomed for the purpose of respectful conversation.⁴⁶ The more intimate nature of the bands gives us a dynamic in discipleship that allows greater freedom in the modern expression of societies.⁴⁷ This is an avenue open for further discussion and implementation by both academics and practitioners.

⁴³ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁴ *John Wesley the Methodist: A Plain Account of His Life and Work* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1903) online at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesley-the-methodist/chapter-ix-society-and-class/>. Accessed April 5, 2011.

⁴⁵ For an example of an institution enabling micro-loans, see www.kiva.org.

⁴⁶ Indeed, Wesley's General Rules can be read as rules appropriate to several forms of religious practice, especially Wesley's urge simply to do good to all people, as far as possible.

⁴⁷ For a contemporary model of small group ministry that encourages larger group sizes and a certain amount of care in what amount of a person's spiritual health is shared, see Myers, *The Search to Belong*, especially chapter 3, and Nelson Searcy & Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008). Myers' approach is heavily dependent on the sociology of Edward T. Hall and the study of proxemics, as applied to a spiritual context in local church settings.

The challenging nature of this calling reveals the necessity to be focused on the call to leadership and avoid simply seeing the practice of listening as being polite. As Graham Ward writes of these forthcoming and existing clashes of community, “[I]f we are to reach any common understanding of ourselves, one another, and the threats and possibilities that pervade the cultures in which we are situated, it is only by being impolite and listening to one another’s impoliteness.”⁴⁸

[Personal illustration from conversation with friend; transformation starting?]

Listening is a constructive practice. Luke Bretherton unpacks listening as a practice that *cultivates* a political sphere. Listening helps to overcome prior assumptions of agenda and political program. It “creates a common realm of shared action and meaning.”⁴⁹ With significant public space occupied by communities of varying faiths, listening helps foster a conversation about how to act together that allows for “real politics.”⁵⁰ Conversation, including in part the practice of listening, has been understood as a key practice and mutual aid on the way to holiness in the Wesleyan tradition.⁵¹ Thus, churches in the Wesleyan tradition have a unique opportunity to teach the discipline of listening as a *Christological act*, centered on the community’s interaction with Scripture and, hence, each other, as Jesus opens the church and the Scriptures, so that disciples of Jesus can foster political participation in his name.

Churches in the Wesleyan tradition can be leading communities in larger gatherings because listening can also be a transformational practice in this world. Recall that listening allows the other into you. Thus, as Christians listen, they are practicing a deep form of presence, as opposed to distance, in the world. Graham Ward argues that the events, stories, etc., that are listened to, then, allow the church to tune itself to the world.⁵² Ward writes, “as [Christians] dwell in Christ and Christ in [them], then [events, stories, etc.] pass through Christ also.”⁵³ Could we not say that as these events pass through Christ, they may be brought under his authority? And could we not say that this transformation of all events and history under the authority of Christ is the emerging future of the universal reign of Jesus?

Conclusion

Four goals:

1. To have us think freshly about listening.
2. To believe that listening is worthwhile—an act of leadership.
3. To believe that listening is a Christian act.
4. To leave here intent on listening.

⁴⁸ Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 22.

⁴⁹ Luke Bretherton, “Reflections on Graham Ward’s *The Politics of Discipleship*,”

<http://www.calvin.edu/~jks4/churchandpomodocs/bretherton.pdf>, 7. Accessed April 20, 2010.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵¹ See Aaron Perry, “Listening, Narrative, and Atonement,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43:1 (Spring 2008): 133-45 for further exploration of listening and conversation in the process of transformation.

⁵² Bretherton, “Reflections on Graham Ward,” 281. Recall how Scharmer described the open mind, will, and heart as three instruments to be tuned.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 282.

Yet the world is turbulent and listening will show us how dangerous the world is. It requires an openness in the other that may not be forthcoming. Dr. Timothy Tennent has described this globo-religious moment as a period of the pause.⁵⁴ It is the short moment of recovery before there is another concerted efforted. It is a *Selah* moment. This is what listening allows. While listening is not the only Christian act of leadership, in this time of religious diversity, it may be the most appropriate.

⁵⁴ Dr Timothy Tennent's address at the Wesley Ministry Conference: The Gospel in the North American Mosaic, April 26, 2010, Tyndale College and Seminary.