

Basics of Empathic Listening for Pastoral Care Ministry March 5th, 2019, 3 PM Transcript



Description:

This webinar explores the art of empathic listening, including how one can develop and practice empathic listening skills and factors that affect one's ability to authentically connect and be present to others. This exploration also distinguishes empathic listening from other forms of human interaction and looks at its critical role and healing nature in pastoral care ministry.

Presenters:

The presenters are:



Theodore M. Smith, D.Min - Dr. Smith is a recently retired United Methodist minister with almost 40 years in professional hospital ministry as a chaplain and pastoral educator in four faith-based hospitals. He currently serves as primary faculty person for the Pastoral Care Institute, a major educational program in pastoral care ministry for laity in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.



Kathryn Getek-Soltis, STL, Ph.D. - Dr. Getek Soltis is Director of the Center for Peace and Justice Education and Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. She previously served as the lay Catholic chaplain in a Boston area house of correction and currently leads communion services in the Philadelphia Department of Prisons.



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Transcription:

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

I'd like to welcome you all. Thank you for joining us for the webinar today. I'm welcoming you. My name is Katherine Getek-Soltis, and I'm welcome you on behalf of the Catholic prison ministries coalition. We're excited for today's webinar, which is on the basics of empathic listening for pastoral care ministry. And with me today is Dr. Theodore Smith. So, I'd like to introduce you to him and give you a few quick tips about how we'll proceed today. And then we'll begin. So, it's our pleasure to welcome Dr. Smith to us. He's worked in hospital ministry as a chaplain and pastoral educator for almost 40 years and is recently retired as a United Methodist minister. He's a published author and national speaker. And at present, Dr. Smith serves as the primary faculty person for the pastoral care Institute in the archdiocese of Galveston, Houston.

It's a pastoral care ministry program for the laity. So, we're really privileged to have his wisdom. Today as we learn more about empathic listening in the context of pastoral ministry, particularly as we think about how that translates to those affected by incarceration. We'll have a presentation from Dr. Smith to begin, and then we'll open this up to some more conversation. So, you're very welcome to, to the bottom of your screen. There's a Q & A button, and you can type questions in there, and we'll try to field as many as possible before the end of our time. We'll conclude at two o'clock Eastern time. And, we just look forward to this time together. So, let me just begin with a brief prayer, and we'll turn things over to Dr. Smith.

Loving and God, we ask for your blessing on our time together today. Open our hearts so that we can better respond to the needs of your people. Open our ears so we can recognize your wisdom wherever it may be found. Open our eyes to see our own brokenness and need for forgiveness, as we call to mind all those whose lives have been touched by the criminal justice system. We pray that you will draw close to those who feel abandoned or lost. We pray that you restore hope to those who have given up on themselves and to those who have given up on others. We pray that you give us the strength to confront how we fail one another and confront the systems of injustice in which we participate. Oh God, may are good news, enlightened, live in our ministries and give us a generous spirit to love as you love, to seek a peace that only you can give, and to work for justice that we can know only through your mercy.

Theodore M. Smith:

I mean, Kathryn, thank you very much. It's an honor for me to be here, a part of this, webinar and involved in this extremely important ministry. So, thank you very much for this, a warm introduction and this invitation. And just for the record, I'm flattered, but I go by Ted, and I hope they will be very collegial and informal during our time together. Before I



began with my presentation's content, I'd like to share two presuppositions about this topic of empathic listening.

First of all, empathic listening is an art and not a science or a technique. I understand that we have a wide group of people with a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. If this is new to you, if you've not had any formal training in empathic listening, then I extend to you a very warm welcome because you are in good company.

We are all learners. For me, there are no masters of empathic listening. It's an art. It's not a science or technique. And therefore, it's always important to continue to learn and to go back to the basics. And for some of us today, this may be very, very basic, but it's my bias that it's good for all of us to review the actual basics that we have. The second thing is that since empathic listening is, is an art and not a science, the categories of assessing one's effectiveness in empathic listening of right and wrong are not helpful. I find it far more useful to use a different category of effectiveness. And, if you will envision a continuum and on one end of the continuum would be a response that we might judge as less effective. And on the other end of the continuum, we evaluate a response to being more effective. Of course, most of our responses are somewhere in the middle of this continuum of effectiveness. I think that's very, very important. And I think that frees us up in a lot of ways.

So, I want to begin by sharing a vignette. It was CLO. It was near the close of a long and lustrous, and amazingly productive life. The 90-year-old John Adams, the second president of the United States, was not actively dying. Still, he was clearly declining, and a lot of people would come by his home making calls to him, some coming out of curiosity, others coming out of genuine friendship and interest. But he received them all gladly. So writes David McCullough in his very massive Pulitzer prize-winning [biography](#). He goes on to talk a bit more about these visitors that came by to see the second president. He focused on one occasion when after some people would leave and John Adams was feeling low and more alone than before they came.

Of one particular couple Adams himself wrote following their visit quote, "They had eyes and ears to perceive the external person, but not feelings to sympathize with internal griefs, pains, anxieties, solitudes and inquired attitudes within." But he'd complained only to himself and to a few other people. Now, this is 19th-century language, to be sure, but Adams, it makes the point. This particular couple, this anonymous couple, by the way, we don't know who they are, had no feelings for the internal grease pains and anxieties. Now, in fairness to this couple, they weren't the only ones that did not have an empathic connection with the second president. A few others apparently for whom he voted, something like that and don't mean don't know the details. It is interesting to conjecture about what happened during that visit. Why wasn't there a connection? Were they intimidated by visiting? The second president noted that they came out of curiosity and froze, and they were scared.

Maybe their anxiety got to them, and they simply talked and talked and talk and never began to listen. They were filling up the room with empty assurances, superficial chit chat and perhaps incessant questions. By the way, do you all know how many times pastoral care providers rely accessibly on questions to make a connection with another person? I don't know what your experience is. Still, in my many years of working with colleagues in formation, so often we rely on questions, and suddenly the pastoral care setting turns into a courtroom. The care receiver is on the witness stand because we, if you will, pepper that person with questions.

But here we are almost 200 years later, still discussing the negative of this particular couple's visit in some cases. Therefore, the lack of empathy is long-lasting; I think it's safe to say that these were regular folks, that they had no training in pastoral care ministry or pastoral care or caring ministries. They were simply North Easterners living in the early 1800's. Some had relational skills, and others didn't. But regardless of the capacity to connect with John Adams, we remember them for good or ill. And so, it continues to this day when we make it empathic connection with others. It's a true gift to them. And of course, the reverse is also true when others connect with us; we feel gifted. So, the importance of empathic connection is, seeing not only in terms of 200 years ago, but it would be absolutely truthful to say that it's essential to the human experience as a whole. The renowned Austrian American psychoanalyst, [Heinz Kohut](#), put it this way, "Empathy is a psychological nutrient without which to remain alive as we know it and cherish it could not be sustained.

Would you agree with me that many people are psychologically malnourished? Another way of putting it in terms of our times today, we are called to feed our neighbors. I'm moving from empathy in terms of the broad human context. We turn our attention more toward our discipline, pastoral care, and draw upon the insights of pastoral theologians and pastoral caregivers. We're going to have the first slide, the second one. So, as I do so many times, I turn to a teacher of mine though I never met [Father Henry Nouwen](#). Now, and I know this name is undoubtedly known to all of you. At one point, he talked about what we do as healers in terms of the healing process and ourselves as healers. I'm sorry, I'm getting out of order—just a second.

Okay. I'm sorry. And so, in one of his writings, Father Nouwen says this, "Providing healing means the creation of empty but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to anyone who truly listens." And then he goes on to say this, "the most important questions about healer listeners is not what to say or to do, but rather how to develop enough inner space where their story can be received." Now, I saw my internist, last week and I was told it was pretty humbling that I needed to lose some weight. So, I intentionally drew a very active caregiver here with a very slim physique. And I figured if I looked at this image enough, it might help me lose a bit more weight. But the point here is that this symbolizes Father Nouwen's empty but friendly space that's interior to us as caregivers.

Now, I would just say that whatever else I might share with you today, I hope that this image that you see there on your screen is one that you will continue to, remember because if we don't get this, I'm not sure the rest of what we're going to talk about will make a lot of sense. If we don't have a place to receive that person's narrative, then we're not going to make any kind of meaningful, empathic connection. The image looks to CIC to be deceptively simple, especially if we're with a talkative person. All we have to do, therefore, is just kind of sit back, relax and let the narrative flow. We take it in. But too often, if our primary motive in terms of serving others is to help or to make a significant impact, our interior space is filled with our well-intended but sometimes poorly timed brilliant insights, pearls of wisdom, lifesaving answers.

And, when we're filled with that, there's no empty interior space with which to receive that person's narrative. There's no room in the end, if you will, in terms of a biblical image. I'd like to move on and make a couple more comments about empathy in general. We're going to have the next slide. There we go. Thank you. and then we'll look at a definition. Another colleague of mine from whom I've learned an immense amount of material is the Reverend [Dr. Herbert Anderson](#). He currently is a professor emeritus, from Catholic theological union where he taught pastoral care and pastoral theology for many, many years. So, Herbert has some very, very important thoughts about empathy that I wanted to share with at least some of them. First of all, he was saying he would argue that empathy is feeling *with* a person and not *for* a person. Feeling *for* a person, one would say, is sympathy, but rather feeling *with* a person is empathy.

But it's feeling *with* a person in a particular way, in a very, very important nuanced way. And that is without equating their experience with mine to realize that even though I may have a great deal of experience, every person is unique in the world, and I'm trying to understand that person. I'm going to suspend my perspective and not move forward. Also, empathy is feeling with and then also responding. Empathy is a two-step process where I received the person's scenario and responded in such a way to give assurance to that person that I have received their story. Otherwise, put that they have the confidence that their pain that they've experienced or shared with me is in my heart. Now we live in a very, very diverse world which is rich and celebrate it and to be super celebrated.

But there are times that empathy is more challenging because of various sociological factors in terms of language, history, culture. That is another enormous topic in and of itself. But it should be noted that the outset that sometimes, these factors are areas where we really do need to do some homework ourselves. Catherine, I'm just aware of the time, and I'm not sure that I'm pacing myself well enough. So, I'm going to continue and then, but I'm just going to be conscious of the time. I just want to make sure that we have time for Q & A. All right. This business about giving a response to a person and assuring them that I've heard them accurately. This makes it a very important point. And that is that the care receiver is always the judge of my capacity to make an empathic connection.



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Remember the couple with President Adams, who made their assessment about their effectiveness? He did. And so, part of the challenge is not only to listen carefully but also to respond in a way using their language and words meaningful to them, assuring them that they have been heard. And unlike President Adams, not feeling low and alone. So, why don't we take a look at the next slide, and we'll look at a definition to get. So, this definition, a one-sentence definition, is very concise but also nuanced. It comes from the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling by Dr. David Massey. And he says that "empathy is the ability to identify with an experience another person's experience by as much as possible suspending one's own frame of reference to enter the perceptual and emotional world of the other." (Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, p. 354).

I think it's a very, very helpful definition. I'm going to go into, in a bit more detail, by looking at the next slide, please. So here we are back with our buddy, our caregiver. And, what I've done is to include some of the basic concepts that Herbert Anderson talks about when he when he's describing, empathy. And he says that the empathy process, as they call it, begins with a pre-understanding or attitudes that we bring to the pastoral setting. And he has several perspectives that he wants us to keep in mind. And for him, the primary attitude is a wonder, a sense of wonder. You know, when I first learned this from Herbert, I thought of wonder as something extremely rare, and if you will, a one-time experience for me, one of those feelings of awe was seeing a band of the Milky Way galaxy for the first time in Central America.

I was just awestruck by the immense magnitude of these brilliant stars in the heavens. And I was truly taken with a sense of wonder. For some of us, a child's birth is a very, very profound sense of wonder. But here, wondering, our context is much more concrete and specific. Is it possible for us even to go back to our places of ministry where we've served many, many years or to return to a person that we've provided in ministry for 20, 30 previous visits? To go back to that person with a sense of wonder, more specifically to convey to that person that we are giving them, is that they feel rapt attention from us. What was the last time somebody related to you and in a way where you felt like their full attention was focused on you? Of all of the seven-plus billion people in the world, you felt that you are the most important person for them at that time. You had their complete and undivided attention. Otherwise, have we received the sense from the other person that they view us with amazing admiration? This language, these concepts are stretching to me. Still, I think they're very challenging and helpful, and that is, it gives a sense of freshness and energy to pastoral conversations that sometimes we might otherwise not have.

Another important element in terms of empathy is a willingness to be surprised, even though our perspective is extremely important and valuable. People have a variety of experiences and worldviews that we don't have at all. And so, it's important for us to be willing, to be stretched when we encounter somebody else as we try to enter into their world. Obviously,



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another part of that is to be open, if you will, to the pastoral conversation, the sense, of, of a journey. You know, to go back to the sense of wonder for just a second, another author talks about wonder this way. It is a searching attitude of simultaneously knowing and not knowing. And this goes back to in some ways captures Massey's definition about, about empathy, where we suspend our judgment, but then we try to enter into the world of the other person.

So, if I'm listening to a person and they're sharing an experience that I've had something very, very similar to it, we listen in, in a very, very important way where I, I don't ignore my experience with something similar to theirs, but I hold it in a balance, if you will, and give my full attention to the nuances and the subtleties of their experience without directly appealing to my mind. So, this raises a larger question about what place does sharing personal history have in listening and empathy. And quite frankly, there are different views among professionals in this area, at least in terms of colleagues with whom I've talked. I'll simply give you one view, and that's mine. And that is that in this case, less is more for me. I want to keep my attention as much on that person as I possibly can. And my use of personal history will be extremely limited, and it's only going to be shared in the service of trying to help facilitate and promote another person's disclosure of their story. Catherine, where are we? Do you want me to pause so that we can open things up?

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Sure. We can do that. I just want to take a moment. I see some questions about logistics here in terms of the webinar and getting access to PowerPoint slides. So, this webinar is being recorded, and a link will be sent out to all of you, all the participants who registered, within the week. So, you'll be able to access this entire recording. And, Ted, I don't know if, if you'd be willing to have your PowerPoint slides attached to that email, but we could do that as well. So, the rest assured for those who are trying to take a quick note that, that this will be accessible. And you will all receive that by email within a week. Yeah. So, we can, I can make a couple of comments in terms of highlighting some ways. I think this is, and there are some particularly challenging pieces right within the prison ministry context.

And I encourage you. We've had maybe just a couple of questions come in, but others who want to submit questions, again, there's a Q & A, a little, icon at the bottom. You're welcome to click on that and type something in, and we'll try to feel those. So, I would just make it just a couple of quick points. I mean, I think, Ted, you mentioned really healthfully the sociological factors. That can be a challenge in terms of making connections. And I think that that's a relevant issue. We need to be conscious of the limits within the intercultural relationships that are going on within prison ministry. We need to be mindful of how we are understood and how our communication is even being received.

You know, so while you may think that you are communicating a desire to listen and get to know someone, it can be taken as intrusive or manipulative. So there are lots of ways that



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one has to have one's radar up. We need to assume that we really can't understand the experience or the assumptions that the other person is making. I think that deep humility is required in our work. But I think there's no way for us to come in as, as neutral bodies. It's really important for me when I'm doing my ministry that I'm very aware and sometimes explicitly claim that I'm a white woman, heterosexual, and highly educated.

I have certain experiences that frame my perspectives and that limit my ability to enter into others' experiences. The more I can be honest about the limitedness of my experience, the more I can create that empty space about which you talked. Because, if I don't name how I've already filled it up with my own presuppositions on my own experiences, then one might think one's more open than one is.

So, I think we have to be careful, about that intercultural awareness when we're trying to make these connections and, and be at peace with the fact of the narrowness of, of where we come from, with a desire to welcome the narrative, but also a humility to know that it, that there may be huge challenges in making some of those connections. That's a very good point.

Theodore M. Smith:

If I could just jump in quick to say thank you. I think humility is on one of those slides. One of the basic things that probably should have been said at the outset is that empathy is always momentary and partially limited. It's never complete, even when there is great commonality between the two people involved because there's a mystery about that other person that one can never fully capture. So, a sense of humility, and without, without trying to be apologetic about it all, is very, very important. And then when you factor in cultural differences, to make that bridge is even more challenging and, and difficult, quite frankly.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Yes!. And I think the other thing you just mentioned about the commonality is important. It's our faith that we are brothers and sisters, right. That there is a fundamental connection that we have just as children of God, right. That is what makes this possible. But at the same time, and I think in a heightened sense, in prison ministry, while there is a commonality, there's also a relationship of compassion to empathy that exists. For example, I choose when I come in and when I leave. There's no way for the men and women that I work with to compel me or to make sure that I follow up on anything I do or say. In addition to the differential just mentioned, the women and men who are incarcerated or who've had that experience and even those who are visiting them are both within a system under the complete power of others.

There's a context of power within which they're living all the time. And so, you know, I think that's important for us to have in the back of our mind when we're making these connections because we're not just listening. In a vacuum, we're listening and connecting to

someone, but we are not in a vacuum. We are in a space that has real power and potential for abuse and oppression, right. And so one thing that I often think about is, how, you know, in a way I can choose to connect and be open to this person's narrative within that power system. Or I can also try to carve out that listening space, that narrative space, as a way of actually resisting that overarching power narrative and say that the real power here is the power that lies in God.

And so to try to transcend the overarching power structure of a system that might, that might be experienced as oppressive or abusive by the way that we, the way connect. So I could say more about that later if folks have some thoughts, but maybe it would be a good moment to get some questions in or Ted if you had some more comments that you wanted to make. Let's look at the questions. Okay, great. So, one question that's come in is about trying to get an individual to share. So if an encounter with a patient or, you know, an individual, in any chaplaincy situation, if that encounter is not question-driven, then how would you propose to move that person enough to share their narrative is the question.

Theodore M. Smith:

So, that particular question is a perennial one! Let me, let me make a couple of comments. Number one, just so I'm clear, I am not saying that questions in and of themselves don't have an important and valid place within a pastoral conversation and the effort to listen empathically. So, I'm not putting this kind of absolute prohibition on questions. My point was that, and understand it; sometimes we rely too excessively on questions. I don't have a magic formula. One thing to keep in mind is to try if we're going to ask questions – we need to ask open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions such as those that can be responded to in terms of yes or no.

One, it may sound somewhat trite, but expressions like, "help me understand more about what you said just a moment ago" is a question is a very, very important question, but it goes back into trying to elicit more responses from that other person. It's hard to generalize because each setting and each conversation is unique in and of itself. We have to be very candid with the other person, and it's important to name what we hear them saying. So, I wish we had someone ask questions in the comments here. Catherine, you want to talk.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Sure. Well, that's great. I mean, I think we have many questions coming in, and so maybe, you know, if someone wants to follow up, we can do that. And then, but I may put the next question out, which is also a challenging one. How do you connect with a person who has given up all remnants of hope?



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Theodore M. Smith:

Excellent question. A couple of quick thoughts come to my mind. One about which we can talk is accompaniment. We can characterize a pastoral ministry as one in which we will accompany a person through whatever valley they're going through. First of all, we need to hear them. And when we talk about empathic listening, it should be important before that it'd be sustained, empathic listening for more than 15 seconds. It has to be something that we continue to try to elicit their story and their comments.

I think if, if, if we convey to them that they are of immense importance to us that despite the darkness of their life at that time, that they are not alone and that those words, are not mere rhetoric, but is something that they feel, in their soul that we're communicating to them. I'm not trying to suggest that that provides a quick and easy answer, but using us, if you will, incarnational theology, to say to that person, I hear that you're, in, a sense of despair. I want to refer to if they can tolerate it, Psalm 88, which is one of those songs I got into the Psalter where it's unrelieved despair and does not end on an affirming note, like so many of the laments in the Psalter. There is a place in the biblical witness for total darkness or blackness, but what we're trying to give them the human experience, which says that there is hope because of the connection we're providing. And I think that's done probably more effectively non-verbally because I don't know that words in and of themselves alone would do the trick.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Yeah. I mean, this is where I think the notion of a ministry of presence, right, is key. You know that it's, it's by us, our embodied, choice to be with this person, is in, you know, and we then, this is another limit. Like we, there's nothing we can do that can formulaically keep someone's hope. Right. But we can hold, hold that space open to say, you know, you may not feel it or see it, but, but you're, you know, I experienced hope for you by just, and that's why I'm here. You know, of those not even be explicit about it.

Theodore M. Smith:

That's very helpful. And a quick comment on that is the ability to sit with a person in silence is also a very key and important quality about being fully present to make this kind of empathic connection. So, I refer again to the analogy of filling the room up with empty assurances. Such empty guarantees are the opposite of what empathy is in that context.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

There are, so related to this or a couple of questions that have come in about, body language and, and how to sort of connect what techniques are recommended to communicate with someone who might not be able to verbalize. Very well. So, I don't know, Ted, if you had other nonverbal communication ideas that would help facilitate that empathic connection.

Theodore M. Smith:

Well, I think one basic guideline is to be extremely sensitive to culture to customs to be as informed as possible in terms of what is okay. And what, when I, when might be considered, intrusive, to the other person. So, there's a balance between not invading their space but also not being too distant. We need to be conscious about how our position creates both emotional and sacred intimacy.

I would like to think that all of us, or else we wouldn't be on this webinar, have a heartfelt commitment to show compassion to another person. And at that deeply internal, value is expressed in different ways, including non-verbally. One of the things that Anderson talks about in terms of walking into a room is - before we step into it - to clear the clutter. Part of that is whatever we think would contaminate our ability to connect with that other person. I think the word wonder is a very suggestive word. We want to be intentional about how our energy and lightness, in terms of our persona, could be picked up by the other person.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Let me get some other questions. One person has asked about distinguishing among empathy, compassion, and sympathy. They also ask when one might be more appropriate than another. I don't know if you want to speak to that. I've heard scholars say that sympathy is an expression of what we feel for the other person instead of compassion or empathy is what we feel with the other person. That is one distinction made between empathy and sympathy.

Theodore M. Smith:

I continue to find, I continued to use the expression, I am so sorry when I've learned that a person is going through a crisis or some extremely difficult circumstance that has come invading into their life. And this is where nonverbal stuff is very, very important because I think that can be said in a very, very compassionate way where they have a genuine sense that I'm feeling with them even though I'm referencing myself in terms of that expression. I am so sorry for you. I thought I'm trying to think of the other. I grieve for you. Well, the subject is still I. The verbs are a little different.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

I don't know if there are definitions that you have used in terms of compassion, empathy, and sympathy. The distinctions aren't as clear.



Theodore M. Smith:

Well, compassion is something that I think, if you will, it goes down to the very marrow of our bones or the bowels of our soul, if you will. If it's going to be genuine and convey something that would be meaningful to the other person, then it has to be felt very, very deeply and has to be genuine on our part. So, you know, I think compassion is an essential ingredient in terms of really making an empathic connection to another person. We can pity another person, and we can listen to their story. But I don't think that that pity is something I, in my mind, quite different and, and doesn't provide the kind of empathic connection that we all want to achieve.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

I think that's helpful. I mean, I think what I hear too is the idea that there's a difference between emotions that can be applied to a situation versus opening the kind of experience where you might be transformed. Right? You talked earlier about reciprocity, which I think is important. What if it's truly empathic listening? And you're really with feeling with them that that may change you, right? Absolutely. Yes. Some other emotions may just be how you respond, but it's not necessarily open yourself up to be changed by it. So that's what we're talking about here.

Theodore M. Smith:

Thank you for going back to that. And that's an extremely important point in terms of not only a change in the sense of my worldview might also not be but might be, should be, or will be. If I'm truly making an empathic connection, my worldview will be expanded a little bit. Still, I will experience life, at some measure, from that other person, and their experience of living and their life is going to be different from mine. Not qualitatively different necessarily, but different enough that I need to be open to that and be willing to be affected by it. I'm, I might just say in my tradition, the United Methodist Church, I don't know if folks who are joining us know this, but we had a major, worldwide conference last week in Saint Louis, a very contentious time. One of the church's respected leaders said there was a precious little listening done in this gathering of about 800, delegates. That's where I decided that as an example where empathic listening didn't take place as a rule. We can always strive for it, but sometimes it doesn't happen in meaningful ways.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Let's go into the idea of being changed by empathy. Today is a national day of empathy for those who've been impacted by the criminal justice system and their efforts nationwide. Here I'm where I'm at in Philadelphia, but around the country, folks are who've been touched by the criminal justice system are meeting with lawmakers. But I think it's significant that it's called the day of empathy because it suggests that, you know, when we can enter into these experiences and, and be shaped by the narratives of others, it may actually lead to us making

different decisions taking different social action. So, you know, the second you talked about it being two steps, there's a response I was feeling. That response can be significant because of the changes that, that are happening. So, let's say something connected to this point about how such listening can be transformative for the person experiencing it. There's also a negative side to that. And someone was asking about, you know, when listening to a person's story, when that triggers, the minister's own pain and brings forth a personal trauma that services, how do you deal with that

Theodore M. Smith:

Yeah. Well, first of all, to be aware of it is the first essential step. And awareness is just a basic building block toward ministry. Still, also certainly the kind of relationship building that we're trying to do that, he'll acknowledge it to ourselves, take it seriously. And if we need consultation from colleagues or, you know, more professional way of, then it's our responsibility to move out. And take the initiative and do that.

I don't think it's wise to, and I'm not saying it was implied in the question, for us to reference it to that other person at the time. But again, to be aware of that, and you were just meant to talk about presence. And so, one-off it talks about, presence in terms of three levels of awareness:

- That we represent something beyond ourselves, and we are comfortable with that, which will evoke something, a response from other people.
- Aware of what that other person is going through to the extent that we can, and
- All this with self-awareness about what's going on with us internally.

That's an example of when that kind of internal awareness is extremely important.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Another question that's come in is about avoiding condescension. How can one be empathically listening but avoid condescension? I think, and you know, this also speaks to the inevitability of recognizing the power differential that often exists in a particular way in prison ministry.

Theodore M. Smith:

Yeah, that's another excellent question. To be aware of language and our best attempts to use language in a way that is well received and understood though not perfectly. But that's certainly, one of the important awareness slides that I didn't get to review. The suggestion is that respect is the first posture, if you will, that we have, with, another person to whom we're ministering.

For the last few years in my ministry, I worked for a Catholic-based hospital. In their values, they intentionally did not use the word respect. Still, I'll use the word reverence, which I



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think is a part of Catholic health's culture. We need to continually remind ourselves that this person before us, is a person of infinite sacred worth. This perspective is extremely important.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Well, sometimes, that can even be communicated in some silence. When you mentioned earlier in your presentation about having lots of things at the ready, some ideas and pearls of wisdom would crowd out that empty space. When we walk in feeling like we have answers and know what to say, it is problematic and shows that we're really not there. We're really not welcoming in.

And so that accompaniment, that ministry of presence, is the fact that we don't have the answers necessarily, but we're there. And sometimes, even moments of silence can show how perplexed we are. Being speechless can communicate that we understand the gravity of the situation. It can clarify to us and the one we are with that we are not there to be the one to fix all. We want people to be helped, but we're not always the ones who have the tools for that. And so, we must find ways to communicate that.

Theodore M. Smith:

Yeah. I mean, we all want to make a difference in it for the better to the positive in a person's life. We all want to help. A lot of pastoral care is, based on helping. What does it mean to help? When, in that kind of situation, when I am not the one with the tools, what can I do? For those in the formation process, it's important to redefine helping in a way that might seem insignificant or even minimize our full potential. But it is profoundly important, and I would suggest very distinct in terms of human interaction. I think an empathic connection is uncommon in our world.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

We're nearing the end of our time. But I think we might be able to get in, at least one more question here before we close. And, in the end, I want to tell you about some things in the future. The question that's come in was whether empathy creates an expectation of a response from the person. Should empathy create an expectation of a certain type of response or reaction?

Theodore M. Smith:

Well, you know, I've said more than once. I don't say this to the, let's just say, the hospital patient, but I go in, and I'm saying, look, if you get to know me, you'll like me. I'm a good guy. So just work with me a little bit and, you know, you'll enjoy this visit, and it'll be a positive part of your day. So, it's no fun to be rejected. I'm not saying being thrown out of the room. We need to be humble and honest enough to realize that that there will be people



with whom I don't connect. Despite all my charm and wit and all that good stuff, they will not be that moved or impressed. So I'd like to think that I can, have the capacity to connect with a wide range of people, but the reality is that that range may be a bit more narrow than I want to admit to myself or other people.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

And I think it would be better for that other person and me if I would make a referral. A referral would be most helpful.

I would just add that there is an additional value to the empathic relationship. We are called to it by our faith. And so, I think it has a potential for eliciting a response, but its value is not contingent upon that response. So, I would say that it's a value to offer that space, that invitation, and that recognition of the person and their own experiences. If it's not returned in the same way, one can move on and respect that boundary. It doesn't eliminate the value of making that offer. It says I see you, and you're worth this invitation, and I respect you to move away if it's not accepted.

Theodore M. Smith:

Yes! And, just like, there have been occasions where I in a hospital and, and praying with a person, their tradition is different enough from mine that despite my best efforts, leading, intercessory prayer within and built-in, limits. And that's just part of what it means to work in a very, very diverse setting.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Wonderful. Well, I think we may want to turn now to let you know about the next opportunities, being offered. Matthew, do you want to help us with that final slide. I appreciate everyone's attention, and I'm sorry that some other questions came in that we didn't have time to answer. But this was a really rich conversation. I'm grateful to you, Ted, for all the wisdom you've shared with us today. The Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition is continuing to host webinars. And so, our next one will be on Wednesday, April 3rd. And as you can see, it's going to be on the topic of recruiting volunteers to ministry—the featured speakers for that webinar, our Sister Rita Mary Hayward, and Dr. Harry Dudley. We'll be talking about the really important work of bringing other workers into the vineyard, supporting volunteers and ministry to the incarcerated and their loved ones.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

So again, that's Wednesday, April 3rd. The time of that webinar is three o'clock Eastern time. And you see there that there's a link, a site for registering. But also know that you know, this webinar, as I mentioned before, is being recorded. It's going to be posted within the week. You'll receive an email with the link to that recording since you've registered for this



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webinar. You will also get an email invitation to register for the next one, so you don't have to write that long website address down. I'm, grateful for everyone's time today and for the seriousness with which folks engaged in this was just speaks of, of the kind of really important ministry that's going on, around the country, around the world. So many thanks to you, Ted. I don't know if you have any closing comments you want to offer.

Theodore M. Smith:

Well, I'm, I'm simply grateful for the invitation. I found it very stimulating. Thank you for your collaboration here and for those who've sent in any questions.

Kathryn Getek-Soltis:

Wonderful. Well, everyone, have a wonderful day. Thank you. Once again, you'll be receiving an email, and we hope to see you on a Wednesday, April 3rd, for the next Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition webinar.

Recommended Questions for Reflection

1. Is empathic listening a science.(see p. 3) True or False. Explain your answer.
2. In David McCullough's biography of John Adams (see p.3) , the second president said of a couple that had visited him: "They had eyes and ears to perceive the external person, but not feelings to sympathize with the internal griefs, pains, attitudes, anxieties, solitudes, and inquired attitudes within." Discuss with your mentor/supervisor what you learned about Dr. Smith's discussion of this couple.
3. According to pastoral theologian, Fr. Henri Nouwen (see p. 4), what has to be provided by the listener in order to provide healing?
 - a) Probing questions to help the person suffering to tell their story.
 - b) Creating an empty but friendly interior space where those who suffer can tell their story.
 - c) Sharing brilliant, answers, pearls of wisdom and life-saving answers gleaned from the caregiver's experience.
4. According to Dr. Herbert Anderson, at Chicago Theological Union (see p. 5), "Empathy is feeling *for* a person." True or False. Explain your answer.
5. According to Dr. Smith, who is always the judge of my capacity to make an empathetic connection? (see p. 6) [Clue: who made the assessment about the couple visiting President John Adams in the McCullough biography?]
 - a) The caregiver.
 - b) The care-receiver



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6. What is the definition of empathy in David Massey's Dictionary of Pastoral Care? (see p. 6)
7. Empathy suspends judgement so as to enter the world of the other person. True or False
Explain your answer. (See p. 7)
8. According to Dr. Getek-Soltis, "If I don't name how I am already filled up with my own presuppositions on my experiences, then I might think I am more open than I am. (See p. 8)
True or False. Explain your answer.
9. Dr. Smith notes that empathy is always momentary and partially limited. (Clue: role of humility – see p. 8.) Explain your answer.
10. Do you understand what is meant by the power differential (see pp. 8,9, 13) in prison/jail ministry? Explain.
11. According to Dr. Smith, if we used questions in pastoral care settings, what kind of questions are more helpful for making a connection? (see p. 10)
 - a) Closed-ended questions – leading to yes or no answers.
 - b) Open-ended questions – like "help me understand what you just said a moment ago."Explain your answer.
12. Empty assurances are the opposite of empathy. True or False. Explain.
13. Dr. Anderson says that before we walk into a room – clear the clutter. What does this mean?
Please explain. (see p. 11)
14. How would you explain what Dr. Smith says about the relationship of compassion to empathy and how is it different from pity? (See p. 12)
15. Dr. Smith says: "If I truly make an empathetic connection my worldview will be expanded a bit? (See pp. 12-13) What do you think he meant by that? Have you experienced such an expansion?
16. What should one do if the interaction with a care-receiver triggers one's own negative memory? (pp. 12-13)
17. How does Dr. Smith describe the three levels of presence? (See p. 13) Is this helpful for you in understanding how to approach your own pastoral care setting?



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18. Explain what you think Dr. Smith means by the word “reverence” when he notes that we need to continually remind ourselves that the person before is a person of infinite sacred worth. (p. 14)
19. What is the best way to respond when no connection is made with the caregiver? (See pp. 14-15)
20. According to Dr. Getek-Soltis, is there an extra value that faith brings to the care-giving relationship? (See p. 15) Explain.

Resources Mentioned in this presentation:

1. **John Adams: The Pulitzer Prize-Winning Biography**, by David McCullough, [Kindle Edition](#)
2. **Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling**, Rodney Hunter. [Paperback Edition](#)
3. [PowerPoint on the Basics of Pastoral Care](#)