

THE ZEN OF LISTENING

by Kathleen Damiani

Listening is:

An art form

A presence

An attitude of mindfulness

A discipline

A way of being

A skill

Most conversations are predictable: we enter into dialogue with each other having something to say, or with an agenda, already knowing what the other will say, prepared to defend, counter, critique, reassure, advise, or agree. Our psyches and intellect are wired to assess a situation, interpret body language and words, and arrive at quick solutions and accurate judgments.

In conflict, to avoid either accountability or the discomfort of looking weak, we defend ourselves with humor, sarcasm, criticism, tears, anger, blame, excuses, etc.

While these behaviors are predictable reactions in conversation, they will not achieve results if the intention of the speakers is to move the action forward toward clarity, mutual respect, fairness, genuine partnership, and a new depth of understanding of the motives, values and desires of the speakers.

If the motive, in other words, is to create something new with one's partner, co-workers, or boss, beyond reactivity and predictability, we have the opportunity before every encounter with another, to approach the conversation as a new frontier of possibility for both parties. With an attitude of mindfulness, we can temporarily suspend our judgments putting our own agenda on hold. We re-focus attention onto the other, allowing that person to speak *without our reaction*. Then, like a midwife, we assist her in bringing forth what she is struggling to articulate. This process does not just benefit the speaker; the listener is moved and inspired by new revelations, as well.

This requires a new way of being in the world, that sees conversation as a new frontier, where the results are not guaranteed, not predictable, automatic and habitual. The speaker and listener enter into a zone where anything becomes possible, because a space is being created for something new to enter the relationship or situation.