

**Speaking from The Heart: A Women's Learning Circle on
Replenishing The Impoverished Spirit**

By

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What does speaking from the heart have to do with being of service? How does our internal state, our spirit, have an impact on our external world? When we sit in a circle is there a collective wisdom that is more than the sum of the parts? How can we together bring this forward?

In our work on Energetic Intelligence we have discovered four elementals¹ that are a way to work with these questions. They are:

Voice – Invite people's voices to come forward.

Gifts – Encourage people to share their gifts.

Learning – Create spaces for learning and listening.

Listening – See listening as the foundation for all possibilities.

When we invoke these elements, **speak from the heart**, and **invite others to speak from the heart**, we create a fertile ground for correcting imbalances, building deeper understandings, and uncovering more possibilities.

Background

On March 6, 2012, I had the privilege of facilitating one of the NGO (non-governmental organization) parallel events at the 56th session of United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, an NGO in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), sponsored the event. The CSW was established under the ECOSOC in 1946 and is "dedicated exclusively to the promotion of gender equality and the advancement of women." The conference runs for two weeks every year. For more information on the CSW and the history of its evolution visit the UN Women's website at: <http://www.unwomen.org/how-we-work/csw/>.

Setting Intention and Creating the Invitation

The theme of the conference this year was the empowerment and role of rural women in eradicating poverty and hunger. **Honoring the Brahma Kumaris long tradition of service, our intention was to create a space for people to explore poverty from an *internal perspective*.** There are invisible forms of poverty and hunger that eat at our spirits, cause our energy to wane, our light to dim, and our gifts to remain unknown to us and, therefore, unshared. Many if not all of us have experienced times of self-doubt, feeling not up to the task at hand, like there isn't enough and *we aren't enough*.

I'd been learning about and witnessing the difference *speaking from the heart*

¹ *Source: *in-Spire: Leadership Moves to Invite, Shape, and Sustain Energy in Organizations and Communities – A Resource for Leaders on Developing Energetic Intelligence* by Michael Marlowe and Lorri Lizza; www.sharedleadership.com.

can make when it comes to matters such as these. Most if not all of the conference would have an external focus and rightly so. **Our invitation was to come and speak from the heart to:**

Explore what it means to be *in*-learning and listen deeply

Experience how we energetically greet the world and walk in relationship to others

Share our gifts and ask, “What is the next step I can take in replenishing my spirit?”

Allow our deeper wisdom to come through.

The Draw

The parallel events are offered throughout the conference. They are ninety minutes long. Participants have complete freedom in which ones they attend and how long they stay. There is no way of knowing ahead of time who or how many people will be present; if people don't find your event relevant, they leave. While initially challenging, this reality helped me design for simplicity, focus on essential ideas and create exercises that would be effective with a group of three or thirty. I am happy to say our room was filled to capacity and no one left. Many participants said they chose to come because of the *title*. The phrases themselves – *a women's learning circle, speaking from the heart, and replenishing the impoverished spirit* - had the quality of an “oasis” to which they felt drawn.

Nor were there any challenges as to why it was important to look at the theme of the conference from an internal perspective or how doing so was relevant to what everyone was doing “out” in the world. There seemed to be a shared appreciation that just as we can be impoverished and experience scarcity and lack in our external life, so too may we experience this internally, and that both must be attended to.

One participant said, “There can be no peace ‘out there’ if we are not at peace within ourselves.”

Forming the Circle

The circle consisted of approximately 35 women and one man. We came from very diverse organizations: the Brahma Kumaris, Women News Network, CEWLA (Center for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance), Feminenza North America, Legion of Good Will, Medical Mission Sisters, Sisters of Charity Federation, Canadian Federation of University Women, Presbytery of Geneva (NY), Gray Panthers, FIDA Nigeria, Temple of Understanding, In-A-Woman Productions, IWID INDIA (Initiatives: Women In Development across India) and the Center for Shared Leadership.

As we formed the circle we paid close attention to ensuring we could *see* each other's faces. We had to expand the circle several times because new people would join. They would enter quietly and sit in the back of the room so as not to disturb. But we made room for everyone. **No one was left outside the circle. It is important not to leave anyone on the sidelines. It is important to see each other when we are speaking from the heart.**

Emptying Out

Today so many of us are completely filled up. As new ideas are offered to us, no matter how compelling they may be, there is no more room. We can't take in anything else because we're out of space on many levels: mentally, emotionally, and energetically. When this happens, we lose a lot of our capacity to listen. Listening is the first "movement" in speaking from the heart; the two are connected in a vital way. My hope was that through the experiences offered each one of us would leave feeling a little more "emptied out" and with more capacity to listen, first to ourselves and then to others, and that we would learn how to replicate this "emptying out" process whenever we needed it. This hope was realized for many of us. I remember one woman in particular who toward the end said quite spontaneously, "Ah! I feel as if I'm *emptier* now than when I came in. It feels GOOD!" She said it with a big smile and a twinkle in her eyes as she made a motion with both arms of brushing away whatever had been taking up space.

The Essential Ideas

There is a flow of thought – a logical progression of essential ideas - that formed the foundation for our learning. These essential ideas were our playground and we explored them organically, allowing them to unfold through open dialogue in the whole circle, sharing in pairs, storytelling and applying them to real situations. Please do not read through the flow too quickly. Allow a space of time before you move from one idea to the next, just as in dialogue, when we leave a few seconds of silence after one person has stopped speaking and before the next person starts. Let each idea speak to you.

1. Deeply listening to our self and others helps us move from the head to the heart.
2. Learning how to be still, and then *becoming willing* to introduce moments of stillness into our busy and overcrowded lives, is very helpful in this as well. Stillness is a dear friend of listening.
3. When we listen and speak from the heart we *naturally* begin to "walk" side-by-side with others.
4. Walking side-by-side *naturally* helps us to be more open and curious. This is an active energetic state of being *in-learning*.
5. When we are *in-learning* we see and experience more possibilities.
6. Seeing more possibilities helps us shift from experiences of minimal or no choice, scarcity and lack, to an experience of having what we need, of having and *being* enough.
7. Whenever we feel a sense of lack or impoverishment from within we can ask ourselves questions that open us up rather than close us down. How am I

“walking” in relationship to this situation, to this person? To what degree am I *in*-learning? Am I speaking from the heart? What is the quality of my listening?

8. The act and on-going practice of asking these questions will help us begin to shift our internal experience. We develop a new *habit of response*.
9. As we shift our internal experiences we are better equipped to shift our external experiences.

Discerning the Qualities of Our Listening

Speaking from the heart starts with listening. There are many ways to listen. We listen to self, to others, to community, to all that is living around us. We learn to *notice* the ways in which we are listening and where we are on the continuum from minimal to maximal. We are then able to make shifts that help us to go more deeply with our listening. We learn how to hear with more than our ears. What we “hear” (i.e., sense, perceive, intuit) brings us new understanding and insights. It may have a quality of light. This is a developmental process.

We began by reading two selections each offering different qualities of listening. We paid attention to our whole experience: the thoughts, feelings, and sensations we were aware of as we listened to the stories. They led us to look within and explore our own life experiences with listening. The stories were poignant and helped us connect not only intellectually but also emotionally. They transcended the many different cultures in the room. **We became more aware of how we were listening to each other. Many times the women would build on each other’s ideas, asking questions and referring back to what someone had said. As we talked about the qualities of listening in the stories, those same qualities began to show up in the circle.**

Being *in*-Learning

I then asked the circle to consider three different energetic stances we adapt for “greeting” the world: *in*-knowing, *in*-wanting and *in*-learning. Through a guided meditation we first created an *energetic experience* of each of the stances. After the group had felt the different energies that accompany the stances we then discussed them. We talked about how to recognize when we are in a particular stance and how to make the energetic shift toward being more *in*-learning.

The stance of *in*-knowing is characterized by the energy and practice of judging, blaming, attacking, arguing to win or be right, dismissing contrary views and practicing any of the “isms” – racism, sexism, classism, etc. The stance of *in*-wanting is the energetic foundation for any addictive behaviors, seeking comfort, controlling outcomes and others, being stuck in the past and/or worried about the future. Both of these states decrease our capacity for listening and seeing more possibilities.

When we are *in*-learning it is easier for us to listen and to be open to influence. We feel curious about the others’ views rather than feeling threatened by

the potential of not getting what we want. The need to be right is minimal; the desire to bring all the voices to the table is maximal.

Walking Side-by-Side

How we energetically “walk” in relationship to others in our lives is another way of understanding more of the experiences we are generating. There are five possibilities. **Walking side-by-side maximizes connection and all that comes from that, including how connected we are to ourselves.** The energetic characteristics of the five positions are:

- Side-by-Side – listening, mutual respect, valuing all the voices
- Above – positional power, expecting deference
- Below – controlling, manipulating, deferring
- In Front – pulling along, dismissing others voices, out-distancing
- Behind – pushing, trying to change another, telling another what to do

When we are having the internal experience of lack or impoverishment we can stop, become still and “see” – whether it be in our energetic body, in our mind’s eye, in our hearts or however else we choose – how we are walking. We can then make a choice to shift. When we are having difficulties with others we can do the same. During one of the partner exercises the woman with whom I was paired shared she was in a difficult work relationship. She’d stopped inquiring into the other person’s position a very long time ago; it seemed futile. She now saw how things might shift if she could adapt an attitude of curiosity, ask her friend more questions and start listening to her again. What I heard her talking about was walking side-by-side and being *in-learning*.

Closing the Circle

During our hour and a half together people were ebullient, thoughtful, respectful of each other’s offerings and fully present. Ideas were tried on, questioned, and investigated in an atmosphere of genuine curiosity. At the conclusion each of us offered one word to describe how we felt. There was a wide variety: *reflective, inspired, empty, refreshed, confused, contemplating, grateful, happy, pondering, interested, energized, “Ahhhhh”* . . . Julia Grindon-Welch from the Brahma Kumaris offered a closing meditation of appreciation and gratitude. Each person was offered practices to continue what we’d just begun to explore: How to speak from the heart and replenish ourselves in order to better share our gifts and be of service, wherever and however that may be.

A Personal Reflection

On a personal note, I left feeling connected to the circle and nourished by what we had learned together. I was deeply grateful for having had the chance to give *and* to receive. Both had happened in equal measure. Perhaps that is always the case when we speak from the heart.

Practices

The suggestions for practicing stillness, being *in*-learning and walking side-by-side which we gave out in the session follow. *Enjoy!*

1. Practice of Stillness and Nearing Stillness

Meditation	Breathing
Yoga	Intentional Silence
Journaling	Being in nature
Quietude	Listening
Reflection	Intention

2. A Practice for Walking Side-by-Side:

All things start with noticing. Notice: how you are “walking” in relationship to the other(s). Be sure to include the children and young people in your life.

Close <> Far, Above, Behind, Front, Below, Side-by-Side.

To increase energy and open up the communication, experiment with moving to the position of side-by-side. It may help with difficult conversations to imagine you are taking a walk together. If possible, take a walk together while you talk. Is there a pattern to how you “walk” with others in your life (e.g., family, community)?

3. A Practice for being *in*-Learning

One way to move toward being *in*-learning is to *listen deeply*. Start simply by practicing with one conversation each day in which you have curiosity, and little or no thinking and rehearsing ahead of time. Do not engage the energy of win/lose or debate. Focus on understanding what the other person is saying. Help the person to tell her/his story fully.

Over time spend as much of your day *in*-learning as you can. When you notice yourself *in*-wanting or *in*-knowing, use it as an opportunity for learning. Is there a pattern or a wound present? As soon as you start inquiring you have moved into the stance of *in*-learning!