

The Art of Listening - An Act of Peace

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SEKEM

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We were invited by the Social Initiative Forum (SIF) to come to SEKEM in Egypt to give a biography and social art workshop titled “The Art of Listening: An Act of Peace.” SIF (which is organized under the umbrella of the Social Science section of the School for Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum) brings an anthroposophical approach to understanding and addressing the major social issues of our time, such as climate change, wealth inequality, and educational reform (www.socialinitiativeforum.org). SIF meetings bring together experts from around the world to discuss innovative solutions, create new connections, and deepen capacities through workshops such as ours.

SEKEM was founded by Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish in 1977 in an area of desert about 80 km (50 mi) outside of Cairo. While living in Austria in the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Abouleish encountered the work of Rudolf Steiner and became interested in integrating anthroposophical ideas such as biodynamic agriculture with Islamic and Egyptian cultures. He returned to Egypt with a vision of “Sustainable Development towards a future where every human being can unfold his or her individual potential; where mankind is living together in social forms reflecting human dignity; and where all economic activity is conducted in accordance with ecological and ethical principles.” Four decades later, this patch of desert is now home to a thriving biodynamic farm, a medical center, a Waldorf-inspired school, a vocational school, a school for children with special needs, production facilities for their various industries, and an eco-village. Nearby Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development (HU) – another SEKEM initiative – hosted the conference, which was also attended by many HU staff and students. You can learn more about SEKEM at www.sekem.com.

The goal of our three-session workshop was to connect people with the roles that listening and being heard have played in their biographies and to explore how they can use listening as an instrument of peace. Each session included sound experiences, biographical exercises, and dyads to deepen their understanding and strengthen their ability to listen artfully. In the first session, we worked with memories of sounds from childhood and music from adolescence to see how they play a foundational role in people’s biographies.

In the second session, our focus was on the interpersonal dimension of listening. One question we worked with was: How does it feel to not be heard? Not feeling heard is an experience that everyone can relate to, particularly during the

adolescent years. There is often a disconnect between the youth and the older generation in this regard. Young people can be inspired by high ideals – like reversing climate change – but they lack the resources needed to bring their ideas into reality. Their lack of capacity for bringing about the change they seek can be used as a reason to not hear them out and dismiss them as naïve and idealistic. “If the youth are our future, we are in trouble!” The youth, in turn, without access to the support and resources they need, may lose their fire and become cynical.

But what if we turn the relationship around and see the youth not as the future but as our *living past*? The older generation was once young and idealistic too. Through years of hard work, they have accumulated experience, connections, and resources. If they can come through artful listening to hear an echo of their own youthful enthusiasm living in today’s young people, they can take back responsibility for the future by offering their expertise to the fresh ideas of the youth.

On the other side, the youth can listen into their *living future* as expressed in the stories of the elders who step up role models. In doing so, they can develop artful listening skills themselves and become role models as they grow into adulthood. You can read more about this idea in an article we have written entitled “Dare to Rethink” (<https://bit.ly/2Q3Fe2u>).

Finally, in the third session we worked to differentiate listening from simply hearing. Ordinary hearing is relatively involuntary – it’s always “on”, even if we are not processing deeply. Listening is an intentional act in which we find a place of inner stillness, open a space where the other can enter and resonate, and then direct our attention to the one who is communicating. In this way, artful listening becomes a gateway to the other higher senses of language, concept, and the I of the other, and practicing listening is one way of nurturing these higher senses. By doing so, we come to not only see the other as a striving human being, but also recognize this striving force within ourselves. In this I-to-I encounter, the seeds for peace can take root.