

# Compassionate Listening:

*Healing Our World from the Inside Out*



Susan Partnow, M.A.

“We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak.”  
Epictetus, ancient Greek philosopher

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## A Courageous Heart Can Change the World

Compassionate Listening is a practice that integrates cognitive awareness with the wisdom of the heart and body. It fosters a quality of listening that helps create a safe setting for people to express themselves honestly and fully in search of their deepest truth.

Our practice is ultimately about healing our way to wholeness. We believe that by opening and changing our hearts, we can contribute to changing the world – one person at a time. These are lofty ideals that require a commitment to the practices of Compassionate Listening skills without attaching to any particular outcome.

The word compassion literally means *to suffer with*. To feel that depth of connection to another we must find the place within us that also suffers. This requires the courage to look honestly and respectfully at our own pain – and the ability to hold it with care when it emerges. This is what we, as Compassionate Listeners, courageously practice and offer to others.

We know that within each individual is the essence of love and compassion. But as we move along our life journey, we suffer – whether from the pain of judgment, self-doubt, physical or mental abuse, or from the impacts of injustice, racism, war and poverty. Over the years, we have all developed layers of armor to protect ourselves. And that armor may manifest in one of many behaviors - perhaps as anger, blame, cynicism, physical attack or withdrawal. Unfortunately, as we arm ourselves against others, we may also close ourselves off to the gifts of our deepest essence, allowing our heart to shrivel and harden.

In the process of protecting ourselves, we also may commit the disservice of weaving together negative stories about ourselves or about the “other” who has harmed us. We may repeat the stories often and truly believe them. Sometimes these stories are about us as “victims” and the other person as “victimizer,” leaving little room for a different truth to emerge. Unfortunately, these negative stories can deplete our physical and mental energy and block access to our greatest asset – the wisdom of our hearts.

You might imagine the metaphor of *bricks and mortar* when thinking about this. The bricks refer to the specific incidents that caused us pain, often in our early years. And the mortar represents the stories we tell ourselves about these events that keep the bricks impermeable and locked in place. The structure we create can contribute to a physical sensation of feeling weighed down, isolated and stuck.

Our work in Compassionate Listening is to re-open and strengthen the pathways back to our hearts, particularly when we’re upset or in the heat of conflict. We seek to soften the mortar enough to enable our hearts to soften and expand, allowing for mental clarity and a new perspective to emerge. Whether you’re challenged by your own self-judgments or by conflicts within your family, workplace or community, these practices can provide a solid foundation for bringing greater peace into your life. Learn more about our work and history at [www.compassionatelistening.org](http://www.compassionatelistening.org)

## About Susan Partnow, M.A., Certified Compassionate Listening Project Facilitator

As a community builder, organizational development and training consultant, Susan serves as a catalyst for positive changes through workshops, retreats, and coaching. Co-founder of Conversation Cafes, Seattle Restorative Justice, and Let's Talk America, certified with The



Compassionate Listening Project and Steering Committee of National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation, Susan facilitates processes to transform conflict and promote co-intelligence in ways that expand collective capacity. She has a long and wide relationship with The Compassionate Listening Project, from Director of Advanced Training to member of the Board and Core Council which developed the core practices. She is founder and Executive Director of Global Citizen Journey and has brought Compassionate Listening to Africa (Nigeria,

Ghana, Liberia, Uganda and South Africa), India, Cuba and Guatemala. She partners with organizations across all sectors, including City of Seattle, Harborview Medical, University of Washington and Microsoft, to promote healthy and productive workplaces and worked as a Sr. Organizational Development Consultant at Swedish/Providence for nearly 10 years. A former teacher and speech pathologist with B.A. and Secondary Credential from the University of California, Berkeley, and an M.A. from Northwestern University, Susan wrote **Everyday Speaking for All Occasions** and is co-contributor to **Practicing the Art of Compassionate Listening**. [www.susanpartnow.com](http://www.susanpartnow.com)