

# Listen to my life

MAPS FOR RECOGNIZING  
AND RESPONDING TO  
GOD IN MY STORY

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SIBYL TOWNER AND SHARON SWING

## ENDORSEMENTS FOR LISTEN TO MY LIFE

“*LISTEN TO MY LIFE* IS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL for life discovery as you begin the adventure of what’s next for your life. Before you take your first step, sit down with *Listen to My Life* and let it guide you through life maps that will help you identify where God has been present in your life and where God is taking you next.”

### **Bob Buford**

Author, *Halftime*, and Founder and Chairman of Leadership Network

“IN A WORLD WHERE NO ONE has time to listen or reflect we need tools that open our hearts and ears to more than a to-do list. *Listen to My Life* is an intentional journey into what has shaped your life. It helps us listen to the narrative we are intentionally or unintentionally writing with our lives. It opens us up to discovering our hurts, motives, desires, direction and purpose in life.”

### **Adele Calhoun**

Author of *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* and *Spiritual Rhythms for the Enneagram*, Pastor of Spiritual Formation Highrock Church

“I WAS IN A HUGE TRANSITION when we embarked on the *Listen to My Life* journey. It was clear that both my career and our location was potentially about to shift. Little did I know how pivotal the *Listen to My Life* process would be to me and my wife. In a time when I was considering an enormous change, *Listen to My Life* brought great clarity and ability to discern the activity of God in my life.”

### **Chuck Spong**

Executive Director, Love Out Loud

“WHAT AT FIRST GLANCE LOOKED LIKE A STUDY has instead become a lifestyle. Through *Listen to My Life*, I have discovered the Lord’s fingerprints in my life and the unique ways He can use me in this world. The study has given me both the tools and the confidence to look at my life – past, present and future – with renewed hope and expectation, believing now more than ever that He has a great, irreplaceable purpose for me. *Listen to My Life* beautifully weaved together for me the joy and reality of knowing Christ and how being in tune with His work can lead me to great adventures.”

### **Alexis Wilson**

Director of Communications, Fort Worth Zoo  
Freelance Writer and Editor

“I RECALL, AS A CHILD, unwrapping a gift to find a copy of Milton Bradley’s *The Game of Life*. It had a game board like no other: a colorful, three-dimensional, life map filled with possibilities. Even at a young age, I imagined creating a map that might chart a course for a life of significance. Sibyl Towner and Sharon Swing, creators of the Listen to My Life Portfolio, have developed just what I might have imagined and more. What was the value of mapping my journey with the Listen to My Life Portfolio? It gave life to my story, and connected it to God’s story, HiStory. It gave me the tools to pray with David, “Search me... try me... lead me” (Psalm 139). It redeemed my past and reconciled my future. It helped me to see God’s presence, providence, provision—and so increased my trust in His faithfulness. And it has amplified my capacity to live in wonder of God. I highly recommend it!”

### **Michael Fox**

Spiritual Director, Professional Coach, Author

“*LISTEN TO MY LIFE* IS A WILDLY UNIQUE TOOL that helped me to take a look at my story in a way that produced spiritual growth and productive focus. I’ve worked through the process with two groups of dear friends — a women’s group, and a couples’ group. We are connected more deeply than ever, and we’re dedicated to supporting each other to courageously co-create the stories God has for our futures. Dive into your journey. You’ll be so blessed!”

### **Marjorie Blanchard, PhD**

Co-Founder, The Ken Blanchard Companies

“TO DISCOVER GOD’S PATH FOR MY FUTURE, I had to first find His fingerprints on where He had already taken me. *Listen to My Life* provides a simple, compelling framework to do just that. I have been deeply impacted by this resource and have seen it work powerfully in others.”

### **Todd Katter**

Willow Creek Community Church Regional Campus Pastor

“ONE OF THE CENTERPIECES OF INNER JOURNEY WORK is for one to understand their story and how it fits into God’s story. The *Listen to My Life* materials provide a framework that allow people to do just that.”

### **Jay Madden**

Pastor for Mission, Peachtree Presbyterian Church

# Listen to My Life

Maps for Recognizing and Responding to God in My Story

BY SIBYL TOWNER & SHARON SWING

**LISTEN TO MY LIFE** is a unique visual tool that helps you invite God into the process of reviewing your past, assessing your present and continuing to walk with God into your future.

## **THIS EXPERIENCE IS FOR YOU IF:**

- you are seeking God in a deeper way and desire to rediscover who you are through His eyes.
- you have thought, “I don’t know myself anymore.”
- you wonder, “Is there something more?”
- you stand at a crossroads in life and ask, “Which way will lead me toward expressing more of who I am made to be?”
- you are looking for a way to understand the restlessness that you feel inside.
- you are relationally at odds with yourself and/or others in ways that have ties to your past.

**WRITTEN FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**, this portfolio of visual maps helps you to explore the implications of the truth that God created you for a purpose and your life is most fully and joyfully lived under God’s direction and guidance. As you invite God into the process and document your story, desires, observations and plans in words, phrases, and pictures, you may sense God providing fresh insights, questions or specific direction by helping you to:

CLARIFY *your desires*

DISCERN *how your life story impacts the way you live today and your choices for tomorrow*

UNDERSTAND *yourself and your part in God’s larger story*

DECIDE *what you might do to live a life that is a more full expression of who God created you to be*

**THIS ADVENTURE IS BEST SHARED** with a friend, coach, counselor, spiritual director, small group, or mentor to help you respond to God as you pay attention to what your life story can tell you. It is a journey worth pursuing now, because life is too short to be lived unintentionally.

*Listen to My Life: Maps for Recognizing and Responding to God in My Story™*

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**Therefore, since we are surrounded  
by such a huge crowd of witnesses**

**to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight**

**that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up.**

**And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.**

**We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus,**

**the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.**

HEBREWS 12:1-2 NLT

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With gratitude for surrounding us,

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# Introduction

WHO SHOULD BEGIN the journey of *Listen to My Life*? This experience is for you if:

- *you are seeking God in a deeper way and desire to rediscover who you are through His eyes.*
- *you have thought, "I don't know myself anymore."*
- *you wonder, "Is there something more?"*
- *you stand at a crossroads in life and ask, "Which way will lead me toward expressing more of who I am made to be?"*
- *you are looking for a way to understand the restlessness that you feel inside.*
- *you are relationally at odds with yourself and/or others in ways that have ties to your past.*

If these statements resonate with you, welcome to an interesting portion of the inner journey toward discovering or rediscovering God, and the way that God has uniquely designed you. You are invited to document your story, thoughts and discoveries using picture metaphors, called 'visual maps.' These visual maps in the *Listen to My Life* portfolio have been created as a guide to help you sort through the chapters of your life and rediscover clues that will point you in a direction of knowing yourself more fully. In addition, you will find maps that help you to pay attention to your inner self, and more intentionally notice God at work in your life.

It is an amazing thing that God made us and wants to be in relationship with us. Truly, it is impossible to know ourselves as we were created to be without knowing the God who created us. Our identities rest in him and in his view of us. The good news is that God loves us, and through Christ, he forgives us and wants to guide us by his Spirit into a deeper, more intimate relationship. In that movement toward God, we find ourselves perfectly suited for doing whatever works God has in mind for us to engage in with him for the benefit of others. He is all about redeeming, restoring, truth, justice, creativity and love. We can be confident that our purpose is wrapped up in those same things.

As you embark on this journey, it is helpful to have a desire to be growing in your understanding of the foundations of the Christian faith, to embrace God's love for you in Christ Jesus, and to be responding to his gracious offer of forgiveness. If you would not call yourself a Jesus-follower, an additional next step for you will be to explore God's deep desire to be in a relationship with you. Go to [www.needhim.org](http://www.needhim.org) to find out more. Please, do not put off this important next step!

How might you know if you are ready for this journey? There may be restlessness in your spirit that has been growing over some time now; a disease with how things are in your

soul, and a longing for a truer sense of who you really are. There may be a break in the action of your life that has led you to consider options of what to do next. Into that space rushes a nagging sense that there is supposed to be more to the storyline than what you are experiencing. And it's true. What you could not hear in the busyness seems to be calling with a bit more volume. God has placed eternity in the human heart, and you know you are being beckoned toward a story that is larger than the one you have been living.

The voice of our culture may tempt you to quench the restlessness you feel by buying a new car, going back to school, getting a make-over, or doing something adventurous. But in the recesses of your soul, you sense there are no external activities that will satisfy this strange sensation. Whatever the next practical steps are for your life, putting the internal journey first will help you make choices that are more in line with who you are and how you are designed to contribute in the world.

This is a journey that will require courage. Inside, you know that if there is more, it will require an openness and vulnerability to question, relearn, reflect, and consider new possibilities about the God who IS, and how your story fits into his. You sense that God is calling your soul in new and profound ways, and you long to understand his desires for your life. There is an assuring sense in you that this is a journey worth taking. You understand that God's larger story has been going on a very long time before you entered the scene, but you are a beloved character in the story, and you have a pivotal role to play. This truly is a God-led adventure!

If it is hard for you to believe the truth that God loves you and wants the story of your life to turn out right, will you take a step of faith and trust that God will be with you? We believe that God loves all of your story, and we hope in time, that you will too. In the process of discovering who you really are with him, you will feel loved and accepted, not condemned. The spiritual practices of silence, solitude, scripture reflection and

spiritual reading are essential in helping you to know that you are a treasured child of God. Throughout this experience, you will be invited into these practices. There is sometimes apprehension attached to these practices when a person tries them for the first time. Being authentic with yourself and with God, regardless of the condition you're in, is what God desires. He longs to be with you without pretense. There is no need to clean up, dress up, or cover up on the inside – just show up as you are to meet with the Father who loves you so dearly!

Housed in your life story are evidences of the activity and presence of God. Making a decision to take a look at your past and consider your current life will allow you to have more confidence that your future can be filled with more meaning, purpose, and joy.

We welcome you to the journey of *Listen to My Life*.

### What is *Listen to My Life*?

*Listen to My Life* is a series of visual maps that are made for you to write and/or draw out your memories and thoughts. You will be led through four sections for each map set.

First, you will find an introduction that describes why the map's content is important, along with some background information to help you get ready for that next step in the journey. The next page in the map set is a self-facilitation guide that gives you specific instructions for filling out the map. You will find a statement of purpose for that map, instructions and helpful hints, along with questions and examples that may provide guidance in filling in the visual spaces created by the map's design.

Next, you will find a page or two of visual maps. These are the pages that you will write and draw on. Pull out some colored pencils and start with whatever comes to mind as you are prompted by the questions on the page. Pray as you begin and continue throughout the process in a conversation with God. It is not important that you answer the questions in order. Let your mind wander through the map, as one memory or thought may prompt another in random order. Intentionally ask God to show you what he wants you to notice as you work, and listen expectantly.

The reflection section of each map set will ask you to look back on the work you just completed. Keep a journal handy, or write on the back or margins of the pages as observations come to you. Sometimes, the reflections on your feelings and thoughts as you worked on the map are

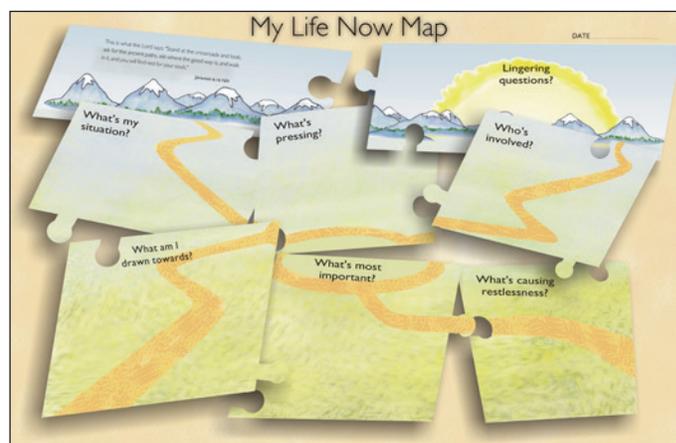
very important to help you discover new things about yourself. There are additional questions and scripture for you to ponder and journal. The purpose of this section is to provide time and space to listen and notice God's love for you and his movement in your life.

Although *Listen to My Life* is designed for you to be able to work through it on your own, be intentional about sharing your stories and insights with a friend or small group after you complete each map in the series. God designed us to be in relationship, and we often cannot see ourselves clearly until we see ourselves through the eyes of another. The Bible tells us that we are 'administrators of God's grace', as we tangibly represent the love and grace of God to one another. Please, don't miss out on the amazing experience of hearing the stories of others as you strive to understand your own.

Five of the visual maps in this series move you through documenting your life story and reflecting on it in various ways. The other visual maps help you to find new ways to connect with God in your everyday life. Here is an outline of what you can expect:

### My Life Now - Map #1

This map offers an opportunity to document the current realities and circumstances of your life. When traveling from one place to another, you must know from where you are starting. You will find questions that help you to take a big picture view of what your life looks like at this time. It will help surface your desires for what you hope to discover through the *Listen to My Life* process.

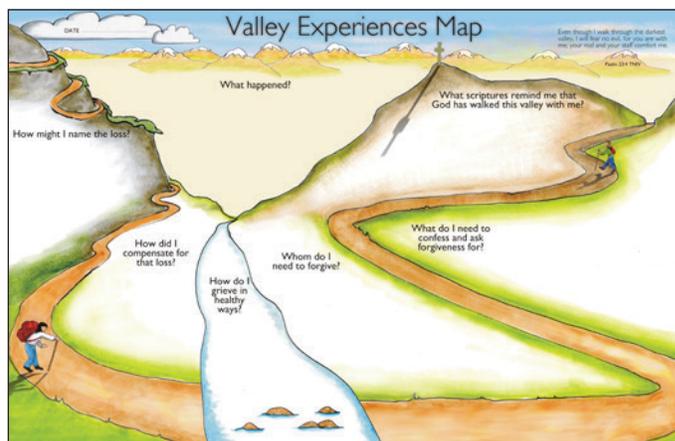
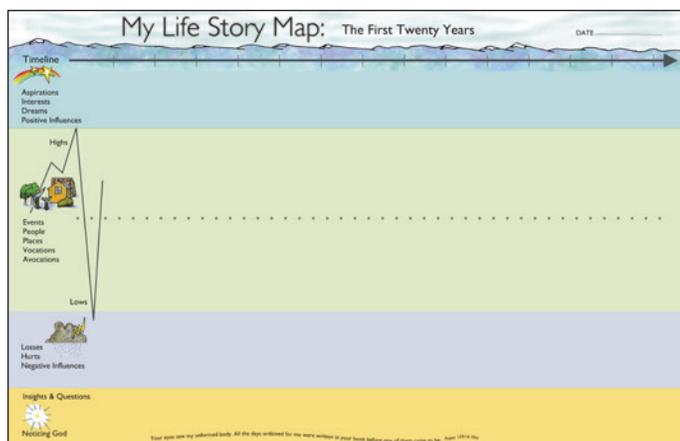


### My Life Story - Map #2

This map will walk you through the process of documenting your story in a way that allows you to see it from new perspectives. One purpose of documenting your life story is to uncover how beloved you are by the God who created you, so you can live gracefully, purposefully, and without

fear. Reflecting on your own story helps you to understand why you are the way you are, move toward resolution of past hurts, and become more grateful. It will allow you to be more open to deeply listen to the beauty and pain in the stories of others.

and giving forgiveness for things that happen every day is a life-style mark of a follower of Jesus.

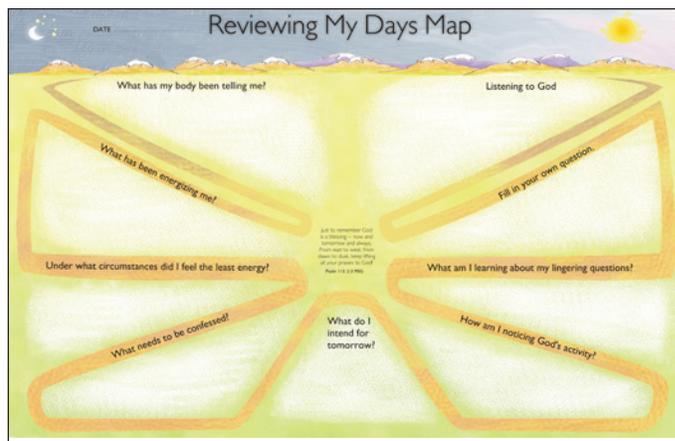
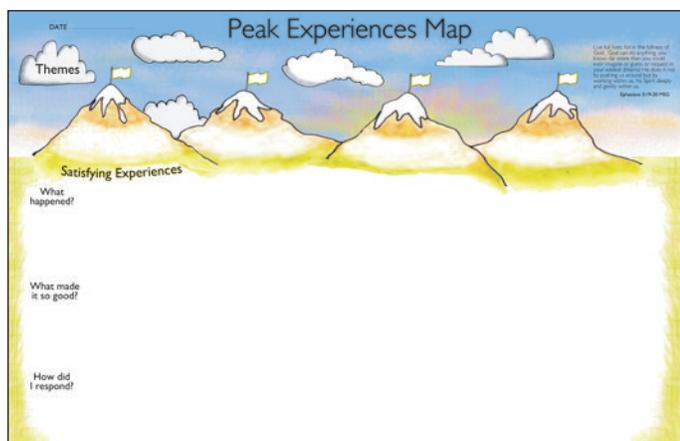


### Peak Experiences - Map #3

This map will ask you to recall several peak experiences in your life – times that you did something well and accomplished something that had meaning to you. You will look for patterns and themes in these peak experiences and reflect on what made them so satisfying. The patterns embedded in the times when you felt exceptionally energized and engaged in activities give clues to your unique design, and what you might plan to do in the future.

### Reviewing My Days - Map #5

This map is the spiritual practice of looking back over each day with an increased awareness of God's activity in your life. You will learn to discern when you are moving towards God and when you are moving away from God. It will help you recognize God's presence more readily, so you can live more gratefully, and be quicker to respond to his loving direction for your life.

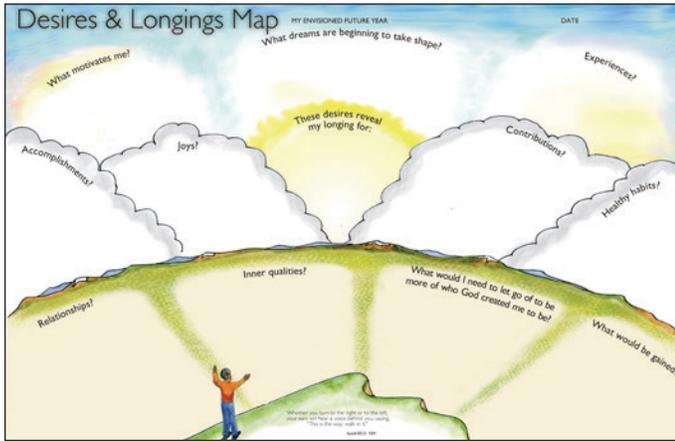


### Valley Experiences - Map #4

This map helps you practice giving and receiving forgiveness. It is designed to work with past hurts and shame, so they don't define who you are in ways that rob you of experiencing life as God intended it for you. Walking through valley experiences with God may be difficult, but freeing. Practicing the process of receiving

### Desires & Longings - Map #6

This map offers space to reflect on the work you have done so far with the maps and begin naming some of your deepest desires and longings. It will help move you toward discovering what kind of life God wants to live through you. Clarifying who God has created you to become and the work he has planned for you to do in the world will help you to imagine and live a more intentional, purpose-filled, and joyful life. You can trust that God knows the plans he has for you and that he will make them known when you seek him.

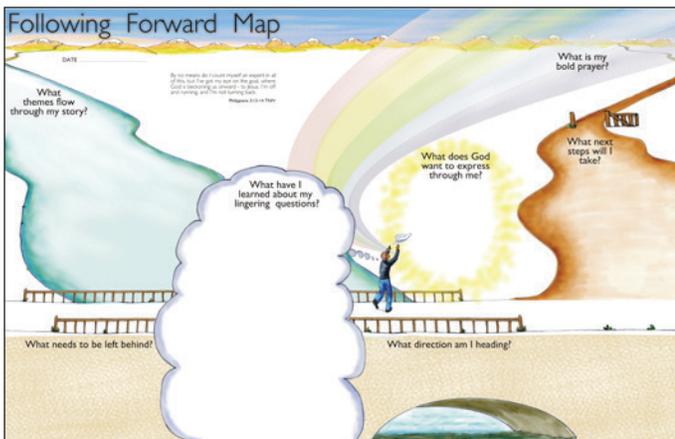


### Life-Giving Rhythms - Map #7

Becoming who you were created to be happens over time, under the loving care of the God who knit you together in your mother's womb. However, you will not drift into this new way of living. When you engage in regular spiritual practices that help you to listen to God throughout your days, weeks, months and years, you make yourself available to receive from God all he wants to give you. He does the work, but we need to cooperate with him. In fact, to listen to God means to obey him. This map will help you plan how you may engage in spiritual practices, in other words 'keeping company with Jesus', so that God can form you into the person you both long to see revealed.

### Following Forward - Map #8

As a summary for the discoveries you have made throughout the *Listen to My Life* experience, this map is designed to help you consider what needs to be left behind, what you sense God wants to express through you, what options will be pursued, what next steps will be taken, and what bold requests you are ready to make of God. It is our hope that it will lead you toward confidently following Jesus forward into the future he has planned for you.



As you move through the *Listen to My Life* experiences, our hope is that you will:

- *move toward a clearer sense of how loved you are by God.*
- *find energy and courage to live in a way that gives you and God great pleasure.*
- *become who you were uniquely created to be.*
- *experience the adventure of doing whatever God needs done in the world, in a way which matches your deepest desires.*

Don't rush through this process. Take the time to engage in it fully. We trust that God will meet you right where you are! Please find one or more people to walk this journey with you, to hold you accountable to completing what you have started, and to help one another listen to God.

We are praying for you, and we hope you'll pray this prayer for yourself and others as you walk this path of discovery.

DEAR HEAVENLY FATHER,

*I want to draw near to you to know you more fully. I ask that you would graciously allow me to take a look at my life through your eyes and find perspective, forgiveness, healing, strength, and love to look at my past. I want what you want for my future. Help me to sense your guidance in the direction of who you have made me to be and what you have prepared for me to do to join you in your redeeming and restoring work in the world.*

AMEN (Let it be so)

All God's best to you,

SIBYL TOWNER & SHARON SWING

For more information and many resources for your *Listen to My Life* experience, visit our website at [www.onelifemaps.com](http://www.onelifemaps.com), visit our blog at [www.onelifelatters.com](http://www.onelifelatters.com), and sign-up to receive notifications of our *oneLife Letters* blog posts.

# Guidelines for Listening

## LISTENING FOR GOD THROUGH THE STORIES OF LIFE

*“Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”*

MATTHEW 18:20 NIV

AS YOU JOURNEY THROUGH THE MAPS in *Listen to My Life*, we hope you’ll choose to have some companions walk this path with you, so you can listen for God together through the stories of your lives. We wouldn’t want you to miss out on the joy that so many of our participants have had as the truth of Jesus’ words have profoundly been anchored in their souls. Jesus promised, “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”

As people tell their stories to one another in the *Listen to My Life* experience, many gain clarity, trace unhealthy patterns to their source, sense receiving guidance from God, come out of hiding, sense God’s love, are ambushed by grace, or experience healing. God is faithful to show up and do just what is needed in each person’s heart. So, why is this deeper experience different from what happens elsewhere? How can it be that we miss sensing his presence among us so easily in the normal course of conversation, and in our everyday lives?

We’ve come to believe that the way we *listen to one another, and with one another* is what makes the difference. The normal course of conversation in our lives does not leave much room to pay attention to God, let alone space to hear ourselves express the deeper stirrings of our souls. The simple *Guidelines for Listening*<sup>1</sup> help us to invite the Holy Spirit to move among us, and keep the listeners out of the way of whatever work he intends to do. The guidelines are set up to provide the kind of safety that allows the soul to come out of hiding. So, the listener’s role is to actively create an environment of safety – and most of the time that means doing less rather than more. In whatever setting you experience *Listen to My Life*, we’d like you to use these guidelines too.

**Participation is invited**, not demanded. Allowing everyone to be in control of their own story creates safety as people can choose how to tell their story or how much of their story to tell.

**Invite the Holy Spirit** to interact with you as you listen to one another. Declare in prayer that you are open to whatever he wants to do in you and among you. The primary objective of the story telling and listening that is done in the *Listen to My Life* experience is for you to be open to what the Holy Spirit wants to do, and be willing to respond. As the other person is speaking, you may choose to silently pray that they might be guided toward whatever God wants them to notice.

**Confidentiality** simply means that we don’t tell one another’s stories without permission. When sharing is completed, discontinue discussion of what was shared, trusting each others’ stories to God. Commit yourself to pray for one another as God leads you.

**Focused attention** is a gift that allows the speaker to stay in their own story, knowing that the listener is not too busy or distracted to be there with them. Too many people have never had the kind of focused attention that allows them to explore their own feelings without worrying that the listener is bored or more interested in other things. A lack of focused attention pushes the person toward a kind of self-consciousness that is dependent on the approval of another person. We’re intentionally creating environments for people to become self-aware, not self-conscious, through these listening sessions.

**Unconditional acceptance** is offered as a form of giving grace. There is nothing that another person can say that God does not already know. Please leave critical spirits at the door. Turn to wonder instead of judgment if your speaker’s story prompts you toward becoming judgmental. Ask yourself, ‘I wonder what it would have felt like to be in this person’s shoes?’ or ‘I wonder what led them to make that decision?’

We highly recommend that you also read the 3-Way Listening article included in this Introduction Booklet.

**No fixing, advising or rescuing** allowed. This is the hardest part of the listening guidelines for people to keep. Unfortunately, all too many small group bible studies have fallen into the trap of thinking that offering advice is a helpful form of fellowship. Attempts to fix a person or a situation pushes the soul into hiding and leaves a person feeling less capable of handling life than the others in the group. Most of the time people just want to be heard - not fixed. Please withhold the urge to offer advice, even advice cloaked in a bible verse, unless it is specifically asked for. Listening to one another in the context of the *Listen to My Life* experience is intended to offer space for a person to hear their own thoughts and emotions, not a time for counsel to be offered.

Although it might seem considerate, rescuing people from their emotions is not helpful in this setting. When a person feels sadness, pain or frustration, let them feel it. Often, in the normal course of sharing stories, when a person begins to get a bit emotional or goes silent, a listener might feel the need to rush in to offer a tissue, or put a reassuring hand on their shoulder. To a speaker, these seemingly kind gestures are a signal that their emotion is too much for the other person to handle. So, if you, as a speaker, need a tissue, you'll need to get one for yourself. We're asking that when listening, you withhold those urges to rescue someone from their emotions, and offer your focused attention and a silent prayer for God to meet them in that moment instead.

**Listen to the silence** instead of jumping in with questions or comments. This is such a strong reflex for most of us! This one listening guideline will be the most difficult for most listeners to abide by. Silence allows the person speaking time to listen to themselves, make decisions about what to say next, and allows the Holy Spirit space to do whatever he has in mind to accomplish. Silence is very often a gateway to a deeper level of honesty and openness to learning. Even though it can feel uncomfortable, stay with it and let the speaker know you are listening with your eyes.

As the speaker, ask for what you need from those who have listened to you. For example, you would like prayer, or you would like reflections, words or phrases on what the listeners heard, or you would be willing to answer some questions.

As the listener, your questions are only to help the speaker more fully explore their own story, but please refrain from asking questions for your own clarification or connection to the events of their story.

**Affirm the gift of the stories** you hear by thanking the speaker for the honor of hearing their story. As you'll soon find out, it really is a great privilege to hear a person's story. Let them know that you heard them by telling them how you empathetically felt their emotion as they told a particular part of their story. Pray for the speaker, actively placing them into the hands of God, right where they belong. Use scripture to encourage them within the prayer, if a verse comes to mind.

YOU MAY REALIZE THAT THESE GUIDELINES leave little for the listener to do but listen. That is the point. Early on, while listening to another, you may find the guidelines very hard to follow. Most people soon find that they can relax, not worrying about what to say next, or how to fix, rescue or advise the other person. It ends up being a relief and a joy once a person gets adjusted to listening this way, because they can let go of being responsible for someone else and their situation or their story.

Listening this way is an act of submission as we consciously put the needs of another above our own for a time. We do not listen for our own benefit, entertainment or understanding.

In following these guidelines, we consciously exchange being a good conversationalist for being a good listener. And when we do, we have an opportunity to sometimes witness the beauty of a soul being honest and open in a way which invites the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The 'My Life Now Map' and 'My Life Story Map' that start the *Listen to My Life* experience provide great opportunities to practice listening to one another. You may listen to one another in pairs, trios or even an entire small group following these guidelines. We highly recommend that you also read the *3-Way Listening* article included in this Introduction Booklet.

The 'Peak Experiences Map' is best to be shared in an interview format in pairs or trios, using the questions on the map to guide the speaker through the experiences they identify. Often, the gift of a focused listener, using the *Guidelines for Listening*, and a few good questions can help to reveal the threads and patterns that run through the speaker's peak experiences.

Listening sessions around the remainder of the maps can follow the listening guidelines, just like the 'My Life Now Map' and 'My Life Story Map'. Remind one another of the guidelines before each listening session, so you don't revert back to a normal course of conversation. Talking

<sup>1</sup>These listening guidelines are a modification of those offered by Juanita Brown in her descriptions of *The World Café* found at [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)

about what you are learning in your listening experiences after using the *Guidelines for Listening* is of great benefit for everyone involved. This gives each person a way to solidify the learning they are gaining from actively listening in a way that is most likely not a part of their normal pattern of conversation.

We've heard many stories about how this way of listening in a *Listen to My Life* group affects an individual's way of listening to the people in their everyday lives in surprisingly wonderful ways. We've also heard our share of stories of how *Listen to My Life* participants get frustrated with how poorly they are listened to by their family, coworkers and friends who have not had the same experience. Just take it as a challenge of being gracious and loving, offering a listening ear in ways that allow people to feel God's love through you. Also, be aware of when you need to be listened to in the future, and ask for what you need from a good listening partner.

Enjoy the process of learning to listen and being listened to in new ways. As David Augsburger wrote, "Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people don't know the difference."<sup>2</sup>

### **Additional Resources**

For resources related to listening go to [www.onelifemaps.com/resources](http://www.onelifemaps.com/resources)

- 🔊 Listen to the oneLife Maps Podcast for great conversations around topics of life story and spiritual formation at [www.onelifemaps.com/podcast](http://www.onelifemaps.com/podcast)

<sup>2</sup> Augsburger, David W. *Caring Enough to Hear and be Heard: How to Hear and be Heard in Equal Communication*. Regal Books 1982.

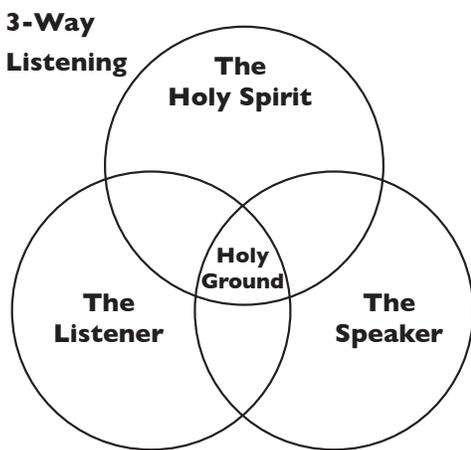
# 3-Way Listening

By Sharon Swing, deeply informed by Sibyl Towner and Susan Shadid

Far from the ordinary conversation over coffee or the banter of a small group, the experience of *3-Way Listening* is focused and intentional. It requires that the listener be aware of some simple, yet profound truths about a deeper kind of listening.

- Listening is an act of loving submission to God and to another person.
- Listening allows a person to hear him or herself, and hear God, while feeling accepted and loved.
- Listening is not about offering advice or fixing another person's problems.
- As you, the listener, present yourself as an available tool for use in the hands of God, he may choose to use your presence to assist the speaker in receiving clarity, guidance or healing.

Sibyl Towner and Susan Shadid call this kind of listening *3-Way Listening*. They have been teaching it for years in the context of teaching people to become spiritual mentors or spiritual friends. They developed a Venn diagram to illustrate the concept that looks like this:



Three elements are necessary: at least one listener, a speaker and the Holy Spirit.

When the speaker can talk through what has been brought to the surface in working through a *Listen to My Life* map, or by some other prompting, they have the opportunity to 'hear' themselves in new ways. What might have been a cluttered mass of facts and emotions in their mind, body and spirit now seems clearer.

## What do we do as listeners?

First and foremost, as a listener, we don't interrupt the speaker. We let the speaker know with our body language that we are listening attentively to something very important. We silently pray for God to bring clarity, truth, healing and restoration to whatever is needed. We pray for God's love to prevail, replacing lies with truth. Simply, we pray that God will

do whatever, in his perfect wisdom, he sees fit to do. Our presence as a listener holds open the time and space for the speaker to stay focused on whatever they feel is helpful.

## What might happen?

When we engage in *3-Way Listening* we are a part of creating an environment that is conducive for the speaker to have an encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. When we look at the diagram, this is represented by the space where 'The Speaker' and 'The Holy Spirit' overlap. We are simply willing tools in God's hands. We offer our presence, prayers and belief that God will do what is most needed. We are not listening for our own benefit, understanding or entertainment. There are many ways in which we, as listeners, can get in the way of the speaker encountering God. To avoid doing so, we must actively and intentionally replace some habitual listening practices with new practices. We are actively offering our attentive presence with the hope and expectation that God will choose to be present with us and do what he does best.

The listener might gain a gift of clarity regarding their past or current circumstances, or sense God offering his loving direction or correction. It may be subtle or profound. It may take a short or a prolonged period of time. It may happen in the moments we are together, or it may happen at a later time when the person is alone. It may be that nothing happens at all. For us as listeners, it is just about lovingly offering our gift of presence and believing

in God for the speaker even if they cannot believe in God's redemptive power for their story for themselves.

Many people expend extraordinary efforts to forget or hide things that they don't think others would understand or accept. This kind of isolation is precisely what the evil one uses to keep us from experiencing grace, or even believing that it could be extended to us. Some people in our *Listen to My Life* experiences have described what happened to them as bringing what was hidden into the light where there is a release from fear and judgment – in essence, an encounter with healing grace – that allows them to be free in some new way. Creating safe places for people to come out of hiding is one of the many ways God can choose to use our listening presence for his redemptive purposes. We can be present as truth and grace triumph over fear.

### Between the Listener and God

The space where 'The Listener' and 'The Holy Spirit' overlap in the Venn diagram represents our connection to God as we listen. We actively, but silently, pray for this person while giving the speaker our attention. We may pray, "Holy Spirit, lead this person to Jesus," or "Holy Spirit, bring clarity and healing," or, "Holy Spirit, let him feel your love." In addition, the Holy Spirit may bring scripture or a question to your attention. After the speaker is finished talking, they may ask for questions or prayer. You may feel prompted to ask those questions or share the scripture that came to mind, or you may sense that you are to remain silent. Pray for discernment, only speaking if you feel prompted to do so, putting all ego needs aside.

A simple question may help the person reflect on what they have said, like, 'Thinking back on what you chose to share, did you notice anything that stood out to you?' or 'Is there something that God might be directing your attention toward?'

Not to be overlooked, is the aspect of listening to one's self. It is useful to pay attention to what comes to mind about your life or story while you are listening to another. You will need to put that aside while you are listening, and ask the Holy Spirit to hold it for you until a later time. Sometimes, something profound happens in the spirit of a listener; healing, exposing, troubling, or opening up a new thought that needs to be attended to. Make time to re-visit what came to mind as you listened.

### Between the Listener and the Speaker

The space where 'The Speaker' and 'The Listener' overlap in the diagram represents our connection to the other person. As we listen deeply to one another, God grows our capacity to love and offer grace. It is a wonderful

gift to have friends who know your story and don't just love you in spite of what they know, but love you even more deeply because of that deep knowing.

You might set the expectation prior to listening, that silence is useful, normal and expected. Many times it is the best part, because it allows the person to have silent space in the midst of telling their story, or after being asked a question that might assist them in reflecting, without the need of verbalizing an answer.

### Between the Three of Us

The center of the diagram, where the Holy Spirit, the Listener, and the Speaker overlap is the space that we like to call 'Holy Ground.' When, at times, you are privileged to be present for an act of redemption, it is a memorable picture of God's miraculous power and tangible love. As one of our *Listen to My Life* facilitators commented, 'Witnessing redemption is never boring!' At times, you may realize that you are experiencing in a new way the truth of Matthew 18:20 TNIV, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them."

### Clues for Entering into 3-Way Listening

Here are a few clues that help me discern if I am practicing *3-Way Listening*:

- I consciously remind myself that I am there to serve the other person and help them to hear themselves and respond to God.
- My body language tells the listener that I am listening with my whole self, and that I am not rushed or distracted.
- I find myself able to listen attentively to the other person, and also be attentive to listen for the Holy Spirit.
- I find myself not needing to advise, control or fix the person to whom I am listening.
- I don't need to interject my own story, because I realize that what is happening between the speaker and the Holy Spirit is much more important, and that my comments will only distract from what God might do.

"Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people don't know the difference."

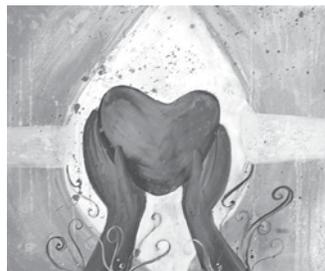
David Augsburger

"Listening is the art of creating space so God can do His work in the heart of another."

Sharon Swing

- I can want what is best for this person, but trust that God knows what is best, and I don't have to have an answer. I release my ego's need to be noticed as smart, wise, or insightful.
- I ask the Holy Spirit to release me to only speak what he deems useful.
- I may sense a prompting to share a scripture that may replace lies with God's truth, ask a question that will draw the speaker toward truth and toward God, or impart a blessing to remind them of their unique, God-given design.

It is interesting that *3-Way Listening* requires us NOT to do many things. Listening in this deep, spiritual manner requires us to say 'NO' to our normal habits of casual, conversational listening so we make room for more beautiful interactions that are graced with God's presence and lead us down a path toward a deep knowing of God, one's self, and others.



*Holding the Space*

A friend of the *Listen to My Life* ministry asked an artist to create a painting, *Holding the Space*, to represent her reflections on the new ways in which she was experiencing and learning about listening. She envisioned a doctor performing open-heart surgery, and the sternum

being retracted to make room for healing hands to reach the vital organ. The retractors, although not doing healing work themselves, make room for the master surgeon's hands to do his healing work. We act as 'retractors' or spiritual listeners, making space for God to do his work in the heart of those to whom we listen.

# Would you like to facilitate a group through a *Listen to My Life* experience?

## Facilitator Equipping Available!

[onlifemaps.com/become-a-facilitator/](http://onelifemaps.com/become-a-facilitator/)

Visit our website for access to many helpful resources to help you get a *Listen to My Life* group started and confidently create an environment where people can recognize and respond to God in their stories. You can:

- Sign up to receive notifications of our free monthly Facilitator Equipping Calls. Join the conversation with others from around the world who are facilitating groups!
- Explore options for virtual and video-based classes to become an equipped and confident facilitator as you grow in recognizing and responding to God in your own story.
- Consider joining us for our live Listen to My Life Facilitator Equipping Events.
- We're available to help you get started using these materials with others. Contact us at [facilitators@onlifemaps.com](mailto:facilitators@onlifemaps.com).



**Sharon Swing**

Bartlett, IL  
Co-Founder & Executive Director of oneLifemaps, LLC  
Co-Author of *Listen to My Life*  
President, Swing Consulting, Inc., Strategic Exploration

SHARON SWING is the Co-Author of *Listen to My Life* and Co-Founder of oneLifemaps, LLC, an organization dedicated to helping people review their life stories for the purpose of recognizing and responding to God. She is energized when people discover the unique

aspects of how God wants to live through them, just as He made them to be.

Sharon's vision statement is 'to be a catalyst for generative change,' and her mission statement is 'to help people articulate their intentions and live them out.' She applies her knowledge and skills in change management, process facilitation, writing, marketing, strategic planning and coaching to bring clarity and motivation to groups and individuals experiencing or initiating change.

Sharon founded Swing Consulting, Inc. Strategic Exploration, and serves business and non-profit organizations as an organization development consultant. In previous roles, Sharon served as Executive Vice President, Strategic Planning and Ministry Services for the Willow Creek Association and led the "Vision College" for Square D Company.

Sharon earned a Masters in Organization Development from Pepperdine University, and she has trained with College of Executive Coaching to further her professional expertise. She is a graduate of the University of Illinois with a degree in Advertising from the College of Communications.



**Sibyl Towner**

Oldenburg, IN  
Co-Founder & Spiritual Director of oneLifemaps, LLC  
Co-Author of *Listen to My Life*  
Master Teacher for Sustainable Faith School of Spiritual Direction

SIBYL TOWNER is the Co-Author of *Listen to My Life* and Co-Founder of oneLifemaps, LLC, an organization dedicated to helping people review their life stories for the purpose of recognizing and responding to God. Her life mission statement is to equip the next

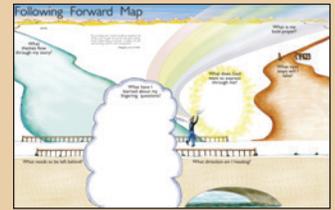
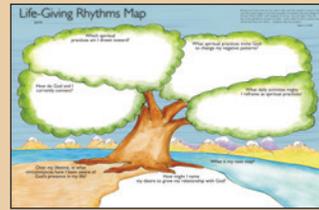
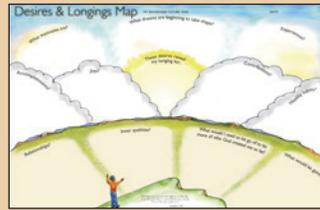
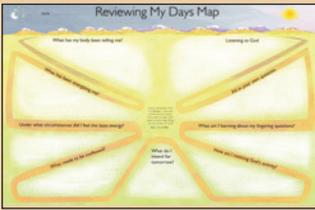
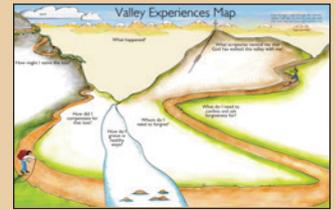
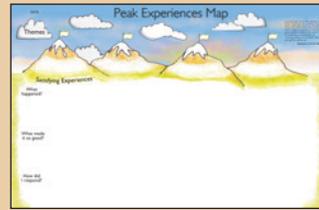
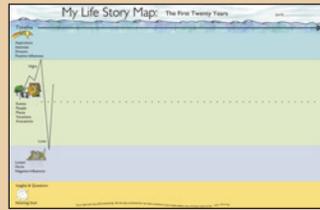
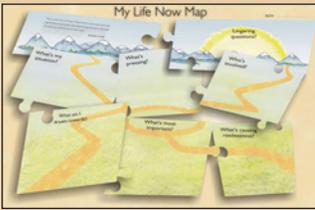
generation of leaders in Godly character and leadership.

Sibyl's professional experience includes 16 years as Head Counselor and Assistant Director of a private girl's camp and 15 years as Minister to Families with Children and Director of Summer Ministries and Camps at College Hill Presbyterian Church. Another 16 years were spent at Willow Creek Community Church where she served in leadership positions within the Adult, Youth, Women's and Small Groups ministries. She also served as Director of Spiritual Mentoring and taught numerous classes through Willow Creek's Classes@Willow. Sibyl is a sought after teacher and has especially enjoyed her international speaking engagements.

Sibyl earned her degree in Education from Bowling Green State University, and is a certified teacher of Spiritual Direction through Sustainable Faith, leading multiple cohorts. She served the Transforming Center, led by Ruth Haley Barton, for 17 years as a participant and offered spiritual direction at retreats.

Sibyl is married to Dick and they have two sons, an adopted-in-love third son, and eleven grandchildren. They live in Oldenburg, Indiana where they are Co-Directors of The Springs, a Christian Retreat Center ([www.TheSpringsIndiana.org](http://www.TheSpringsIndiana.org)) at which they invite people to listen and respond to God. Sibyl enjoys listening to people's stories, reading, walking in all seasons, opening their home and facilitating retreats.

## Listen to My Life Map Portfolio includes:



*Listen to My Life is a unique visual tool that helps you invite God into the process of reviewing your past, assessing your present and continuing to walk with God into your future.*

### This experience is for you if:

- you are seeking God in a deeper way and desire to rediscover who you are through His eyes.
- you have thought, "I don't know myself anymore."
- you wonder, "Is there something more?"
- you stand at a crossroads in life and ask, "Which way will lead me toward expressing more of who I am made to be?"
- you are looking for a way to understand the restlessness that you feel inside.
- you are relationally at odds with yourself and/or others in ways that have ties to your past.

**Written from a biblical perspective**, this portfolio of visual maps helps you explore the implications of the truth that God created you for a purpose and your life is most fully and joyfully lived under God's direction and guidance. As you invite God into the process and document your story, desires, observations and plans in words, phrases, and pictures, you may sense God providing fresh insights, questions or specific direction by helping you to:

CLARIFY *your desires*

DISCERN *how your life story impacts the way you live today and your choices for tomorrow*

UNDERSTAND *yourself and your part in God's larger story*

DECIDE *what you might do to live a life that is a more full expression of who God created you to be*

# oneLifemaps.com

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