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Holy Listening in Reference Work: A Sacred Aspect of the Christian Librarian's Calling

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Abstract

Along with all Christians, I live out a vocation – both a general and a missional calling. More specifically, as a Christian who is a librarian, my missional calling is to serve my patrons. In my experience, the best way that I can fulfill this service is by listening. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*, "[t]he first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them" (1954, p. 97).

Many pastors and spiritual directors write on the practice and importance of listening for the work they perform. The listening they do is shaped by their faith, as well as their professional practice. A number of librarians (Christian or not), write about the intersection of listening with their work. There is scant literature, on how a Christian librarian's faith and calling shape our listening as librarians. In this essay I will suggest a new model for reference work with patrons at a Christian university. By examining literature from librarianship and from two Christian helping professions, I will pose a model for holy listening as a Christian librarian. I am particularly addressing librarians who are employed at Christian universities, where our faith shapes and informs the work we do as reference librarians, but the ideas presented here can also apply to the work of any librarian who is a Christian. Examples gleaned from my practice as an academic librarian are provided.

Keywords: holy listening, listening, Christian librarianship

Holy Listening in Reference Work:

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James 1:19 "Let everyone be quick to listen."

1 Thessalonians 5:11 "Encourage one another and build up each other."

Beth[1] walked in the door of my office, as she had many times before. She entered tentatively, unsure of herself—not unusual for a doctoral student at the end of her first year. I welcomed her back to this space, a safe space that she visited often during her initial year of study. The lighting and the placement of a comfortable chair were intentionally arranged to provide a warm, barrier-free setting. Beth and I sat face to face. As she settled in, I asked her some open-ended questions. I used key non-verbal cues to express my continuing interest in her research (Jennerich, 1980; RASD, 1996, 2.2 & 2.4). I also took notes, while making sure that I maintained regular eye contact (Jennerich, 1980; RASD, 1996, 1.3 & 2.2). I smiled frequently. I mentally prayed and asked God to be with me during the interaction. Beth's voice was thick with tiredness. She started to cry as she described her time spent in the PhD program and the crushing emotional nature of doctoral work. I listened to the details of her journey, including her thoughts about possibly dropping out of the program.

Every summer, the doctoral faculty at Seattle Pacific University ask me to teach a one-hour session for new doctoral students, to introduce them to some of the library resources. At the end of those all-too-brief sessions, I gather a list of email addresses from the students and then ask them to arrange a meeting with me for a more in-depth reference interview about their research interests. This is how I first became acquainted with Beth. Over the course of Beth's visits that followed her first reference interview, our times together became more personalized.

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[1] All names have been changed.

In addition to assisting her with the particular topic of her research, we also came to see each other through the eyes of our mutual faith.

During the visit described above, I eventually set my pad of paper and pen aside and leaned forward to listen more intently to Beth. Before she left my office that day, I asked if I could pray with her. Beth would share that the time I spent listening and praying with her during that dark hour played a part in her continuation in the program. She went on to graduate with her PhD in education. The exchange was a gift to both of us. I offered her the gift of listening, and she offered me the gift of her story (Hart, 1980). It was a holy interaction.

As a Christian, I live out a vocation – both a general and a missional calling (Koskela, 2015). As a librarian, one of the core parts of my job is to serve my patrons by assisting them to develop the skills they need to find, evaluate, and use information (American Library Association, 2017). And as a Christian who is a librarian, my missional calling is to spend time working closely with patrons to guide them with their research needs while pointing them to God. One of the best ways I can fulfill this service is by listening. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954) wrote in *Life Together*, "the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them" (p. 97).

Many pastors and spiritual directors have written on the practice and importance of listening in the work they perform. The listening they do is shaped by their faith, as well as their professional practice. Meanwhile, many librarians write about the intersection of listening and reference work, but not through the lens of faith. There is scant literature, on how a Christian librarian's faith and calling shape our listening as librarians. By examining literature from librarianship and from two Christian helping professions, I will pose a model for holy listening as a Christian librarian. I am particularly addressing librarians who are employed at Christian

universities, where our faith explicitly shapes and informs the work we do as reference librarians, but the ideas presented here can also apply to the work of any librarian who is a Christian.

Librarians as listeners

Even a cursory examination of library literature indicates that listening is an essential part of a librarian's skill set. As early as 1876, Samuel Green, Worcester Public Librarian, called for librarians to listen to their patrons. He wrote: "A hearty reception by a sympathizing friend, and the recognition of someone at hand who will listen to inquiries even although he may consider them unimportant, make it easy for such persons to ask questions, and put them at once on home footing" (Green, 1876). Margaret Hutchins (1944) built on the description of a librarian's work when she wrote that listening through to the "end of a patron's speech" is a minimum courtesy that should be offered a patron in a reference interview (p. 22). Hutchins (1944), who was an assistant professor at Columbia University, maintained that not only should reference librarians be physically available, they should also be approachable in an "intellectual and spiritual" way (p. 22). Being approachable intellectually and spiritually involves listening. Listening is an essential part of a reference interview.

Expanding the role of the librarian, David Maxfield (1954), former librarian and associate professor of library science at the University of Illinois Library School, introduced the term "Counselor Librarianship" (p. 2). Maxfield (1954) advocated that counselor librarians should invest in reference interviews that offer more than pieces of information. Rather, reference interactions should include an interview in which the librarian, trained in counseling techniques, would show an interest in the "total individual development" of patrons (p. 21). Counseling techniques involve listening skills that are necessary for a robust interview process.

Building on Maxfield's (1954) counseling model, Patrick Penland (1970) recommended going beyond merely furnishing information to engaging in an exchange during which "library counseling tries to facilitate human development as an interaction between the individual and his environment" (p. 71). In his work, entitled *Interviewing for Counselor and Reference Librarians*, he posited a new emphasis in librarianship termed "advisory counseling for librarians" (1970, p. 4). As part of the advisory counseling role, Penland (1970) encouraged librarians to use specific counseling skills such as listening and empathy. Penland, and others, apply theories of interpersonal communication, such as Carl Rogers' "Client Centered Therapy," to the work of the reference librarian (1970, p. 33; Tibbets, 1974; Bunge, 1999; Radford, 1999). Penland (1970) proposed that these same skills should be used in an "interview encounter" with library patrons in order to be more "effective in serving the individual patron" (p. 5). He also asserted that library schools should provide more instruction on the interview encounter. His scholarship pushed librarians to focus on the "human relationships of the librarian and his interpersonal communications" rather than "emphasizing the mechanical" (p. 4). Further, Penland (1970) said that librarians should "establish a relationship of frankness….where the librarian listens carefully to understand what is said." (p.8). Other scholars (Peck, 1975; Jennerich & Jennerich, 1976; Klipfel, 2015) have sought to apply counseling skills to the reference interview. Peck (1975) wrote: "Many similarities exist between counseling and reference work." More recently, Kevin Klipfel (2015) suggests that employing counseling skills will help librarians to engage authentically with students so as to understand them as unique persons, resulting in an "ideal informational transaction" (p. 27).

In addition to applying counseling skills to librarianship, a few scholars borrow concepts from the "helping relationships" literature and apply them to reference work (Bunge, 1999; Jennerich, 1980; Lukenbill, 1977; Penland, 1976). Bernard Lukenbill (1977) used the work of Naomi Brill, social worker and professor, to reform reference work. Brill (1973), in her book, entitled *Working With People: The Helping Process,* wrote about the need for empathy, attentive behavior, and active listening when working with people. Lukenbill (1977) proposed using Brill's ideas to guide librarians in reference work. He went so far as to design a library school course, entitled "Helping Relationship Instructional Unit" (p. 115). As part of the course, he listed five teaching objectives. One of the objectives is "to introduce students to some of the basic helping relationship concepts and skills such as empathy, attentive behavior, active listening, and to help students to apply these skills to the reference process" (p. 116).

In a seminal article, Robert Taylor (1967) described the practice of "question negotiation" and applied it to the patron-librarian interaction. Taylor (1967) asserted that "negotiation of reference questions is one of the most complex acts of human communication" (p. 5). He insisted that trying to figure out what a patron wants is, ultimately, a communication problem.[2]

Also, taking librarianship to a level beyond mechanical aspects, Nancy Maxwell (2005), former library director at Miami Dade College, equates library work with the work of clergy. In her book *Sacred Stacks: The Higher Purpose of Libraries and Librarianship,* she writes about the sacred/spiritual dimension of the work librarians perform and mentions that some see their work as a calling and a way of serving a higher purpose. Maxwell (2005) identifies active

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[2] For a more substantive literature review, see Marie L. Radford's (1999) chapter titled, "Literature on the Reference Interaction" In M. L. Radford (Ed.). *Literature on the reference transaction: Interpersonal communication in the academic library.*

listening as a key part of the "higher calling" of librarianship. She shares that some librarians feel

called by something or someone they cannot describe. She falls short, however, of naming God

as the One who calls.

In 1996, the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD), a subdivision of the

American Library Association (ALA), realized the need for a set of specific guidelines

addressing patron-librarian interactions. The RASD (1996) listed five key facets of reference

services – Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow-up. With the

goal of emphasizing the importance of the reference interview, RASD (1996) developed

"Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers." The

Guidelines state that "the success of the transaction is measured not by the information

conveyed, but by the positive or negative impact of the patron-librarian interaction" (RASD,

1996). Three of the five facets include a number of interpersonal communication skills that

require listening. For example, to be approachable, the verbal and nonverbal responses of the

reference librarian should make it clear that he or she is "available to provide assistance" (1.0).

To do this, the Guidelines assert that conversing with patrons is key in setting "the tone for the

entire communication process between the librarian and the patron" (1.0). In setting the tone,

librarians should be welcoming and help the patron feel comfortable in a situation which may be

perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming" (1.0). In order to listen

effectively, the librarian should set up her or his interview space in such a hospitable way that the

patron will feel comfortable—as I did with Beth, and with other people who enter my office.

Another facet of the Guidelines (RASD, 1996) articulates the fact that "demonstrating a

high degree of interest in the reference transaction" will result in a successful interaction (2.0).

The Guidelines recommend librarians should face "the patron when speaking and listening"

(RASD, 1996, 2.1). Practicing this indicates that the librarian is focusing "his or her attention on the patron" (RASD, 1996, 2.1). Additionally, the librarian should signal "an understanding of the patron's needs through verbal or non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head or brief comments or questions" (RASD, 1996, 2.4). Again, all of these actions have been important in my interactions with Beth and other students.

The third facet, Listening/Inquiring, is a key aspect of the Guidelines. "The reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process…Strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction" (RASD, 1996, 3.0). Besides asking questions to clarify a patron's information need, librarians are encouraged to communicate "in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner" (RASD, 1996, 3.2). Open-ended questioning techniques should be used to guide the patron in expanding the description of their need (RASD, 1996, 3.5).

As the above brief review of academic and professional literature demonstrates, listening is an essential part of effective reference. By adopting the concepts of communication, interpersonal skills in conversation, helping relationships, and counseling skills for librarianship, library scholars designed a stronger model for reference work. The focus of the literature, however, is only on the skill development of the librarian, for the sake of providing a successful reference interaction. The reference interview is described in a transactional and utilitarian way. Even Klipfel (2015), who talks about engaging with students in an authentic way and recognizing them as unique beings, is still suggesting a utilitarian transaction. The ultimate goal posed by the library literature is a successful reference interview, not a relationship.

Beyond transaction to relationship

The tenets of my Christian faith and calling push me to go beyond a transactional encounter. Scripture provides models and injunctions in which we see people as unique beings created by God who are deserving of careful listening to their needs. In addition to scripture, many religious writers provide insight on why we should cultivate more in-depth personal interactions. The work of Martin Buber, an influential Austrian-born religious philosopher, is one such writer. His *I-Thou* philosophy, described in his book *I and Thou,* offers a starting place for developing a pathway to move from a transactional interaction to a relationship. Buber (1958) describes an *I-Thou* interaction that points to a non-utilitarian relationship. In our work as Christian librarians, we should see interpersonal relationships with patrons as an "I and Thou" encounter where "the spheres in which the world of relation arises" includes "our life with men" (Buber, 1958, p. 6). "If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things." (p. 8). "I do not experience the man to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him" (p. 9). Buber (1958) is saying that encounters among people can move from being objectified transactions to becoming subjective relationships. In this way, the connection between individuals can become truly authentic.

Even more profoundly, *I-Thou* relationships between human beings point us to the ultimate *I-Thou* relationship that exists between human beings and God. In a Christian context, such an understanding reminds us of the words of Jesus, who stated: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" Matthew 25:40 (New Revised Standard Version).

According to Neil Pembroke (2002), a lecturer in pastoral care, Buber felt that the objectification of people "produces a soul-destroying sense of alienation" (Pembroke, 2002, p. 32). Instead, we should strive for a dialogical relation which engenders a "humanizing presence." Pembroke (2002) writes that Buber's purpose in describing this dialogical philosophy was to show that "in the meeting between persons there is also a meeting with God" (p. 36). Pembroke (2002) takes Buber's idea of *I-Thou,* in his book *The Art of Listening: Dialogue, Shame, and Pastoral Care,* and applies it to the work of pastoral care. He writes that Buber felt "a genuinely loving presence is one which aims at assisting the other in growing into her potential" (p. 3). Pembroke (2002) proposes that to be genuinely present we need to adopt Buber's dialogical philosophy when interacting with one another. Therefore, as we "enter into dialogue with the other, I accept her uniqueness and particularity and struggle with her in the release of her potential as a person" (p. 31).

To enter into an *I-Thou* relationship with our patrons, we must practice the art of listening. By listening in a more profound way, we establish an environment in which genuine dialogue takes place. By resisting a merely instrumental interaction with our patrons, we establish a setting in which we are fully present and listening. In this posture, we are able to listen for the claims our patrons are making and attempt to respond faithfully (Pembroke, 2002). When we listen and respond to our patrons in this way, we confirm them as persons (Pembroke, 2002).

While Buber's *I-Thou* is a helpful place to start to build a fuller model for our reference work as librarians who are Christians, recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit in our interactions with patrons should also be addressed. With that in mind, I find it useful to turn to

literature from the disciplines of Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care to inform a distinctly

Christian model for librarianship.

Spiritual Direction

The practice of listening is discussed in the literature of many of the Christian helping

professions. In reading through writings on spiritual direction for example, listening is frequently

mentioned (Frykholm, 2011; Fryling, 2009; Guenther, 1992; Hart, 1980; McHugh, 2015;

Wolsterstorff, 1994). Spiritual directors consider listening an essential skill or practice for their

work. Claire Wolterstorff (1994) says: "Simply put, spiritual direction is more helpfully called a

ministry of listening or accompaniment….The director listens always, encourages often" (p.19).

Thomas Hart (1980), writing in his book on the art of Christian listening, recommended:

"To listen with an attentive and receptive heart until that person is finished is to bestow a gift of

great value" (p.1). He maintained that "there is probably no service we can render other persons

quite as great or important as to be listener and receiver to them in those moments when they

need to open their hearts and tell someone their story" (p. 1). His book on spiritual direction was

written to offer guidance in listening to people who work in myriad positions involving a helping

relationship. For example, he wrote: "there are more structured helping relationships, such as

students coming to teachers with other than academic concerns, clients going to professional

therapists, men and women approaching a priest in the sacrament of reconciliation" (p.2).

(Unfortunately, librarians are not specifically mentioned.) The stated purpose of Hart's (1980)

book was to "make people more comfortable with the idea of ministering to others in this way"

(p. 2).

Hart's (1980) model of the "helper as sacrament" is particularly apropos in our work as Christian librarians (p. 8). "If the church is sacramental, if human beings, in the Spirit of Jesus, are the sacrament of God's presence and action in the world" then "the encounter is sacramental" (p. 9). "Any helping relationship in the context of Christian faith is a mysterious encounter and God is present and at work in it" (p. 9). According to Hart (1980), listening and helping are key aspects of spiritual direction. These aspects can readily be applied to Christian librarianship. In fact, some of the same language on librarianship as a helping relationship is used in the library literature (Lukenbill, 1977; Penland, 1970; Bunge, 1999).

Margaret Guenther's (1992) writing, in her book entitled *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction,* expands the sacramental encounter. Guenther (1992), an Episcopal priest, describes the interaction between director and directee as a "covenanted relationship" in which "the director has agreed to put himself aside so that his total attention can be focused on the person sitting in the other chair" (p. 3).

These examples, borrowed from spiritual direction, provide the basis for a model of reference work that involves listening in a more personal, sacramental, and holier way than what the standard library literature employs. Margaret Guenther (1992), for example, describes spiritual direction as "Listening to the story…as a dialogue and sometimes the listener-director must become active in helping shape the story" (pp. 22-23). It is in this vein that I listened to Beth's vocational story—and helped to shape it—when she shared her situation with me in my office.

Indeed, when performing reference work, it is my role to listen to the stories of those who seek me out for help. As I listen, I am also open and attentive to the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is the mediator who "stands in the centre between my neighbor and myself" (Bonhoeffer,

1948, p. 84). The Holy Spirit is present, prompting me regarding the questions I might ask, in order to help the patron understand their needs, both in reference and in life.

Carmelita

While staffing the reference desk, Carmelita, an undergraduate business major, stopped by to ask for help understanding a passage of a text written by St. Augustine of Hippo. She was reading the text in order to write a paper assigned by a professor who taught a class on "Christian Formation" that all Seattle Pacific University students must take. Since I am not an expert on interpreting Augustine, I suggested that we read through the passage together. After twenty minutes pouring over the passage, Carmelita expressed her thanks and went back to working on her paper. About an hour later, she returned to the desk and inquired whether she could pose another question. With great earnestness and curiosity, she asked me why God forgives people over and over again for the same sin. Carmelita shared her bewilderment as to why God would be so forgiving. A precious conversation ensued about grace, a concept with which she did not seem to be familiar. Listening to Carmelita's profound questions eventually resulted in an ongoing friendship. During her senior year, she visited me a number of times to update me on her job searches. She often shared her fears about her future. In an *I-Thou* posture, I offered her the gift of listening to her story to the end. Carmelita appreciated the time I took to be present with her and to encourage her questions about spiritual and vocational matters.

Pastoral Care

Similar to the literature on spiritual direction, many books and articles have been written on the essential nature of listening when offering pastoral care (Baab, 2014; Hedahl, 2001; Moschella, 2011; Pembroke, 2002; Riain, 2011). Lynne Baab (2014), a Presbyterian clergywoman who writes about the power of listening in ministry, offers a rich model which is

applicable to the work of Christian librarians. Much of the language on listening that Baab

(2014) uses can be applied to the work that I do as a Christian librarian. For example, she writes

that, "listening to someone patiently and carefully is a great gift, and compassionate listening

communicates love and acceptance" (Baab, 2014, p. 7). She says that Christians "are called to

be in the world as Jesus was in the world, so it is worth noting that Jesus was a champion

listener" (p. 8). For Baab (2014), the gift of a "listening ear communicates love and

grace…which are qualities found abundantly in Jesus" (p. 9). I especially appreciate the phrase

Baab mentions as a guide for her ministry: "holy listening" (p. 9). Baab (2014) borrowed the

term "holy listening" from Craig Satterlee, a bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of

America. He described holy listening as an endeavor in which one discerns "the presence and

activity of God in the joys, struggles, and hopes of ordinary activities" (as cited in Baab, 2014,

p.9). Satterlee writes, "From a Christian perspective, holy listening…takes the incarnation

seriously; it dares to believe that, as God was enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, so God is embodied

in other people and in the things around us" (as cited in Baab, 2014, p.10). For Baab (2014),

when we listen, the "Holy Spirit enables us to perceive the presence of Jesus in wildly diverse

people and places, and our listening becomes holy" (p.10).

Amy

Sometimes, faculty colleagues are also my patrons. Amy, a faculty person, is one who

reaches out to me often, seeking help with her research. During a recent visit from Amy, we had

a holy encounter. As she entered my office, she looked exhausted. I removed my backpack from

my worn, comfy patron chair, so she could sit down. I closed the office door, pulled up my chair,

and grabbed my pad and pen, ready to take notes as she detailed her research interests. She

shared that she had spent several days trying to find research on school counselors working with

neuro-diverse students, but to no avail. Part way into Amy's explanation, she started to share

about her son, who is on the autistic spectrum, and thus neuro-diverse. She teared up as she

expressed her concern that someday, school officials might misinterpret her son's behavior. In

light of recent school shootings, she worried that staff at her son's school would misread his

behaviors, which could result in him being categorized as a danger to those around him. Amy

was concerned about her son's inability to express his frustration and anger in appropriate ways.

She feared that his behavior would be perceived as intending something threatening. She sought

me out, looking for assistance in finding school counseling literature that suggested productive

ways to work with neuro-diverse students in order to help them communicate effectively. What

began as an information seeking transaction resulted in a holy encounter as I prayed with her

regarding her worries.

Combining Buber's work with the practices of spiritual direction and pastoral care, which

help us to see the essential role of the Holy Spirit's prompting, we can now move forward in

proposing a new model of reference work for Christian librarians.

Holy Listening

If I see my work as the living out of a calling and ministry, then practicing holy listening

with patrons as they share their stories, their struggles, and their hopes for their academic and

personal lives, should be paramount. What would it look like to apply the concept of holy

listening to the reference work I do as a Christian librarian? What would it look like if I were to

listen to my patrons in such a way that I expect both the patron and me to encounter God in the

interview?

As I sit with patrons in an *I-Thou* posture, I seek to perceive the presence of the Holy

Spirit in each one. I listen for how God is working in their lives, which is evident when they

describe their research in passionate ways. Holy listening as a librarian who is a Christian goes beyond the utilitarian goal of merely providing information or a successful reference transaction. Rather, the purpose is to practice listening to the patron in a reference interview because I care for them. The ministry, or call, in my work as a reference librarian who is a Christian is to listen because Jesus, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, calls us to listen. In the act of listening, I see each patron as a unique creation of God. I listen to them as Jesus would.

Regarding specific practices, engaging in holy listening includes establishing eye contact, smiling, and focusing my full attention on the patron. Doing so expresses genuine concern for them, so that they know that they are loved by God and me (RASD, 1996; Hart, 1980). Holy listening means hearing our patron's story all the way to the end before engaging in a back-and-forth dialogue (Hutchins, 1944; Guenther, 1992; Pembroke, 2002; RASD, 1996, 3.3). Holy listening requires one to ask questions that "cut to the heart of the matter" (Guenther, 1992, p. 24; Taylor & Lehigh Univ., 1967). Holy listening requires one to be prayerfully open to the presence of the Spirit throughout the interaction. Holy listening happens when the librarian uses questioning techniques to encourage the patron and point them to God (Taylor & Lehigh Univ., 1967; RASD, 1996; Hart, 1980). Holy listening is bestowing a gift on my patrons when they share their research stories with me (Hart, 1980).

As I listen to patrons, might I be listening for how God is working in them through their studies? By practicing the art of question negotiation, might they begin to understand the grace that is apparent in the work they are doing? As I engage in holy listening, rather than only focusing on a successful interview, I also can prayerfully discern God's activity in their lives and, if appropriate, invite them to discover where God is with them in their studies (Fryling, 2009).

It is important, however, to be sensitive to where a patron is spiritually. For example, it is not appropriate to engage in a spiritual discussion with a patron who is not open to such a discussion. While sometimes the reference encounter involves explicit discussions of one's faith, at other times, when meeting with patrons, the care and listening I practice offers a more implicit *I-Thou* interaction. For instance, the time I spent with numerous Saudi Arabian students is typically an example of an implicit *I-Thou* relationship. When I meet with Saudi students, I do not usually inquire about their religious beliefs. However, in seeing them as unique creations of God, I still offer holy listening and am attentive to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the meeting. Consequently, I feel that they understand that I care for them—so much so that some of them asked me to be the faculty advisor for the Saudi club on campus.

Another example of reference work where the *I-Thou* relationship was implicit was the help I provided to Josiah, a PhD student from Tanzania. During his five years of doctoral work at SPU, Josiah spent a lot of time talking with me about his research, which addressed the use of traditional tribal music to enculturate Tanzanian children in the norms of their indigenous society. In the course of his reference appointments, Josiah asked me if I would go and visit his village and organize a library in the secondary school. Initially, I did not agree to go. But over the next year, he persistently and patiently asked me when I was "going to start the library." I kept putting him off with various lame excuses. Mostly, my fear was that, just because I was a trained as a librarian, it did not mean I actually knew how to *set up* a library in a majority world nation. Eventually, I ran out of evasions and was no longer able to say "no" to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. After that, Josiah and I spent much time together, as I listened to his dreams for the secondary school library. It was important for me to listen carefully to his story and his wishes so that I would do what was culturally appropriate and not what I imagined was correct.

When I eventually did travel to Tanzania in order to organize the library, I had the chance to

spend time with Josiah and his family. This led to an ongoing relationship that is having an

impact on many students in Josiah's village—and at my university. This friendship involved an

implicit *I-Thou* relationship. I believe that the work we have done together in Josiah's village

points to God.

By combining ideas from library literature and RASD Guidelines with theological

insights and the practical aspects discussed by spiritual directors and pastoral care scholars, we

can begin to describe the idea of holy listening in reference work. Holy listening is engaging

with our patrons, not in a transactional way, but in an *I-Thou* way, that recognizes the presence

of God in the space and in the person with whom we meet. Holy listening recognizes the

sacramental nature of the interaction with our patrons (Hart, 1980, p.9). Holy listening requires

showing interest in our patron, not simply for instrumental reasons, but for the purpose of being

present to our patrons and recognizing the Holy Spirit's presence in the encounter (Hart, 1980, p.

9; Guenther, 1992; Pembroke, 2002; RASD, 1996). This sort of practice means providing a

reference interview where listening is a holy encounter between the patron, the librarian, and

God.

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