



## Mindful Listening - A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Just as a sphere circumscribes a space and delineates what is included or excluded, so does listening draw a circle that contains features of beauty or matters of significance. The purpose of any sphere of attention is to highlight what is important while downplaying what is distractive or superfluous. Paradoxically, in-depth listening equally entails *not* listening. The visual equivalent shows up in theatre productions when a central spotlight draws the audience's attention to a solo performer on stage. Everything outside of that illuminated space is relegated to the sidelines. So it is with the focused ear.

One of the greatest challenges facing us moderns today is not the obvious fact that we don't listen well. The deeper predicament is that we, as multi-tasking, stimuli loving, soundbyte consumers, have lowered or lost our ability to *not listen*. We get sidetracked continuously or listen too distractedly. The phrase 'paying attention' implies a choice to exercise and focus a conscious experience. If we simply respond to low-flying information (buzz) that registers automatically, most of us will be found wanting in moments when we are required to isolate content that is meaningful from content that is inconsequential. Too often our attention is wandering about in extraneous places through scanning, skimming, and surfing. What is called for in the act of deliberate listening is the ability to

taper our lens to foreground information while taking little or no notice of the background stuff.

Listening, at the risk of stating the obvious, is all about directing the capacity of attention so that we transform a too hyper, chaotic, or vast field of stimuli into a desirable focus of attention. Low level listening undermines a sense of connectivity because it is either tracking too much information or has fogged out. When a listener lacks focus, the non-attentive state functions in harmful not merely harmless ways. Diluted listening works like acid and corrodes the intimate links composing our matrix of relationships. In the workplace, a lack of listening can disintegrate the connective tissue of trust, genuineness, or effectiveness that bonds us to colleagues. Similarly, core friendships and partnerships can be devastated in a moment because a listener misses a vulnerable sharing and only hears the shattering sound of something precious falling to the floor after a moment of vulnerability bounced off a pair of distracted ears.

When it comes to connecting with other human beings, what matters most is the art of being attentive to what is present in the present. If we can't bring our listening capacity to attention, how can we lovingly embrace the preciousness of a child's giggle, hold the tenderness of a confidante's story, take in the medicine of music, or detect the verbal slight of hand behind a spin, a con, or a pitch? Even the ecological health of our Earth hinges on how well humans can catch the silent cry of trees, lakes, and soil. A poverty of connectivity results from attention not being paid abundantly.

So how does a skilful listener disregard or de-emphasize the noise or irrelevant data beyond her circle of attention? For one thing, if we are to develop attention and focus, we each must exercise our ears repeatedly in a variety of circumstances. Cultivating listening skills is not unlike cultivating the social skill of manners. An individual develops the etiquette of good manners because he practices the required competencies across a wide swath of environments. A child learns to conduct himself in appropriate ways at the dinner table, in the classroom, on the schoolyard, with strangers on the bus, and at Grandmother's home. Likewise, listening skills must be exercised broadly and consistently throughout diverse domains for us to become not just proficient but well-rounded as listeners.

Unfortunately, courses on listening tend to simply stress verbal communication and undervalue three-quarters of the remaining modes where the aural arts ought to be gainfully employed (sound, music, and silence). Teachers in college courses and trainers in corporate seminars routinely ignore a multi-disciplinarian approach. Instead of realizing the worth and wealth of interconnectivity between verbal, musical, natural, and even internal voices, students are taught to rein in their listening to the small territory of human speech. One result of over emphasizing verbal communication is that the functionality of speech takes precedence over a more imaginative, subjective, and comprehensive landscape of listening. Our ears are much wilder and wider than we believe and yet we repeatedly domesticate them by focusing on trained responses. We ask our ears to behave like caged animals in a zoo.

The conventional methodology in most corporate communication courses is to assess and measure a listener's ability to capture and retain verbal or numerical content. Memorizing facts and figures may serve you in the boardroom but not the bedroom. Retaining verbal facts may be a helpful skill but it won't come to your aid when you are with colleagues who confide in you about an illness, an anxiety, or a bigger dream. "Yeah, but at the end of the day," states one of my corporate friends, "verbal miscommunication costs time and money." I agree and have seen the devastating evidence of sloppy listening. However, I don't think the appropriate response is to reduce the complexity of listening to a handful of do's and don'ts given in a one-day corporate course on 'improving your communication skills'. How could mechanistic or simplistic techniques such as 'Ten Tips To Improve Your Communication Skills' really deliver anything more than a few motivational thoughts?

Listening, by nature, is feral. It grew out of the fierce life of our ancestors and continues to desire wide-open spaces and an interdisciplinary mix. Cultivating silence, noticing body language, hearing sub-text, catching someone's tone of voice, attuning to the rhythm of exchanges, and developing attention techniques are rarely taken into account in corporate communication courses. Whether in classrooms or boardrooms, we all could benefit from in-depth 'ear training' sessions that do more than reduce listening to one-dimensional edicts such as: "Look the speaker in the eye when he is addressing you".

In the most radical ways possible, we must re-imagine listening to be a practice that implicates everything from our political bodies to our physical bodies. We must entertain the possibility that deep listening can prevent violent conflicts, heal psychological wounds, draw out a person's deepest dreams, connect us more fully to the natural world, and provide a means of knowing ourselves intimately. Ultimately, listening is not just about capturing information. It's a universal way of being in the world as a conscientious person and a way of attending to the world with care, attention, and an ear for wonder. Snagging information exists in the shallow in of the pool. The contemporary poet, David Whyte, captures this sentiment in his poem *Loaves and Fishes*.

*This is not  
the age of information.*

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*Forget the news,  
and the radio,  
and the blurred screen.*

*This is the time  
of loaves  
and fishes.*

*People are hungry  
and one good word is bread  
for a thousand.*

The one good word that provides bread, or real substance for our being, comes in many nourishing forms, not just verbal. I remember a therapist I worked with who could instantly affirm my breakthrough moments with nothing more than an exhaled, 'ahhh' sound. That 'good word', was a body-rooted, heartfelt affirmation that signaled how fully I was heard.

The deepest changes in my life came not so much from what was said to me by a mentor, a friend, or a parent. Instead, good listeners have blessed me with their ability to provide a landing place for my human struggles. This guidebook comes from those priceless times when

someone took the time to pause, focus, and hear past the surface. In those moments, the listener could comprehend how things were being said as much as what was being said. This ability to listen mindfully and deeply doesn't happen without practice. Rapt attention happens because a person has developed an eclectic ear (one that can take in multiple layers of information) and a selective ear (one that can hone in on salient detail). Beyond the personal benefits of being heard by another exists a higher octave of audition. In these unparalleled times, I invite you to regard listening as a humanitarian act, one that influences how we love, how we live, how we learn, and how we lead.