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Listening with Love: Recovering the Art of Listening Well

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Listening with Love: Recovering the Art of Listening Well

Abstract

"Listening requires attention and focus—an absorption and processing of the sounds coming into your auditory cortex. Hearing is passive; listening is active. You cannot listen unless you are paying attention."

Posting about communicating with empathy from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Listening with Love: Recovering the Art of Listening Well

Erin Olson

I will admit—I do not hear very well. Due to a genetic predisposition to hearing loss, I am, at the age of 41, oftentimes unable to hear clearly what someone is saying. This is exacerbated by any outside or background noise which may also be present. I know I do not hear well, and I know this is something I should probably have assessed and evaluated relatively soon. When it comes to my ability to listen, however, I think I am still in denial. I like to think, as a social worker and trained mental health clinician, that I listen well. After all, I have been trained in active listening and empathy—I should be a great listener!

What is the difference between hearing and listening? Hearing is purely physical—a sound enters your ear, vibrates your ear drum, the nerve endings send a message to your brain, and your brain registers that you have (I am simplifying here) in fact, heard a sound. Just because the brain hears the sound, however, does not mean that the brain processes it. Listening requires attention and focus—an absorption and processing of the sounds coming into your auditory cortex. Hearing is passive; listening is active. You cannot listen unless you are paying attention. I am guilty of hearing and not listening, and I also witness this with my children. I will say something to one of them and they will acknowledge they have heard me by saying, “huh?” or “what?”, but the words that I have said have not been properly absorbed and processed, meaning I will have to repeat myself. Full disclosure: my kids often must do the same thing to me if I am distracted. Listening takes effort and not only the involvement of our sense of sound; good listening requires that we use our other senses to assist (Murphy, 2019).

Listening shapes us. Studies conducted to understand the relationship between listening and good communication found that when communication is good, the brain waves of

the listener and the communicator often begin to sync. Using an fMRI, neuroscientist Uri Hasson found that when someone was focused on listening to another research participant describing their favorite show, the two brain wave patterns became almost identical. In a similar study, researchers mapped the brain waves of good friends as they watched the same video clips and found that their brains reacted similarly. Yes, we tend to gravitate toward people similar to ourselves, but if we take this with Hasson's findings, it suggests that "who we listen to shapes how we think and react" (Murphy, 2019, p. 23). This can be good and bad. It brings connection—something we all need—but it can also lead to disconnection and division.

What happens if we typically listen to those who sound just like us—if we only (or mostly) listen to those whose opinions, ideas, theological beliefs, and political ideologies are similar to our own? The two studies cited above seem to suggest that our brain waves (and I would argue brain pathways) tend to be shaped and reinforced by our echo chambers. When someone wants us to hear and consider a different message, however, our bodies and brains often react. Our blood pressure goes up, our heart rate increases, feelings of stress release cortisol in our brains, and it can even initiate the fight or flight response in our amygdala because it can trigger a fear reaction. If you consider all these physiological responses to a disagreement, is it any wonder we usually find it difficult to listen during these conversations or arguments? If we are having to combat the physical response we are having, it makes it very difficult to focus and pay attention—two things essential to good listening.

Not only do we have to combat physical reactions and responses, but our brain can also get distracted by starting to plan our rebuttal. We start structuring our counter-arguments and sometimes even interrupt to blurt them out before the moment has passed. We are not paying attention because we have taken our focus away from what the other person is saying and are busy putting together our response. If we are busy formulating our response, we have quit listening. We think of our disagreement and corresponding discussion much like a debate, and our minds become busy putting together our counterpoints rather than listening to what the other person is saying. When this happens, we are stuck in what Murphy (2019) calls the "speech-thought differential". This does not only happen during an argument, but it can also happen when we are distracted by other thoughts and find ourselves wondering what words just came out of the other person's mouth. The best thing to do if this happens is to just be honest, but you can be sure that if you're continuously having to ask your husband or friend what they just said (especially if you appeared to be fully attentive), they will soon get irritated with having to repeat themselves.

One way to counteract our tendency to plan our responses or to ensure we stay focused is to use active listening. Instead of structuring a response based on our occasional

physical reactions, we can stay focused on what the person is saying and respond with empathy. Empathy can best be communicated using reflection and rephrase. Someone shares a piece of bad or discouraging news with us, and often our response is to offer an “at least” statement. Your friend tells you she’s unhappy or stressed with her job, and your response is, “at least you have a job”, or maybe less insensitively, you respond with, “well, at least you have good people to work with”. Brené Brown says empathy is not “silver-lining” (yes, made into a verb) someone else’s experience. Empathy says, “I hear you, and I understand, and I want to sit in this with you.” This may be difficult when someone gives us a piece of their bad or discouraging news, but can feel almost *impossible* when someone we are trying to listen to is arguing a point we do not agree with.

Active listening reflects empathy by allowing the listener to paraphrase what they heard in the message they received. Your friend says, “Work is really stressing me out lately. I’m not getting done what I need to, and my boss is always bringing me more things to do. I have a hard time falling asleep at night because I’m so anxious about getting everything done. I think it might be time for me to leave this job.”. How do you respond? Active listening uses a formula to help us think through what a proper response might look like. To start thinking it through, you think (and could even say), “You feel (name a feeling you heard in their statement) because (name what in their experience is causing them to feel this way).” Obviously, if you continually use this formula, things are going to feel very contrived and unnatural, but that’s when you start to put it in your own words. You might say, “It’s overwhelming feeling like you can’t get ahead at work and wondering if you should look for a new job.” Again, this should feel natural and reflect you as a person, not a formula.

What does this look like when someone says, “(Such and such) policy (or platform) is the most important voting issue for me, and I cannot imagine voting for someone who does not support my position on this.” How can you demonstrate that you have heard them and not immediately provide your own perspective on said policy (or platform)? You can see how this becomes a little more difficult, but not impossible. By using active listening, you are not saying that you agree with their statement, but you are demonstrating that you heard and understand what they said and where they are coming from. Hopefully, you will be able to share your opinions and ideas too—but if not, is that really the point?

Jesus gives us a great example of how to listen well, even to those with whom we strongly disagree. I have seen the acronym LISTEN used to describe how we can model Jesus in our listening:

L—Love

Love must be our motivation and underlying foundation for listening. Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you,” (John 13:34).

I—Inquire

Ask questions. Jesus’ questions always had the intent of helping the person he was questioning—he wanted to help them gain clarity and insight.

S—Stop

Take time to stop and listen. Jesus was a very busy man, but even on his way to heal Jairus’ daughter, he stopped to listen to the woman who touched his robe (Mark 5:22-34).

T—Test

Sometimes the first thing a person says is not what they truly mean. A good and active listener is able to be patient and listen for the core of their message. “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but the one who has insight draws them out.” (Proverbs 20:5).

E—Engage

Jesus was always in the moment with the person he was talking with and listening to—his mind was not wandering, nor was he trying to structure his counter-arguments. He did not interrupt to make his own point. He was present and let people know they mattered.

N—Nudge

Jesus demonstrated active listening himself, but also modeled a life of listening to God. His ability to listen well, both to those he met on Earth and to his Heavenly Father, provides all of us with a nudge to do the same.

References

Murphy, K. (2019). *You’re Not Listening: What You’re Missing and Why it Matters*. Celadon, New York, NY.