

On Being Human

Listening

Perhaps one of the most glaring “lost arts” in human communication today is listening. Many people seem to have forgotten that communication is a two-way street. Though it may gain approval from the “core base,” rude questions, cutting people off mid-sentence and generally showing little or no real interest in others is no way to build the kind of trust that is needed to get almost any kind of work done. When it is done right, listening has great benefits, both for the listener and the person talking.

Here are a few questions that help sort out why we should all be listening a little better.

Is listening just about asking questions?

Listening is not just about asking questions. It’s about going on a journey of discovery with others, exploring life and relationships. It is also about giving hope, honor and respect. David Isay, a radio producer and the editor of Listening is an Act of Love, says that “many people among us feel completely invisible, believe that their lives don’t matter, and fear they’ll someday be forgotten.” Therefore, our goal is not just to use our ears or to use the format of asking questions but to use our hearts and to open our mind. When it comes to relationships, we listen not primarily to get answers but to give life. Often, we won’t have to ask any questions at all. Just by having our ears and hearts open, we will discover plenty.

My friend Bahari runs a summer program for kids in an inner city neighborhood in Durham, NC. Part of what enables him to do this job so well is his ability to “listen” to the lives of these kids: he watches their actions, hears their words, seeks their hearts, discovers hidden strengths, is aware of their weaknesses. Because he knows these kids, he knows when to give someone a little space when they show up late, when to confront someone wearing the wrong t-shirt, what job opportunity is going to provide the right level of challenge, who’s grandma needs to be convinced, etc. He keeps his eyes, ears and heart open so that when trouble or opportunity comes up, he knows his kids well enough to take the right action. He has a heart to listen and is therefore ready and able to help.

Some of what he discovers, of course, comes through listening well in conversation, but much is learned just by watching. One kid’s parents are always late picking him up. Another quietly withdraws each time there is tension in the room. Everybody listens when Darel speaks. Nobody listens to Kara. Some of the kids never have any money for snacks, others are always sharing.

Because Bahari wants to serve, he is, as they say, “all ears.” He is constantly listening to the lives of these kids he loves so much.

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How long do I have to listen before giving them the answer?

In our society, we have come to value the bottom line far more than the process of getting there. We want everything boiled down, frozen, ready to microwave. We think that the right answer is all that is needed and that whatever process we use to get there is fine. "Let me just tell them the way it is. That'll fix them."

If we are committed to the idea that the right answer is all that is needed, we are in danger of becoming just another billboard. We may truly want to help, but if we can not listen, we will have trouble finding true compassion: how can I sympathize with a soul in trouble if I can not hear its cries? If we aggressively pursue the goal of telling, even our listening becomes mere waiting for an opening, any opening, to deliver our pitch. If the only thing the people around us really need is better information, why should we waste time listening? This kind of thinking makes us look and sound quite arrogant.

Listening is a big part of earning trust. When I walk into a store to buy something and need help, I pay attention to how well the salespeople are listening to me. If they are not asking me good questions, I doubt their ability to give me the right product. If they move too quickly to giving me answers, I don't trust them. I feel the same way about doctors. Every one of them has more knowledge than I do, but the ones I go back to are the ones who take the time to listen. If they are not listening, how can I know that they know what my problem is?

The alternative to listening is not just telling but selling. And the more aggressive the pitch is, the less likely a thoughtful person is going to be to accept it: with so little information and so much outside pressure, the more reasonable choice will often be to wait.

So, if you are really interested in communicating, you will listen as long as you need to. Your goal will not be to look for an opening for your presentation but to understand the person in front of you.

What's the point of just asking questions?

Have you ever had a friend call you up, ramble on about some problem, and without you ever saying very much, they come up with a solution by themselves? Sometimes people just need to hear themselves think out loud for a bit. To discover what their questions are or to explore possibilities, often people just need someone to listen to them. Through talking it out, truth is explored and re-examined in a way that makes trusting it and acting on it possible.

When I lived in Japan, I experienced the tremendous value of meeting another culture. As people asked me to talk about myself or about the US, I was forced to evaluate things I had never consciously thought about before. Truth and values came to the surface for me as people listened. My grandparents on one side of my family are from Italy, but I had no idea just how Italian I was until I lived in Japan. Japanese people were often surprised by

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the things I was willing to eat (octopus, squid, etc.), and as I explained that I had grown up eating these things I realized I ate like an Italian. It was part of who I am, but I only understood the significance of it when I was asked about it by others.

Most people have little time or inclination to reflect, and they need others to help them process their thoughts. Creating the space for other people to think out loud can be a great gift

How can I turn what I want to say into a question?

A good listener can greatly enhance the discovery process, but it can not be a gimmick we use to set up our own pre-determined messages. I once heard a young woman who works as a pharmacist talk about customers and the stories they tell about their illnesses. Some of the information they share is helpful, some of it is unimportant, and very often, there are things the customer should have shared but did not. Because of her understanding of disease and medicine, she is able to ask questions that gets at the information that leads to the right medicine, if any, that the customer needs.

For me, this is a great illustration of the power of good listening and appropriate questioning. The point, outside of a formal debate, is not to use questions to force people to certain conclusions or as a subtle way to make your point but to move towards discovery. If the pharmacist is simply trying to sell a certain product, her questions will inevitably point in this one direction, but if she is set on helping the customer figure out what is going on, her questions will be very different.

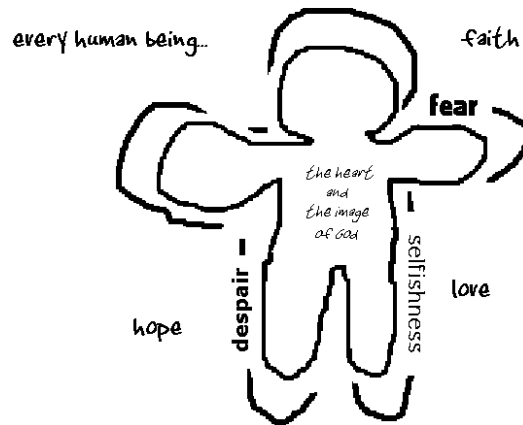
The most important part in this process is not developing a great list of questions but developing what my friend Andy calls "supernatural curiosity." If you are truly curious, if your goal really is to listen and learn, you will discover along the way how to ask the right questions. And even if you ask the wrong question or ask it in an awkward way, I have found that most of the time people can sense your heart. They will know that your intent is to listen.

So, if you have something to say, just say it, but if the need of the hour is to discover and explore, that is what questions are for.

What am I listening for?

So, what are we listening for? For me, the great stories in life are all about things like hope and longing, fighting isolation and finding freedom, discovering the right use of power and learning how to open up to friends. Take it for what it is, but I call all these things the "image of God," the divine something that every human being cares with them. Not every conversation is this deep (but probably more are than we realize), but when I'm really listening, here the things that I am listening for. Here is a picture of the way I think people are put together and what I can find when I am listening well:

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Every human being is full of hope, faith and love. Through many tragedies and our own duplicity, however, these things are often hidden under or tainted in some way by fear, despair and selfishness. But they have not been destroyed. Instead, we find ourselves in a constant struggle to live out of our better selves, to live by faith, full of hope and motivated by love.

Our goal, then, in our listening and watching is for these glimmers of each others' truer selves.

Questions

- What hinders you from listening well? What helps? Are there ways that having strong convictions about politics or faith that make it difficult to listen well? In what ways are you becoming better at being a good listener?
- Who do you know who is a good listener? What do they do that makes it easy to talk to them? What do they do that lets you know they are really listening? How does talking with them make you feel? What does it do for you?

Media

- Do you know of any examples of a good listener from a TV show? Any good examples of a bad listener?
- Gandalf (from The Lord of the Rings) – one of the things that makes him such a powerful force is his ability to listen. The next time you watch any of the movies based on Tolkein's books, watch Gandalf's face and notice the details he is able to pick up on and the decisions he is able to make because of his listening.
- Peter Jennings, the TV journalist, wrote a short essay on the power of listening. He states that interviewers, if they are not careful, can easily miss the "real answers" being given by people if the reporter can not see anything except their own perspective. The next time you watch/listen to an interview, pay attention to the interviewer. Are they really listening? How can you tell?