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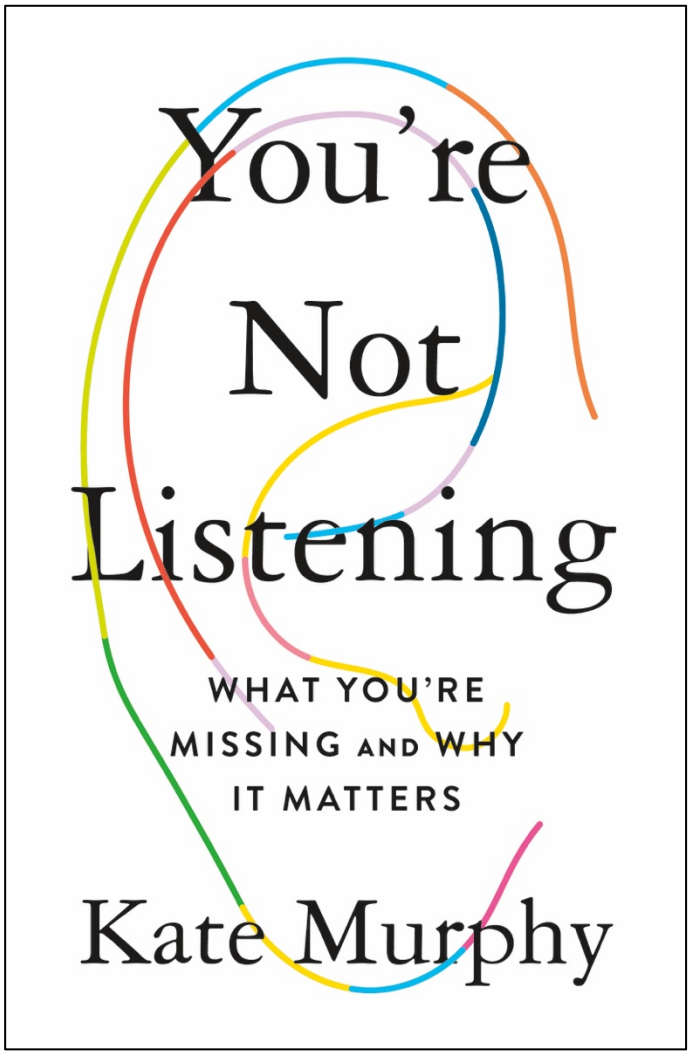

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YOU'RE NOT LISTENING

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What You're Missing and Why It Matters

KATE MURPHY

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Some names and identifying details in this book have been changed
to protect the privacy of certain individuals.

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For anyone who has misunderstood or felt misunderstood

Contents

Introduction

When was the last time you listened to someone? *Really* listened, without thinking about what you wanted to say next, glancing down at your phone, or jumping in to offer your opinion? And when was the last time someone *really* listened to you? Was so attentive to what you were saying and whose response was so spot-on that you felt truly understood?

In modern life, we are encouraged to listen to our hearts, listen to our inner voices, and listen to our guts, but rarely are we encouraged to listen carefully and with intent to other people. Instead, we are engaged in a dialogue of the deaf, often talking over one another at cocktail parties, work meetings, and even family dinners; groomed as we are to lead the conversation rather than follow it. Online and in person, it's all about defining yourself, shaping the narrative, and staying on message. Value is placed on what you project, not what you absorb.

And yet, listening is arguably more valuable than speaking. Wars have been fought, fortunes lost, and friendships wrecked

for lack of listening. Calvin Coolidge famously said, "No man ever listened himself out of a job." It is only by listening that we engage, understand, connect, empathize, and develop as human beings. It is fundamental to any successful relationship—personal, professional, and political. Indeed, the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus said, "Nature hath given men one tongue but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak."

So it's striking that high schools and colleges have debate teams and courses in rhetoric and persuasion but seldom, if ever, classes or activities that teach careful listening. You can get a doctorate in speech communication and join clubs like Toastmasters to perfect your public speaking, but there's no comparable degree or training that emphasizes and encourages the practice of listening. The very image of success and power today is someone miked up and prowling around a stage or orating from behind a podium. Giving a TED Talk or commencement speech is living the dream.

Social media has given everyone a virtual megaphone to broadcast every thought, along with the means to filter out any contrary view. People find phone calls intrusive and ignore voicemail, preferring text or wordless emoji. If people are listening to anything, it's likely through headphones or earbuds, where they are safe inside their own curated sound bubbles; the soundtracks to the movies that are their walled-off lives.

The result is a creeping sense of isolation and emptiness, which leads people to swipe, tap, and click all the more. Digital distraction keeps the mind occupied but does little to nurture it, much less cultivate depth of feeling, which requires the

resonance of another's voice within our very bones and psyches. To really listen is to be moved physically, chemically, emotionally, and intellectually by another person's narrative.

This is a book in praise of listening and a lament that as a culture we seem to be losing our listening mojo. As a journalist, I've conducted countless interviews with everyone from Nobel laureates to homeless toddlers. I view myself as a professional listener, and yet, I, too, can fall short, which is why this book is also a guide to improving listening skills.

To write this book, I have spent the better part of two years delving into the academic research related to listening—the biomechanical and neurobiological processes as well as the psychological and emotional effects. There is a blinking external hard drive on my desk loaded with hundreds of hours of interviews with people from Boise to Beijing, who either study some aspect of listening or whose job, like mine, is listening intensive; including spies, priests, psychotherapists, bartenders, hostage negotiators, hairdressers, air traffic controllers, radio producers, and focus group moderators.

I also went back to some of the most accomplished and astute individuals I've profiled or interviewed over the years—entertainers, CEOs, politicians, scientists, economists, fashion designers, professional athletes, entrepreneurs, chefs, artists, authors, and religious leaders—to ask what listening means to them, when they are most inclined to listen, how it feels when someone listens to them, and how it feels when someone doesn't. And then there were all the people who happened to sit next to me on airplanes, buses, or trains or who perhaps encountered

me at a restaurant, dinner party, baseball game, grocery store, or while I was out walking my dog. Some of my most valuable insights about listening came from listening to them.

Reading this book, you'll discover—as I did—that listening goes beyond just hearing what people say. It's also paying attention to how they say it and what they do while they are saying it, in what context, and how what they say resonates within you. It's not about simply holding your peace while someone else holds forth. Quite the opposite. A lot of listening has to do with how you respond—the degree to which you elicit clear expression of another person's thoughts and, in the process, crystallize your own. Done well and with deliberation, listening can transform your understanding of the people and the world around you, which inevitably enriches and elevates your experience and existence. It is how you develop wisdom and form meaningful relationships.

Listening is something you do or don't do every day. While you might take listening for granted, how well you listen, to whom, and under what circumstances determines your life's course—for good or ill. And, more broadly, our collective listening, or the lack thereof, profoundly affects us politically, societally, and culturally. We are, each of us, the sum of what we attend to in life. The soothing voice of a mother, the whisper of a lover, the guidance of a mentor, the admonishment of a supervisor, the rallying of a leader, the taunts of a rival are what form and shape us. And to listen poorly, selectively, or not at all is to limit your understanding of the world and deprive yourself of becoming the best you can be.

1

The Lost Art of Listening

I was sitting on the floor of my bedroom closet interviewing Oliver Sacks. Construction across the street from my apartment made the closet the quietest place I could go. So there I was, sitting cross-legged in the dark, pushing dangling dresses and pants legs away from the mic of my telephone headset while talking to the eminent neurologist and author, best known for his memoir *Awakenings,* which was made into a film starring Robin Williams and Robert De Niro.

The purpose of the interview was to talk about his favorite books and movies for a short column in the Sunday Review section of *The New York Times*. But we had left Baudelaire behind and plunged headlong into a discussion of hallucinations, waking dreams, and other phenomena that affect what Sacks poetically called the "climate of the mind." As my dog scratched at the closet door, Sacks described the climate of his own mind, which was at times clouded by an inability to recognize faces, including his own reflection. He also had no

sense of direction, which made it hard for him to find his way home even after taking a short walk.

We were both pressed for time that day. In addition to the column, I had another story to turn in for *The Times,* and Sacks was squeezing me in between seeing patients, teaching, and lecturing. But we got immersed in our conversation, which, at one point, had us trading weather metaphors for states of mind: sunny outlook, hazy understanding, bolt of inspiration, drought of creativity, torrent of desire. I might have been sitting in a dark closet, but, listening to him, I experienced flashes of insight, recognition, creativity, humor, and empathy. Sacks died in 2015, a few years after we talked, but our conversation is alive in my memory.

As a frequent contributor to *The Times* and occasional correspondent for other news outlets, I have been privileged to listen to brilliant thinkers like Oliver Sacks as well as less well-known, but no less insightful, intellects, from couturiers to construction workers. Without exception, they have expanded my worldview and increased my understanding. Many have touched me deeply. People describe me as the type of person who can talk to anyone, but it's really that I can *listen* to anyone. It's worked for me as a journalist. My best story ideas often come from random conversations. Maybe with a guy running fiber-optic cable under the street, the hygienist at my dentist's office, or a financier turned cattle rancher I met at a sushi bar.

Many of the stories I have written for *The Times* have landed on the most-emailed and most-read lists, and not because I took down someone powerful or uncovered a scandal. It was because

I listened to people talk about what made them happy, sad, intrigued, annoyed, concerned, or confused and then tried my best to address and expand on what they said. It's really no different from what needs to happen before you can design a successful consumer product, provide first-rate customer service, hire and retain the best employees, or sell anything. It's the same thing that's required to be a good friend, romantic partner, or parent. It's all in the listening.

For every one of the hundreds of stories I have written in which you might see four or five quotes, I likely talked to ten or twenty people for corroboration, background information, or fact-checking. But as my closet conversation with Oliver Sacks suggests, the most memorable and meaningful interviews to me were not the ones that broke open or nailed the story but rather the ones that veered off topic and into the personal—maybe about a relationship, closely held belief, phobia, or formative event. The times when a person would say, "I've never told anyone that before," or "I didn't realize I felt that way until I just said it."

Sometimes the disclosures were so profoundly personal, I was the only other person who knew, and may still be. The person seemed as surprised as I was by what lay between us. Neither of us knew quite how we reached that moment, but it felt important, sacred, and inviolate. It was a shared epiphany wrapped in a shared confidence that touched and changed us both. Listening created the opportunity and served as catalyst.

Modern life is making such moments increasingly rare. People used to listen to one another while sitting on front

porches and around campfires, but now we are too busy, or too distracted, to explore the depths of one another's thoughts and feelings. Charles Reagan Wilson, an emeritus professor of history and Southern studies at the University of Mississippi, recalled asking the short-story writer and novelist Eudora Welty why the South produced so many great writers. "Honey," she said, "we didn't have anything else to do but sit on the porch and talk, and some of us wrote it down."

Instead of front porches, today's homes more likely have front-facing garages that swallow up residents' cars at the end of a hectic day. Or people live compartmentalized in apartments and condominiums, ignoring one another in the elevator. Stroll through most residential neighborhoods these days and it's unlikely anyone will lean over the fence and wave you over for a word. The only sign of life is the blue glow of a computer or television screen in an upstairs window.

Whereas in the past, we caught up with friends and family individually and in person, now we are more likely to text, tweet, or post on social media. Today, you can simultaneously ping tens, hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people, and yet, how often do you have the time or inclination to delve into a deep, extended, in-person conversation with any one of them?

In social situations, we pass around a phone to look at pictures instead of describing what we've seen or experienced. Rather than finding shared humor in conversation, we show one another internet memes and YouTube videos. And if there is a difference of opinion, Google is the arbiter. If someone tells

a story that takes longer than thirty seconds, heads bow, not in contemplation but to read texts, check sports scores, or see what's trending online. The ability to listen to anyone has been replaced by the capacity to shut out everyone, particularly those who disagree with us or don't get to the point fast enough.

When I interview people—whether it's a person on the street, CEO, or celebrity—I often get the sense that they are unaccustomed to having someone listen to them—as if it's a novel experience. When I respond with genuine interest to what they are saying and encourage them to tell me more, they seem surprised. They noticeably relax and become more thoughtful and thorough in their responses, assured I'm not going to rush them, interrupt, or glance at my phone. I suspect that is why so many end up sharing such tender things—unsolicited by me and wholly unrelated to the story I am writing. They find in me someone who will finally, at last, listen to them.

People get lonely for lack of listening. Psychology and sociology researchers have begun warning of an epidemic of loneliness in the United States. Experts are calling it a public health crisis, as feeling isolated and disconnected increases the risk of premature death as much as obesity and alcoholism combined. The negative health impact is worse than smoking fourteen cigarettes per day. Indeed, epidemiological studies have found links between loneliness and heart disease, stroke, dementia, and poor immune function.

Perhaps the canary in the coal mine for the current scourge of loneliness was an anonymous person who, back in 2004, just as the internet revolution was taking firm hold, posted,

"I am lonely will anyone speak to me?" on a little-known online chat room. His cri de coeur went viral, accumulating a massive number of responses and media attention as the thread spawned similar threads still active on multiple online forums today.

Reading the posts, you'll notice that many people are lonely not because they are alone. "I'm surrounded by so many people every day but I feel strangely disconnected from them," one person wrote. Lonely people have no one with whom to share their thoughts and feelings, and, equally important, they have no one who shares thoughts and feelings with them. Note that the original post asked to be spoken to. He didn't want to talk to someone; he longed to listen to someone. Connectedness is necessarily a two-way street, each partner in the conversation listening and latching on to what the other said.

The number of people feeling isolated and alone has only accelerated since that 2004 post. In a 2018 survey of twenty thousand Americans, almost half said they did not have meaningful in-person social interactions, such as having an extended conversation with a friend, on a daily basis. About the same proportion said they often feel lonely and left out even when others were around. Compare that to the 1980s when similar studies found only 20 percent said they felt that way. Suicide rates today are at a thirty-year high in the United States, up 30 percent since 1999. American life expectancy is now declining due to suicide, opioid addiction, alcoholism, and other so-called diseases of distress often associated with loneliness.

It's not just in the United States. Loneliness is a worldwide phenomenon. The World Health Organization reports that in

the last forty-five years, suicide rates are up 60 percent globally. The UK was moved in 2018 to appoint a "minister of loneliness" to help its 9 million citizens who often or always feel lonely, according to a 2017 government commissioned report. And in Japan, there's been a proliferation of companies such as Family Romance that hire out actors to pretend to be lonely people's friends, family members, or romantic partners. There's nothing sexual in the arrangements; customers are paying only for attention. For example, a mother might rent a son to visit her when she's estranged from her real son. A bachelor might rent a wife who will ask how his day went when he arrives home from work.

Loneliness does not discriminate. The latest research indicates no major differences between men and women or between races when it comes to feeling disconnected. However, it does show that those in generation Z, the first generation raised on screens, are the most likely to feel lonely and self-report that they are in worse health than other generations, including the elderly. The number of school-age children and adolescents hospitalized for suicidal thoughts or attempts has more than doubled since 2008.

Much has been written about how teenagers today are less likely to date, hang out with friends, get a driver's license, or even leave home without their parents. They are spending more time alone; blue in affect, as well as in appearance, thanks to the reflected glow of their devices. Studies indicate the greater the screen time, the greater the unhappiness. Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of clinical depression by 27 percent and are 56 percent more likely to say they are unhappy than their peers who

spend less time on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Similarly, a meta-analysis of research on youths who habitually play video games showed they were more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

To combat loneliness, people are told to "Get out there!" Join a club, take up a sport, volunteer, invite people to dinner, get involved at church. In other words, get off Facebook and meet "face-to-face." But as mentioned previously, people often feel lonely in the presence of others. How do you connect with people once you're "out there" and "face-to-face"? You listen to them. It's not as simple as it sounds. Truly listening to someone is a skill many seem to have forgotten or perhaps never learned in the first place.

* * *

Bad listeners are not necessarily bad people. You likely have a dear friend, family member, or maybe a romantic partner who is a terrible listener. Perhaps you, yourself, are not the best listener. And you could be forgiven since, in many ways, you've been conditioned not to listen. Think back to when you were a little kid. If a parent said, "Listen to me!" (perhaps while holding you firmly by the shoulders), it's a good bet you weren't going to like what was coming next. When your teacher, Little League coach, or camp counselor beckoned, "Listen up!" what followed was usually a bunch of rules, instructions, and limits on your fun.

And certainly the virtues of listening are not reinforced by the media or in popular culture. News and Sunday talk shows

are more often shouting matches or exercises in "gotcha" than respectful forums for exploring disparate views. Late-night talk shows are more about monologues and gags than listening to what guests have to say and encouraging elaboration to get beyond the trite and superficial. And on the morning and daytime shows, the interviews are typically so managed and choreographed by publicists and public relations consultants that host and guest are essentially speaking prepared lines rather than having an authentic exchange.

The dramatic portrayal of conversation on television and in the movies is likewise more often speechifying and monologues than the easy and expanding back-and-forth that listening allows. Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, for example, is praised as a master of dialogue. Think of his characters' breathless banter and verbal jousting on *The West Wing, A Few Good Men,* and *The Social Network*. His walk-and-talk scenes and epic confrontations, of which there are endless compilations on YouTube, are fun to watch and full of great lines—"You can't handle the truth!" But instructive on how to listen so you have a mutually responsive and fulfilling conversation, they are not.

All this, of course, is in the grand tradition of conversational grandstanding that dates back to the Algonquin Round Table—a group of writers, critics, and actors in the 1920s who met daily for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan to trade wisecracks, wordplay, and witticisms. Their competitive and razor-sharp repartee, which was published in major newspapers at the time, captivated the country and arguably still defines clever conversation in the popular imagination.

And yet, many of the regular members of the Round Table were profoundly lonely and depressed people, despite being part of a lively group that met almost every day. For example, the writer Dorothy Parker made three suicide attempts, and theater critic Alexander Woollcott was so beset with self-loathing that shortly before he died of a heart attack, he said, "I never had anything to say." But then, this was not a group that listened to one another. They were not trying to truly connect with others around the table. They were just waiting for an opening, for someone to take a breath, so they could lob their verbal firecrackers.

In her more reflective later years, Dorothy Parker said, "The Round Table was just a lot of people telling jokes and telling each other how good they were. Just a bunch of loudmouths showing off, saving their gags for days, waiting for a chance to spring them . . . There was no truth in anything they said. It was the terrible day of the wisecrack, so there didn't have to be any truth."

Our political leaders are not model listeners, either. Consider the spectacle of U.S. congressional hearings, which are not so much hearings as occasions for senators and representatives to pontificate, pander, chastise, berate, or otherwise cut off in mid-sentence whoever is unfortunate enough to appear before them. The most common feature of transcripts of congressional hearings is the all-caps insertion of the word CROSSTALK, which indicates everyone is talking over one another, and the transcriber, or recorder, of the debate can't make sense of what anyone is saying.

Similarly, Prime Minister's Questions, the weekly questioning of the British prime minister by members of Parliament, is seen as less an exercise in listening than Kabuki theater. The showboating has gotten so extreme that many MPs no longer attend. Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow told the BBC, "I think it is a real problem. A number of seasoned parliamentarians, who are not shrinking violets, not delicate creatures at all, are saying, 'This is so bad that I am not going to take part, I am not going to come along, I feel embarrassed by it.'"

The blowhard factor is in part responsible for ongoing political upheaval and divisiveness both in the United States and abroad, as people feel increasingly disconnected from and unheard by those in power. Those feelings seem justified, as political leaders, the mainstream media, and the upper echelons of society were gobsmacked by the disaffection laid bare in election results, most notably the 2016 victory of President Donald J. Trump and the British vote to exit the European Union the same year. Voters did the equivalent of throwing an electoral grenade to get their leaders' attention. Few saw it coming.

Polling proved a poor substitute for actually listening to people in their communities and understanding the realities of their everyday lives and the values that drive their decisions. Had political forecasters listened more carefully, critically, and expansively, the election results would have come as little surprise. Data derived from unrepresentative samples (i.e., people who answer unknown numbers popping up on their caller ID and who honestly answer pollsters' questions when they do)

was misleading. So, too, was media coverage that relied heavily on social media to gauge public sentiment.

And yet, social media activity and polling continues to be used as a proxy for what "real people" are thinking. Tempted by the ease and seemingly broad access, it's now common for print and television journalists and commentators to quote from Twitter and Facebook rather than going out and getting quotes that come from actual people's mouths. Seen as efficient and data driven, looking at what's trending on social media or conducting online surveys is largely how listening is done in the twenty-first century by the press, politicians, lobbyists, activists, and business interests.

But it's questionable that social media activity reflects society at large. Repeated investigations have shown that fake or bot accounts are responsible for much of the content. It's estimated that 15–60 percent of social media accounts do not belong to real people. One study showed 20 percent of tweets related to the 2016 U.S. election came from bots. Audits of the Twitter accounts of music celebrities, including Taylor Swift, Rihanna, Justin Bieber, and Katy Perry found that the majority of their tens of millions of followers were bots.

Perhaps even more pervasive are *lurkers*[*] on social media. These are individuals who set up accounts to see what other people are posting but who rarely, if ever, post anything them-

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[*] The pejorative term *lurkers* was coined by internet companies to describe non-revenue-generating users. Online platforms typically make their money by collecting personal data that users volunteer (likes, dislikes, comments, clicks, etc.) and selling it to advertisers.

selves. The 1 percent rule, or 90-9-1 rule, of internet culture holds that 90 percent of users of a given online platform (social media, blogs, wikis, news sites, etc.) just observe and do not participate, 9 percent comment or contribute sparingly, and a scant 1 percent create most of the content. While the number of users contributing may vary somewhat by platform, or perhaps when something in the news particularly stirs passions, the truth remains that the silent are the vast majority.

Moreover, the most active users of social media and commenters on websites tend to be a very particular—and not representative—personality type who a) believe the world is entitled to their opinion and b) have time to routinely express it. Of course, what generates the most interest and attention online is outrage, snark, and hyperbole. Posts that are neutral, earnest, or measured don't tend to go viral or get quoted in the media. This distorts dialogue and changes the tenor of conversations, casting doubt on how accurately the sentiments expressed track what people would say in the presence of a live, attentive listener.

* * *

To research this book, I interviewed people of all ages, races, and social strata, experts and nonexperts, about listening. Among the questions I asked was: "Who listens to you?" Almost without exception, what followed was a pause. Hesitation. The lucky ones could come up with one or two people, usually a spouse or maybe a parent, best friend, or sibling. But many said, if they were honest, they didn't feel like they had anyone who truly listened to them, even those who were married

or claimed a vast network of friends and colleagues. Others said they talked to therapists, life coaches, hairdressers, and even astrologers—that is, they paid to be listened to. A few said they went to their pastor or rabbi, but only in a crisis.

It was extraordinary how many people told me they considered it burdensome to ask family or friends to listen to them—not just about their problems but about anything more meaningful than the usual social niceties or jokey banter. An energies trader in Dallas told me it was "rude" not to keep the conversation light; otherwise, you were demanding too much from the listener. A surgeon in Chicago said, "The more you're a role model, the more you lead, the less permission you have to unload or talk about your concerns."

When asked if they, themselves, were good listeners, many people I interviewed freely admitted that they were not. The executive director of a performing arts organization in Los Angeles told me, "If I really listened to the people in my life, I'd have to face the fact that I detest most of them." And she was, by far, not the only person who felt that way. Others said they were too busy to listen or just couldn't be bothered. Text or email was more efficient, they said, because they could pay only as much attention as they felt the message deserved, and they could ignore the message or delete the message if it was uninteresting or awkward. Face-to-face conversations were too fraught. Someone might tell them more than they wanted to know, or they might not know how to respond. Digital communication was more controllable.

So begets the familiar scene of twenty-first-century life—at

cafés, restaurants, coffeehouses, and family dinner tables, rather than talking to one another, people look at their phones. Or if they are talking to one another, the phone is on the table as if a part of the place setting, taken up at intervals as casually as a knife or fork, implicitly signaling that the present company is not sufficiently engaging. As a consequence, people can feel achingly lonely, without quite knowing why.

And then there were the people who told me that they were good listeners, though their claims were often undercut by the fact that they were talking to me on their mobile phones while driving. "I'm a better listener than most people," said a trial lawyer in Houston returning my call in his car during rush-hour traffic. "Wait, hold on a second, I have another call." Also unconvincing were the people who said that they were good listeners and then immediately pivoted to a wholly unrelated topic, in the vein of *The New Yorker* cartoon where a guy holding a glass of wine at a cocktail party says, "Behold, as I guide our conversation to my narrow area of expertise." Other self-described good listeners repeated what I had just said as if it were an original thought.

Again, this is not to say that poor listeners are necessarily bad or boorish people. When they finish your sentences for you, they truly believe that they are being helpful. They may interrupt because they thought of something that you would really want to know or they thought of a joke that was too funny to wait. They are the ones who honestly think that letting you have your say is politely waiting for your lips to stop moving so they can talk. Maybe they nod very quickly to move

you along, sneak glances at their watches or phones, lightly tap the table, or look over your shoulder to see if there is someone else they could be talking to. In a culture infused with existential angst and aggressive personal marketing, to be silent is to fall behind. To listen is to miss an opportunity to advance your brand and make your mark.

But think of what would have happened had I been preoccupied with my own agenda when interviewing Oliver Sacks. It was a short column, and all I needed were a few circumscribed answers from him. I didn't need to listen to him wax poetic about the climate of the mind or describe the challenge of living without a sense of direction. I could have interrupted and made him cut to the chase. Or, wanting to express myself and make an impression, I could have leapt in to share things about my life and experiences. But then I would have disrupted the natural flow of the conversation, halted the unfolding intimacy, and lost much of the joy of the interaction. I would not, to this day, carry his wisdom with me.

None of us are good listeners all the time. It's human nature to get distracted by what's going on in your own head. Listening takes effort. Like reading, you might choose to go over some things carefully while skimming others, depending on the situation. But the ability to listen carefully, like the ability to read carefully, degrades if you don't do it often enough. If you start listening to everyone as you would scan headlines on a celebrity gossip website, you won't discover the poetry and wisdom that is within people. And you withhold the gift that the people who love you, or could love you, most desire.

2

That Syncing Feeling

The Neuroscience of Listening

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg gave himself a "personal challenge" in 2017 to "talk to more people about how they're living, working, and thinking about the future." But he wasn't going to engage with just anybody. He had an advance team fan out across the country to find just the right people in just the right locations for him to talk to. When Zuckerberg arrived, he was accompanied by an entourage of up to eight aides, including a photographer to capture him "listening." The images were posted on, no surprise, Facebook.

What Zuckerberg got right was listening is a challenge. What he got wrong—and made him the object of considerable mockery online and in the press—was thinking contrived listening was the same as actual listening. You've probably had experiences with people who made a show of listening. Maybe they went through the motions, nodding earnestly with knitted

brows, but there was a strange vacancy behind their eyes, and the nods did not correspond with anything in particular that you said. They might have responded generically ("Uh-huh" or "I hear you") but conveyed no real understanding of the points you'd made. It likely felt patronizing—and you might have even wanted to punch them in the face.

If you're like most people, you get aggravated when people don't listen to you, and worse when they condescend to you. But what does it mean to really listen to someone? Interestingly, people can more readily describe what makes someone a bad listener than what makes someone a good listener. The sad truth is people have more experience with what makes them feel ignored or misunderstood than what makes them feel gratifyingly heard. Among the most frequently cited bad listening behaviors are:

- Interrupting
- Responding vaguely or illogically to what was just said
- Looking at a phone, watch, around the room, or otherwise away from the speaker
- Fidgeting (tapping on the table, frequently shifting position, clicking a pen, etc.)

If you do these things, stop. But that alone is not going to make you a good listener. It will just make it less obvious that you're a bad listener. Listening is more of a mind-set than a checklist of dos and don'ts. It's a very particular skill that develops over

time by interacting with all kinds of people—without agenda or having aides there to jump in if the conversation goes anywhere unexpected or untoward. For sure, listeners take on more risk by making themselves available when they don't know what they will hear, but the greater risk is remaining aloof and oblivious to the people and the world around you.

It's a fair question to ask why, in this technological era, you should bother cultivating your listening skills. Electronic communication is arguably more efficient and allows you to communicate when you want and how you want with vastly larger numbers of people. And it's true that many speakers don't get to the point quickly. People may bore you with self-aggrandizing stories or give you way too much detail about their colonoscopies. And sometimes, they say things that are hurtful or disturbing.

But listening, more than any other activity, plugs you into life. Listening helps you understand yourself as much as those speaking to you. It's why from the time we are babies, we are more alert to the human voice and exquisitely tuned to its nuances, harmonies, and discordances. Indeed, you begin to listen before you are even born. Fetuses begin to respond to sound at just sixteen weeks' gestation and, during the last trimester of pregnancy, can clearly distinguish between language and other sounds. An unborn child can be soothed by a friendly voice and startled by an angry outburst. Hearing is also one of the last senses you lose before you die. Hunger and thirst are the first to go, then speech, followed by vision. Dying patients retain their senses of touch and hearing until the very end.

Research on deaf and hearing-impaired children has shown they have a diminished ability to empathize and affiliate. There is also extensive research on the detrimental emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects on those who lose their hearing later in life. Helen Keller said, "I am just as deaf as I am blind . . . Deafness is a much worse misfortune. For it means loss of the most vital stimulus—the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir, and keeps us in the intellectual company of man."

But it's important to emphasize that hearing is not the same as listening, but rather its forerunner. Hearing is passive. Listening is active. The best listeners focus their attention and recruit other senses to the effort. Their brains work hard to process all that incoming information and find meaning, which opens the door to creativity, empathy, insight, and knowledge. Understanding is the goal of listening, and it takes effort.

Many of the great collaborations in history were between people who fully understood and internalized what the other was saying. The fathers of flight, Orville and Wilbur Wright; WWII leaders Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt; James Watson and Francis Crick, who codiscovered the structure of DNA; and John Lennon and Paul McCartney of the Beatles were all partners known for spending uninterrupted hours in conversation before they made their marks on history.

Of course, they were all brilliant on their own, but it took a kind of mind meld to achieve what they did. This congruence happens to varying degrees between any two people who

"click," whether friends, lovers, business associates, or even between stand-up comedians and their audiences. When you listen and really "get" what another person is saying, your brain waves and those of the speaker are literally in sync.

Neuroscientist Uri Hasson looked at fMRI scans and found that the greater the overlap between the speaker's brain activity and the listener's brain activity, the better the communication. In one experiment conducted in his lab at Princeton University, pairs of subjects described to each other a scene from the BBC television series *Sherlock*. During the recollection, the tellers' brain waves looked much the same as they had when they were actually watching the show. Upon hearing the story, the listeners' brains began to show the same patterns as the tellers'. This coupling, or syncing, of brain waves is visible, measurable proof of the transmission of thoughts, feelings, and memories.

A subsequent study conducted by researchers at the University of California–Los Angeles and Dartmouth College showed that the brains of good friends react similarly when watching short video clips. In fact, the more in line the subjects' brain activity while watching the videos (of baby sloths, an unknown couple's wedding, and a debate over whether to ban college football), the closer the subjects were as friends. This is partly due to the fact that people with similar sensibilities gravitate toward one another. But if considered in conjunction with Hasson's findings, it also suggests who we listen to shapes how we think and react. Our brains not only sync up the moment someone tells us something, the resulting understanding

and connection influences how we process subsequent information (even videos of baby sloths). The more you listen to someone, such as a close friend or a family member, and the more that person listens to you, the more likely you two will be of like minds.

Consider the synchrony that developed between behavioral psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Their ideas on irrational behavior represent some of the most influential scholarship in social science and are the basis of Kahneman's bestselling book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. The pair were very different personalities—Tversky was impulsive and brazen while Kahneman was more reticent and considered. But they clicked through many hours of conversation—arguing, laughing, and occasional shouting—leading to many eureka moments neither could have accomplished alone.

Kahneman and Tversky spent so much time together, their wives became jealous. "Their relationship was more intense than marriage," said Tversky's wife, Barbara. "I think they were both turned on intellectually more than either had ever been before. It was as if they were both waiting for it." When they wrote their research papers, the two men would sit side by side at a single typewriter. "We were sharing a mind," said Kahneman, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Econmics in 2002, six years after Tversky's death.

* * *

Our desire to have our brains sync, or to connect, with another person is basic and starts at birth. We are all "waiting

for it." It's how we find friends, create partnerships, advance ideas, and fall in love. But if that yearning is not satisfied, particularly when we're very young, it can profoundly affect our well-being. No psychological concept emphasizes this more than attachment theory. It's the idea that our ability to listen and connect with people as adults is shaped by how well our parents listened and connected with us as children.

By the end of our first year, we have imprinted on our baby brains a template of how we think relationships work, based on how attuned our parents or primary caregivers were to our needs. In other words, your ability to form attachments, or your attachment style, is determined by the degree to which your caregivers' brain waves synced with yours. Attentive and responsive caregivers set you up to have a secure attachment style, which is characterized by an ability to listen empathetically and thus, form functional, meaningful, and mutually supportive relationships.

On the other hand, children whose parents were not dependably attentive typically grow up to be adults with an insecure anxious attachment style, which means they tend to worry and obsess about relationships. They do not listen well because they are so concerned about losing people's attention and affection. This preoccupation can lead them to be overly dramatic, boastful, or clingy. They might also pester potential friends, colleagues, clients, or romantic interests instead of allowing people their space.

An insecure avoidant attachment style comes from growing up with caregivers who were mostly inattentive—or perhaps

overly attentive, to the point of smothering. People raised this way are often bad listeners because they tend to shut down or leave relationships whenever things get too close. They resist listening because they don't want to be disappointed or overwhelmed.

Finally, people who have an insecure disorganized attachment style display both anxious and avoidant behaviors in an illogical and erratic manner. This is often the result of growing up with a caregiver who was threatening or abusive. It's really hard to listen if you have a disorganized attachment style because intimacy can feel scary or frightening. Of course, not everyone fits neatly into one of these categories. Most people land somewhere along a continuum from secure to insecure. And, if more on the insecure side, you're on a continuum from anxious to avoidant.

But history doesn't have to be destiny when it comes to attachment styles. People can change how they are in relationships when they learn to listen and be emotionally responsive to others. And just as important, they must allow people to listen and be emotionally responsive to them—that is, they must form secure attachments. More often, though, people spend their lives seeking or creating circumstances that reproduce what they knew in childhood. They selectively listen to people who sound like who they heard first and, thus, reinforce old neural pathways. They are trying to sync in a way that feels familiar—like following old ruts in a dirt road.

An example is the gregarious owner of a shipping business I met several years ago while on assignment in New Orleans.

Married multiple times, he talked entertainingly, if incessantly, answering his own questions and interrupting anyone who tried to get a word in. He talked loudly, almost like a stage actor, further discouraging input or participation from anyone else. It emerged during a rare reflective moment that as a child, whenever he tried to talk to his father, particularly about anything bothering him, his father would shut him down with an abrupt, "That's enough of that." Talking about your feelings, he said, shrugging off one of my questions, is how you "lose your audience." And that was something he seemed desperate to avoid, having grown up deprived of one. He couldn't tolerate syncing on another wavelength.

Several programs have emerged in the last decade to address the lack of resonance, or syncing, between parent and child, which leads to a cycle of disconnectedness passed down from generation to generation. Intervention strategies like Circle of Security, Group Attachment-Based Intervention, and Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up essentially teach parents of young children how to listen and respond to their babies and toddlers before dysfunctional neural patterns get grooved into their tiny developing brains—that is, before children develop lifelong anxious and/or avoidant approaches to relationships. While the programs focus on helping parents listen to their kids, participants report using the same strategies to improve their relationships with spouses, coworkers, and friends.

Our culture makes it hard for people to listen even in the best of circumstances. But it's even tougher for participants in some of these programs, many of whom experienced abuse

or neglect when they were growing up. Given they expect criticism or insult, they've developed a resistance to listening, either by tuning out or talking over people, without realizing it—like the shipping magnate in New Orleans. And yet, these programs have had tremendous success. Their efficacy, measured by marked reductions in children's problem behaviors and parents' improved listening skills, has been validated in several published studies. But the real proof is the growing demand for these programs worldwide. Within the past ten years, Circle of Security alone has trained more than thirty thousand facilitators in twenty two countries.

* * *

Many of the attachment-based programs incorporate video. In the moment, people are often too distracted by the demands of their everyday lives, or are too much in their own heads, to realize when they are being inattentive. But with video, human interactions can be paused, slowed down, and watched frame by frame to see what they might be missing. For training purposes, program facilitators, usually psychologists and social workers, watch videos of themselves and other clinicians working with parents and children to learn how to be more effective listeners. So, too, parents watch videos of themselves or other parents interacting with their children to recognize missed listening opportunities and the impact on family dynamics.

In a darkened and cramped seminar classroom at the New School in New York, I sat with several psychology graduate students who were watching videos of clinicians to learn the

best practices of the Group Attachment-Based Intervention method, a program offered at six specially designed parent-child centers in New York City. Score sheets in hand, the graduate students were not only grading how well the clinicians in the videos listened but also how effective they were at getting parents to listen and attend to their children. The scoring system measured several dimensions of listening, including emotional awareness and body positioning.

In the first vignette, a clinician was seated with a mother and child at a low table in a roomful of squealing toddlers. One of the clinician's arms was resting comfortably on the table and the other was on a chair back, creating an imaginary bubble encompassing both parent and child. The child was playing with Play-Doh, the mother was looking elsewhere, sighing and, at one point, even calling her child "weird" for playing make-believe. "Look," the clinician said in a low voice, leaning closer toward the child and willing the child's mother to follow. "She has an idea." The mother suddenly looked at her toddler with interest. What was her little girl thinking?

When the lights went up, the grad students nodded at one another approvingly as if they had just watched an Olympic gymnast execute a difficult maneuver and land squarely on her feet. They gave the clinician in the video a near-perfect score and all but high-fived one another. It wasn't clear to me why she was so exceptional until I watched videos of other clinicians. By comparison, they appeared stiff, more self-conscious, and more easily distracted. And while they chatted amiably enough with mothers or maybe played with the children and

encouraged mothers to join in, what the clinician who scored like Simone Biles did was markedly different. She was exemplary not only for her calm demeanor, inclusive posture, and intent focus on both mother and child but also her deceptively simple observation: "She has an idea." Which is another way of saying, "Let's figure out what's going on in your daughter's head."

It's subtle, but profound. And it's what listening is all about. Everybody has something going on in their heads, whether it's your child, your romantic partner, your coworker, a client, or whoever. To listen well is to figure out what's on someone's mind and demonstrate that you care enough to want to know. It's what we all crave; to be understood as a person with thoughts, emotions, and intentions that are unique and valuable and deserving of attention.

Listening is not about teaching, shaping, critiquing, appraising, or showing how it should be done ("Here, let me show you." "Don't be shy." "That's awesome!" "Smile for Daddy."). Listening is about the experience of being experienced. It's when someone takes an interest in who you are and what you are doing. The lack of being known and accepted in this way leads to feelings of inadequacy and emptiness. What makes us feel most lonely and isolated in life is less often the result of a devastating traumatic event than the accumulation of occasions when nothing happened but something profitably could have. It's the missed opportunity to connect when you weren't listening or someone wasn't really listening to you.

"What we're after is a snatch of magic in the parent-child

interaction, that moment of interest, attunement, and understanding, even if brief, that will stick in the minds of both parent and child, and might get them to notice and to listen later in another situation," said Miriam Steele, professor of psychology and codirector of the Center for Attachment Research at the New School in New York, who has published studies on the effectiveness of the Group Attachment-Based Intervention program.

Those "snatches of magic" are what make life meaningful and what you see concretely in Uri Hasson's fMRI scans of two brains in sync. It's the measurable moment when, by listening, you connect with someone. Steele gave the example of another mother in the Group Attachment-Based Intervention program who said she couldn't stand her baby's crying. A well-meaning person might have explained that humans are designed to react negatively to babies crying so we'll be moved to take care of them. Or maybe commiserated with the mother by saying, "Oh yeah, the sound of a baby crying can get to me, too." But those responses would have earned you a low score on the listening scale used by the New School's graduate students. The highest score, in fact, went to a clinician who didn't tell the mother anything. She paused and asked, "What is it about the crying that bothers you?"

Why was this better? Because the mother thought for a moment and said it reminded her of crying when she was little and no one doing anything. Her child's crying triggered a sort of post-traumatic stress. It made her fearful, resentful, and depressed. While the clinician and the young mother weren't

hooked up to an fMRI at that moment, it's a good bet that if they had been, you would have seen their brain waves sync; that overlap of neural impulses that signals understanding and a significant relational shift. By listening first rather than jumping in prematurely to explain or reassure in a way that missed the point, the clinician was able to get on the mother's wavelength so they could connect on a deeper level. And having experienced being experienced, the mother will hopefully be able to extend a similar gift to her child. It's a model for how we could all listen better.

We are defined by our attachments in life, each relationship shaping how we are in the world and with one another. And these attachments come from listening to others, starting with our caregivers' coos to soothe our distress, continuing into adulthood, work, marriage, and everyday life. Talking without listening is like touching without being touched. More encompassing than touch, our entire self vibrates with the sounds that are the expressed thoughts and feelings of another. The human voice enters and moves us physically as well as emotionally. It's this resonance that allows us to understand and also to love. Evolution gave us eyelids so we can close our eyes but no corresponding structure to close off our ears. It suggests listening is essential to our survival.

3

Listening to Your Curiosity

What We Can Learn from Toddlers

Seated at a corner table in the bar at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, D.C., Barry McManus scanned the room, taking in and taking the measure of everyone there. It's a habit he developed during his twenty-six years working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. A trim African American with almond eyes, McManus could pass himself off for any number of nationalities—and, in fact, has.

We sat together, hunkered down in leather club chairs and camouflaged by a potted palm, after a very spy-like rendezvous at the Lincoln Memorial. I was on foot when the headlights of his Mercedes SUV pierced the mist and fog. McManus slowed down just long enough for me to get in, and we sped to Georgetown, where he made a swift U-turn across several lanes of traffic to deftly slide into an open parking space that seemed to be waiting for us in front of the hotel. I'm not making this up.

As the CIA's chief interrogator and polygrapher, McManus worked in 140 countries interviewing terrorists, bomb makers, drug dealers, traitors, and other suspects. Lives depended on how well he listened. He retired in 2003 and now divides his time between teaching behavioral assessment at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, and traveling the world doing security consulting. His clients are primarily foreign governments but also high-net-worth individuals who hire him to have what he calls "fireside chats" with prospective employees—particularly employees who will have close contact with the clients' families, such as domestic staff, private doctors and nurses, the pilots who fly their jets, and the crews on their yachts. "A background check will only tell you what this person got caught doing in the past," McManus said. "My job is to find out what the person didn't get caught doing or might do in the future."

While CIA agents are trained to be deceptive, manipulative, and even predatory in their quest for intelligence, what makes McManus effective is not some dark art. He simply gets a charge, almost a rush, out of listening to people who are different from him, even if (or maybe especially if) they have done very bad things. "Even if I don't get anything from them, I learn the mind-set, the stance, the beliefs. How does he look? What does he think? What does he think of the West? What does he think of a guy like me? It's a mind-blowing experience. It makes me better," McManus said. "It's your experiences in life that make you who you are. Even if you can't get through to the suicide bomber, it helps you maybe get through to the guy

later on, who is on the fringe or who is on the fence. You can relate to him after meeting the guy who took that wrong turn."

McManus told me the CIA doesn't so much train agents to be good listeners as recruit good listeners to be agents. The very best listeners get routed into interrogation and espionage while others might get assigned to work as, say, analysts or cyber warriors. It's not surprising the agency would rather recruit than groom listeners because listening is more art than science. And the science that exists is pretty flimsy.

Listening is the neglected stepchild of communication research, pushed aside by investigations into effective elocution, rhetoric, argumentation, persuasion, and propaganda. Browse the three-volume, 2,048-page *International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication* and you'll find only one entry specific to listening. And you won't even find *listening* in the index of *The SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*.

Much of what we think we know about listening comes from research on how students comprehend material taught in classrooms, which bears little resemblance to the listening we do in our everyday lives. Worse, scholars can't seem to agree on a definition of listening. They introduce a different jargony definition every few years. In 1988, it was "the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli." After several more iterations, in 2011, listening became "the acquisition, process, and retention of information in the interpersonal context." All fancy ways of saying you totally get what someone is trying to tell you.

And yet, there's lots of pat advice out there about how to

be a better listener. Most of it comes from business consultants and executive coaches who toss around the same ideas but use different (sometimes hilarious) terms and catchphrases like, *shared sonic worlds* and *co-contextualizing*. The advice typically boils down to showing that you are paying attention by making eye contact, nodding, and throwing in a "mmm-hmm" here and there. They instruct you not to interrupt, and when the speaker finishes, you are supposed to repeat or paraphrase back what the person said and then allow them to confirm or set you straight. Only at this point should you launch into what you want to say.

The premise is this: listen in a prescribed way to get what you want (i.e., get a date, make the sale, negotiate the best terms, or climb the corporate ladder). Listening may indeed and probably will help you accomplish your goals, but if that's your only motivation for listening, then you are just making a show of it. People will pick up on your inauthenticity. You don't need to act like you are paying attention if you are, in fact, paying attention.

Listening requires, more than anything, curiosity. McManus is almost compulsively curious. We all were at one point. When you were a little kid, everything was new, so you were curious about everything and everybody. Little kids will ask a million questions, sometimes embarrassingly personal questions, trying to figure you out. And they listen carefully to what you say, often repeating back what you least want them to—like an indiscreet comment or expletive you let slip.

"Everyone is born a scientist," said physicist Eric Betzig. "It's just unfortunate that with a lot of people, it gets beat out

of them." He told me this in 2014 after learning he had won a Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his role in the development of a super high-resolution microscope that allows visualization of such minute biological processes as the transfer of DNA between cells. "I've been lucky to be able to maintain that kid-like curiosity and enthusiasm for experimenting and learning," he said.

Studies show that children and adults who are securely attached tend to be more curious and open to new information than people who are not. It's another tenet of attachment theory that if you have someone in your life who listens to you and who you feel connected to, then the safer you feel stepping out in the world and interacting with others. You know you will be okay if you hear something or find out things that upset you because you have someone, somewhere, you can confide in and who will relieve your distress. It's called having a *secure base,* and it's a bulwark against loneliness.

Pulitzer Prize–winning author and historian Studs Terkel made a career out of his curiosity. His landmark book *Working* was a collection of his interviews with people from all segments of society talking about their jobs—from garbage collectors and gravediggers to surgeons and industrial designers. Using their own words, Terkel demonstrated that we have something to learn from everybody. "The obvious tool of my trade is the tape recorder," said Terkel, who died at ninety-six in 2008. "But I suppose the real tool is curiosity."

It was a curiosity that developed during his childhood. His parents owned a boardinghouse in Chicago, and he grew up fascinated by the intrigues, arguments, and assignations he

overheard. The boarders, while transient, took up permanent residence in his imagination and enlivened his later work—people like Harry Michaelson, the pugnacious tool and die maker; Prince Arthur Quinn, the local precinct captain in his green fedora; and Myrd Llyndgyn, the Welsh scavenger, whom Terkel said was not only penniless, "he didn't have a vowel to his name."

The most valuable lesson I've learned as a journalist is that everybody is interesting if you ask the right questions. If someone is dull or uninteresting, it's on you. Researchers at the University of Utah found that when talking to inattentive listeners, speakers remembered less information and were less articulate in the information they conveyed. Conversely, they found that attentive listeners elicited more information, relevant detail, and elaboration from speakers, even when the listeners didn't ask any questions. So if you're barely listening to someone because you think that person is boring or not worth your time, you will actually make it so.

Think about a time when you were trying to tell a story to someone who was obviously uninterested; maybe they were sighing or their eyes were roaming around the room. What happened? Your pacing faltered, you left out details, or maybe you started babbling irrelevant information or overshared in an effort to regain their attention. Eventually, you probably trailed off while the other person smiled blandly or nodded absently. You also probably walked away from the encounter with a distinct dislike for that person.

In *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* Dale Carnegie wrote, "You can make more friends in two months by becom-

ing interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." To listen is to be interested, and the result is more interesting conversations. The goal is to leave the exchange having learned something. You already know about you. You don't know about the person with whom you are speaking or what you can learn from that person's experience.

Ingvar Kamprad, founder of the international furniture retailer IKEA, knew this. While he reportedly lived mostly in seclusion, he would show up at IKEA locations around the world and anonymously stroll the floor, sometimes posing as a customer questioning employees, and other times approaching customers as if he were an employee. "I see my task as serving the majority of people," he told an interviewer several years before his death in 2018. "The question is, how do you find out what they want, how best to serve them? My answer is to stay close to ordinary people, because at heart I am one of them."

Kamprad's approach demonstrates not only good business sense but also a genuine curiosity about other people's thoughts and feelings. It's an eagerness to understand someone else's worldview and an expectation that you will be surprised by what you hear and will learn from the experience. Put another way, it's a lack of presumption that you already know what someone will say, much less that you know better.

* * *

Thinking you already know how a conversation will go down kills curiosity and subverts listening, as does anxiety about the

interaction. It's why every day, strangers completely ignore one another in crowded public spaces like trains, buses, elevators, and waiting rooms. But what if you weren't allowed to keep to yourself? Behavioral science researchers at the University of Chicago ran a series of experiments involving hundreds of bus and train commuters whom they assigned to one of three conditions: 1) sit in solitude, 2) engage with a stranger, or 3) act like they normally do on their commute.

While the study participants for the most part expected to be least happy and least productive if they had to engage with a stranger, the researchers found the opposite was true. The people who talked to strangers were the happiest following their commute and didn't feel like it prevented them from doing work they would have otherwise done. And whereas the study participants were convinced other people wouldn't want to talk to them and the exchange would be uncomfortable, *none of them* reported being rebuffed or insulted.

Human beings detest uncertainty in general, and in social situations in particular. It's a survival mechanism residing in our primitive brains that whispers, "Keep doing what you've been doing because it hasn't killed you yet." It's why at parties you might gravitate toward someone annoying whom you know, rather than introducing yourself to a stranger. McDonald's and Starbucks are testaments to how much humans crave sameness. Their success relies largely on the fact that you can go into any location, anywhere in the world, and get an identical Big Mac or Frappuccino.

We love our daily routines and detailed calendars that tell

us exactly what to expect. Occasionally, we might inject a little novelty into our lives, but more typically, we walk or jog the same routes, sit in the same seats in class or during work meetings, shop aisles in the same order at the grocery store, stake out the same spots in yoga class, return to the same vacation places, go to dinner with the same people, and have pretty much the same conversations.

But paradoxically, it's uncertainty that makes us feel most alive. Think of events that shake you out of your rote existence: maybe attending a family wedding, making a big presentation, or going somewhere you've never been. It's on those occasions that time seems to slow down a little and you feel more fully engaged. The same holds true if the experience is risky, like mountain climbing or parasailing. Your senses are sharper. You notice more. Thanks to the release of a feel-good chemical in the brain called *dopamine,* you get a greater surge of pleasure from chance encounters with people than planned meetings. Good news, financial rewards, and gifts are more enjoyable if they are surprises. It's why the most popular television shows and movies are the ones with unexpected plot twists and astonishing endings.

And nothing is more surprising than what comes out of people's mouths, even people you think you know well. Indeed, you've likely sometimes been surprised by things that came out of your own mouth. People are fascinating because they are so unpredictable. The only certainty you achieve by not listening to people is that you will be bored and you will be boring because you won't learn anything new.

During our clandestine meeting at the Four Seasons, McManus told me, "I feel like there's very little I haven't heard at this point, but still, I will walk out of a room and think, 'I can't believe that guy just told me that.'" Like when a doctor he was vetting for a wealthy client volunteered she had a drug habit or a yacht captain who admitted to habitually cutting himself. McManus scanned the bar again, which made me do the same. "But that's the point," he said, slowly returning his gaze to me. "That's how you know you're at the top of your game."

While McManus's title at the CIA was chief interrogator, he said interrogation was his least preferred and least effective tactic. "I've never been big on interrogation. Trust me, I know what it is. If I berate the hell out of you, you're going to give me something. But is it credible and reliable?" He shook his head and continued, "I've got to take the time and be patient enough and be a good listener to get information that is going to be useful." His approach was to ask suspects to tell him their stories, not bully them to fess up.

As an example, McManus told me about getting Pakistani nuclear scientist Sultan Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud to admit that he met with Osama bin Laden. This was shortly after 9/11 when the intelligence community was scrambling to hunt down the mastermind of the attacks. Rather than be adversarial, McManus built an odd rapport with Bashir by having a surprisingly long and illuminating conversation with him about the African American experience. "I'm just listening to him as he told me all about the civil rights movement and the travails of black people in America. He knew more about

American history than I did," McManus said. "After all that, I asked him wouldn't he rather tell his story to someone like me than someone like 'them.' I wasn't sure who 'them' was. I wanted him to create a picture in his mind of 'them.'" The scientist said he'd rather tell McManus his story.

Listening for things you have in common and gradually building rapport is the way to engage with anyone. Interrogation doesn't work with terrorists, so why would it work when you meet someone at a social gathering? Peppering people with appraising and personal questions like "What do you do for a living?" or "What part of town do you live in?" or "What school did you go to?" or "Are you married?" is interrogating. You're not trying to get to know them. You're sizing them up. It makes people reflexively defensive and will likely shift the conversation into a superficial and less-than-illuminating résumé recitation or self-promoting elevator pitch.

In the Chicago commuter study, the participants who engaged with strangers were told to try to make a connection. They were instructed to find out something interesting about the other person and to share something about themselves. It was a give-and-take. Had they aggressively started asking personal questions about the person's employment, education, and family, it wouldn't have gone so well. Instead, they might have started out by talking about the commute or maybe noticing someone's Chicago Cubs ball cap, asking if the person ever goes to games—listening and letting the conversation build organically. By being genuinely curious, courteous, and attentive, the study's participants discovered how correspondingly

gracious—and ultimately, interesting—their fellow commuters could be.

Curious people are those who will sit at the airport with a book in their lap but never open it or who forget about their phones when they are out and about. They are fascinated by, rather than fearful of, the unpredictability of others. They listen well because they want to understand and connect and grow. Even people who you would think had heard it all—CIA agents, priests, bartenders, criminal investigators, psychotherapists, emergency room intake nurses—will tell you they are continually amazed, entertained, and even appalled by what people tell them. It's what makes their lives interesting, and it's what makes them interesting to others.

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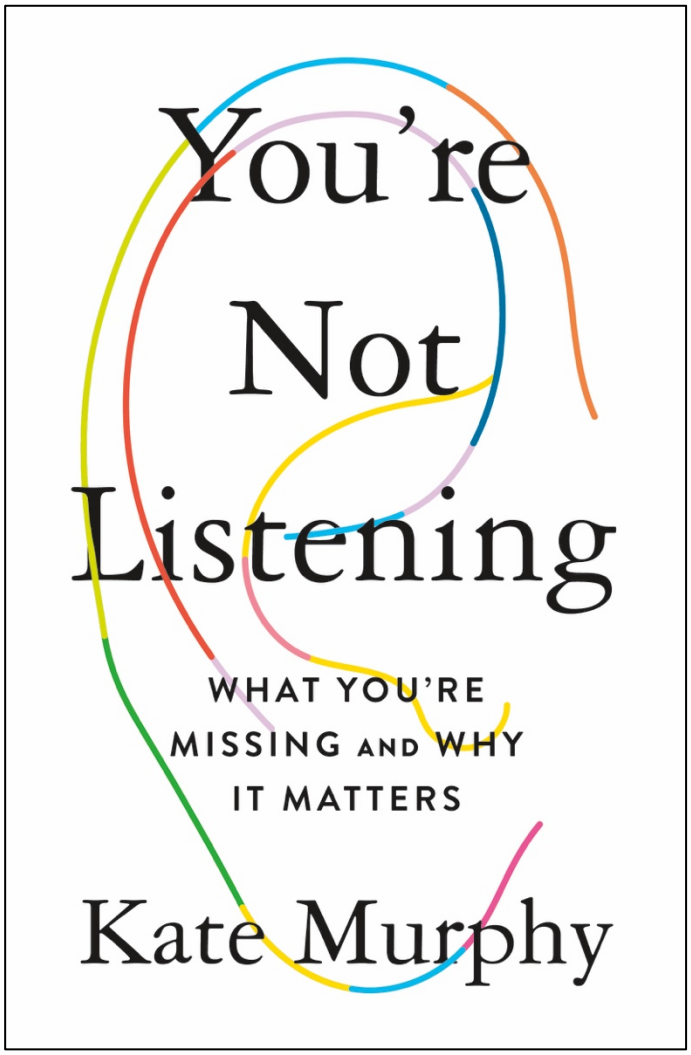
This is an excerpt from *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters* by Kate Murphy, published by Celadon Books.
The full book will be available for sale in the U.S on January 7, 2020 in hardcover, e-book, and audiobook.



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