

Can't See? Listen



The wisdom that comes from true maturity is often most powerfully evidenced in the level of our listening to others. When others are real to us—not single dimensional caricatures defined by broad categorizations or external characteristics—we are endlessly fascinated. When we are mature, we recognize that other human beings must be as multi-dimensional, layered, storied, contradictory, evolving, mysterious, and worthy as we are ourselves. To fully comprehend and understand another human being is as impossible as plumbing the depth of the universe, and just as awe-invoking to the mature.

But we are not always mature, especially in how we relate to those who don't look like us, act like us, or hold the same beliefs as us.

The Motivation Behind Dehumanization

When we mistreat another person, we are no longer interested in their full humanity as a person. Rather, having mistreated another human being—a multi-dimensional mystery who intrinsically matters the way I matter—I create a new need in my life: the need to be justified for using, discounting, demeaning, overlooking, undercutting, or neglecting another

human being. I *need* justification. I need to make seem right what I know is inherently wrong. How can I feel justified? I do so in seeing myself as better or worse than another. In any case, different; more deserving or less deserving, but not equal. I no longer see others as people, but as the single-dimensional caricature that deserves my mistreatment because I have grouped them based on factors of race, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, etc. with others who are not like me.

Having located all my evidence for their mistreatment in a single descriptor, the most dangerous thing I could do is to learn anything else about them. I avoid, at all costs, anything that might suggest that they and I are more alike than this single difference suggests. And, of course, there is nothing fascinating about a single-dimensional caricature whose entire existence can be summed up in a single label. Is it any wonder that mistreatment spells the ends of curiosity and listening?

The history of the world when traced through wars, conquests, and ongoing conflicts might be as simple a story as this all-too-predicable process writ large.

The Humanizing Power of Listening

To reverse this dehumanizing process, we can begin with the very thing that comes least naturally to us at our most immature: listening. By this we do not mean the kind of listening that sorts what others say (or don't say) through the lens of our justification-seeking agenda. Not the kind of listening that intensely looks for fallacies and logical flaws. Not the kind of listening that pounces on inconsistencies or a poorly chosen word or phrase. Not the kind of listening that waits anxiously for an opening or a segue to what we want to say. And, most importantly, not the kind of listening that pays more attention to *what is said*

than what a person is *trying to say*

To the mature, there is more value in understanding meaning than parsing words. And because other people are *real* to the mature, the mature works to find the most charitable way to infer meaning from the words that are always a grossly imperfect medium to convey that meaning. The listening of the mature might be best called charitable listening. It is the opposite of reconstructing the flimsiest, straw-man version of another's argument. It is infusing in another's words as kind and hopeful a reading as is possible. And what follows is usually some form of the eagerly investigating ask: "*tell me more.*"

In her essay by the same name, Brenda Ueland writes: "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. Think how the friends that really listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us good, like ultraviolet rays. This is the reason: When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life."

Is there a more important time for this kind of listening than now, especially to those who are different than us in some way? How interested are we in really understanding others? How eager are we to learn from others the kinds of things that might dispel the discriminatory darkness from those parts of us that are invested in maintaining the justifications we prop up through prejudice, misconceptions, and fear? How eager are we to listen?

A Listening Exercise

Senthiyl SSG, Managing Director of Arbinger Singapore/Malaysia, described what happened as he conducted a listening exercise in one of the workshops that he facilitated:

During an Arbinger workshop, I gave groups 15 minutes each to deeply appreciate the needs, goals, burdens and pains of one person in their group. Five minutes into the activity, a few groups asked me if they could move onto the next person as they had “already finished understanding” the first person. I invited these groups to consider how well they could have understood the other people given that they only invested five minutes in the exercise. I further explored with them how much time they really spent understanding the needs of those who were impacted by this person. I asked these groups if the problems and challenges they were having with many of their stakeholders might be rooted in not investing enough time understanding their needs, goals, burdens and challenges. Near the end of the discussions, I finally asked the groups if the way they were listening might be an indication of how they were truly regarding others—as people or as objects.

What's Our True Motivation?

Senthiyl suggests a simple question that could help us become more aware of our true motivation in situations that require us to more fully understand others: “Am I listening to correct and teach, or am I listening to learn?” While it is clear how we might listen to correct or teach, what does it mean to listen to learn? What would our dialogue as a society look like if in every interaction with others, whether in person or online, we committed to listening and learning in the following three ways?

Listening to learn *about* the person

Listening to learn *from* the person

Listening to learn *how I may be mistaken*

Senthiyl concludes, “Listening with these three areas in mind creates a deep connection between the listener and the person being listened to. We hear things we haven’t heard before; we begin to really understand the other person and how the other person feels that they and their views are important.

Unfortunately, listening is often thought of as a burden we impose on ourselves for the benefit of others. As if it is a gift we give to others. Listening, I have come to realize, is primarily a gift we offer ourselves—to live and work free of prejudices, biases, and false assumptions.”

To be human now, at this moment in our human story, is to be part of the conversation about how to rid ourselves of the prejudices that fixate on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, class, disability, and a range of dehumanizing labels that justify our mistreatment of each other. Whatever role we play to help advance us toward that goal, the influence we have will be, in large part, a function of the degree to which we allow ourselves to be influenced by others—to be mature enough to seek out the people who are not yet fully people to us, not yet fully real. If others are not real to the immature, then the only way to mature into our potential as a human family is to finally see each other. And that might just begin not with eyes, but listening ears. Ask yourself, “Am I eager to listen?” Seek out those with diverse background, life-experiences, and views. Spend time just listening without imposing your own views. Commit to listening to learn rather than to correct. Ask yourself: how might what this person is saying be true—perhaps true in ways I haven’t seen before? Unsure how to have a conversation like this? Don’t forget the remarkable power in the words “Tell me more.”