

**Listening**  
by  
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There is a joke on the airwaves about someone going to the water cooler, looking for a little sympathy about a toothache. He is greeted by people so self-absorbed, they ignore his plea and outdo each other with stories of their own. The last person describes how he had all his teeth pulled out without any anesthetic. It's only funny because we all know how true that is.

Too often today, the opposite of talking is not listening. It is waiting to talk. If you tell a story to a group of people, you can almost rely on someone coming back with one better. Maybe it's our competitive nature. Maybe it's about winning. Whatever it is, it's not listening.

There is another category of people that can look like they are really listening but they do not hear one word. They have this remarkable ability to tune out whatever is being said while bobbing their head up & down and interjecting just enough comments to look like they genuinely understand. Meanwhile their mind is focusing on whatever is really important like Steeler training camp. I'm told that I am great at that.

Did you ever notice how children can ignore their parents while watching television? Is this an acquired skill from watching adults ignore other adults while watching the tube?

Is there anything more disrespectful than watching a child tune out his parent at a grocery store in front of you? No matter how many times he is told he can't have the candy, he keeps putting it up on the counter.

While listening may be one of the most underestimated skills refined in childhood, it is certainly a skill that we take for granted as adults. But is listening becoming a dying art? As we race to what will be or what was, are we being present to what is by truly listening.

I am sometimes asked what job skills are important in the workplace. I routinely put communication skills at the top of the list. Along with reading, speaking and writing skills, I never overlook the act of listening. People that listen are usually the best performers. They get it right the first time.

In the business world, the best salespeople are the ones that listen. When you are busy, the last thing you want is someone telling you what you need. However it's great to work with people that listen to what you want. It's even more delightful when they deliver the service or product as you specified.

More important, in our personal lives, listeners give dignity and respect to the speaker. Is there anything more demoralizing than having someone look at something else while you

speaking? There is no better way to make someone feel unimportant. Listening says, "I value you as a person" or simply, "I care."

We live in an age where we are bombarded by stimulation. Restlessness, dissatisfaction and anxiety abound while silence is often rare and uncomfortable. It is difficult to listen when we are preoccupied with things. On the other hand, people are starved to be heard. Some resort to talking to themselves. There is such a need to be listened to and such a scarcity of listeners that thousands in our country make a very good living from listening to others.

In 1579, a remarkable woman wrote a timeless book that is a recipe for listening. St. Teresa of Avila believed that a person first had to listen to what was inside oneself. As she silently listened, she discovered the castle that was her soul and it was there that God dwelled supremely. Her recognition of God's deep love detached her from herself and she became a wellspring for listening and empathy for others. It came naturally.

Wouldn't it be great if we were all just natural listeners? While few of us can be like St. Teresa, there may be a variety of ways to improve our listening skills. Perhaps the key to being a natural listener is a selflessness that puts others before ourselves.



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