

Highlights from “You’re Not Listening” by Kate Murphy

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 The ability to listen to anyone has been replaced by the capacity to shut out everyone, particularly those who disagree with us or don’t get to the point fast enough.

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 felt 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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 as they normally would on their commutes.

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 commutes 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.

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.

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.

A white man, a woman of color, an evangelical, an atheist, a homeless person, a billionaire, a straight person, a gay person, a boomer, a millennial—each has a singular experience that separates them from everyone else who shares that label. Making assumptions of uniformity or solidarity based on age, gender, skin color, economic status, religious background, political party, or sexual preference reduces and diminishes us all. By listening, you might find comfort in shared values and similar experiences, but you'll also find many points where you diverge, and it's by acknowledging and accepting those differences that you learn and develop understanding. Our listening suffers from broadly applied and collective ideas of identity, which discourages discovery of what makes us and other people unique.

It's all too easy to get complacent about how well you know those closest to you, just as it's hard not to make assumptions about strangers based on stereotypes, particularly when reinforced by that person's own overt social signaling. But listening keeps you from falling into those traps. Listening will overturn your expectations.

Rogers described himself while active listening this way: "I hear the words, the thoughts, the feeling tones, the personal meaning, even the meaning that is below the conscious intent of the speaker." For him, active listening was more about being in a receptive mode than outward mannerisms. The idea is to go beyond "just the facts, ma'am," which is usually only a fraction of what's being conveyed. In conversation, people rarely tell you something unless it means something to them.

Criminologists have found that mass shooters are typically not psychotic but depressed and lonely, motivated most often by a desire for revenge. The Trace, a journalism nonprofit dedicated to tracking gun violence, found that a striking commonality among mass murderers is a profound alienation from society. This was true whether the assailant was a disgruntled employee, estranged spouse, troubled teenager, failed business owner, jihadist, or traumatized veteran. They shared a sense that no one listened to or understood them, and they in turn ceased to listen to anyone, moved only by the often warped things they told themselves.

While being open and curious about someone else is a state of mind, the ability to acknowledge someone's point of view with a sensitive response that encourages trust and elaboration is a developed skill. Good listeners are not born that way, they become that way.

Disagreements and sharp differences of opinion are inevitable in life whether they are over political ideology, ethical issues, business dealings, or personal matters. When engaged in any kind of dispute, the father of listening studies, Ralph Nichols, advised listening for evidence that you might be wrong rather than listening to poke holes in the other person's argument, much less plugging your ears or cutting someone out of your life entirely. It requires a certain generosity of spirit, but if you remain open to the possibility that you might be wrong, or at least not entirely right, you'll get far more out of the conversation.

According to Carl Rogers, the psychologist who coined the term *active listening*, listening to opposing viewpoints is the only way to grow as an individual: "While I still hate to readjust my thinking, still hate to give up old ways of perceiving and conceptualizing, yet at some deeper level I have, to a considerable degree, come to realize that these painful reorganizations are what is known as learning."

Listening is the engine of ingenuity. It's difficult to understand desires and detect problems, much less develop elegant solutions, without listening.... Good listeners know understanding is not binary. It's not that you have it or you don't. Your understanding can always be improved.

People who have conversational sensitivity not only pay attention to spoken words, they also have a knack for picking up hidden meanings and nuances in tone. They are good at recognizing power differentials and are quick to distinguish affectation from genuine affection. They remember more of what people say and tend to enjoy, or at least be interested in, the

conversation. Conversational sensitivity is also thought to be a precursor to empathy, which requires you to summon emotions felt and learned in previous interactions and apply them to subsequent situations.

Contrast between a “shift response” and a “support response.” Good listeners are all about the support response. Here are some hypothetical examples:

John: My dog got out last week, and it took three days to find him.

Mary: Our dog is always digging under the fence, so we can’t let him out unless he’s on a leash. (shift response)

John: My dog got out last week, and it took three days to find him.

Mary: Oh no. Where did you finally find him? (support response)

Sue: I watched this really good documentary about turtles last night.

Bob: I’m not big on documentaries. I’m more of an action-film kind of guy. (shift response)

Sue: I watched this really good documentary about turtles last night.

Bob: Turtles? How did you happen to see that? Are you into turtles? (support response)

Shift responses are symptomatic of conversational narcissism, which quashes any chance of connection. Shift responses are usually self-referential statements while support responses are more often other-directed questions. But they have to be truly curious questions meant to elicit more information and not subtly impose your own opinion.

Good listeners are good questioners. Inquiry reinforces listening and vice versa because you have to listen to ask an appropriate and relevant question, and then, as a consequence of posing the question, you are invested in listening to the answer. Moreover, asking genuinely curious and openhearted questions makes for more meaningful and revelatory conversations—not to mention prevents misunderstandings. This, in turn, makes narratives more interesting, engaging, and even sympathetic, which is the basis for forming sincere and secure relationships.

You can’t have meaningful exchanges with people, much less establish relationships, if you aren’t willing to listen to people’s stories, whether it’s where they come from, what their dreams are, what led them to do the work they do, or how they came to fear polka dots. What

is love but listening to and wanting to be a part of another person's evolving story? It's true of all relationships—romantic and platonic. And listening to a stranger is possibly one of the kindest, most generous things you can do.

People who make an effort to listen—and respond in ways that support rather than shift the conversation—end up collecting stories the way other people might collect stamps, shells, or coins. The result is they tend to have something interesting to contribute to almost any discussion. The best raconteurs and most interesting conversationalists I have ever met are the most agile questioners and attentive listeners.

While our smartphones may not allow us to have a decent conversation (“Can you hear me now? How about now?”), they seem to offer us just about everything else—social media, games, news, maps, recipes, videos, music, movies, podcasts, shopping, and pornography, if you're so inclined. In the end, none of it is as emotionally satisfying or as essential to our well-being as connecting with a live human being. And yet, like any addict, we keep tapping, scrolling, and swiping as if pulling a lever on a slot machine, hoping to eventually hit the jackpot

This compulsion, driven by a fear of missing out, prevents sustained attention, making listening—or any task requiring thought—difficult. It's hard to concentrate on what's happening in the real world when you're preoccupied with what could be happening in the virtual one. Experts have raised concerns that we are even losing our ability to daydream, as fantasizing, too, requires some level of attention. Many of the greatest advances in science and arts and letters have come by way of daydreaming. Albert Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, T. S. Eliot, and Lewis Carroll all attributed their genius to long periods of uninterrupted musing. Could you put away your phone for an hour? A half hour? Five minutes?

To be a good listener is to accept pauses and silences because filling them too soon, much less preemptively, prevents the speaker from communicating what they are perhaps struggling to say. It quashes elaboration and prevents real issues from coming to the surface. Just wait. Give the other person a chance to pick up where they left off. As a journalist, it took me too long to realize that I didn't have to say anything to keep the conversation going. Some of the most interesting and valuable bits of information have come not from my questioning but from keeping my mouth shut. You get so much more out of interactions when you allow people the time and space to gather their thoughts.

Our modern selves talk more and listen less despite the fact that understanding and responsiveness to one another's stories, ideas, and concerns have defined all our achievements

from hunting woolly mammoths to putting a man on the moon. Not listening to one another diminishes what we can achieve and in that way, too, can be seen as a moral failing. We not only fail one another as individuals, we also fail to thrive as a society.

Moreover, when people feel the urgency to always sell themselves, they tend to exaggerate, which lowers the level of discourse and fosters cynicism. When asked his IQ score, the physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking said, "I have no idea. People who boast about their IQ are losers." This is from a man whom many considered the smartest person in the world. My great-great-aunt also observed that those who bragged the most were usually the least accomplished. Something to keep in mind when you're tempted to promote yourself instead of finding out what's great about whomever is in front of you.

People tend to regret not listening more than listening and tend to regret things they said more than things they didn't say. It seems giving people a piece of your mind isn't all it's cracked up to be. While you may feel a sense of urgency to tell people how you feel, it's not always helpful. You are putting your ego ahead of the other person's vulnerability. This doesn't mean you have to be dishonest or self-effacing, but you do need to listen enough to know when the other person is ready to hear what you have to say. Not everything needs to be said as you are feeling it. In fact, sometimes it's better to wait until you aren't feeling it quite so strongly.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer." It is flattering when someone listens to you, which is why we are drawn to those increasingly rare individuals who actually do. Listening is a courtesy and, more fundamentally, a sign of respect. It's impossible to convince someone that you respect them by telling them so. It must be demonstrated, and listening is the simplest way to do that.

But listening is no easy task. Our magnificent brains race along faster than others can speak, making us easily distracted. We overestimate what we already know and, mired in our arrogance, remain unaware of all we misunderstand. We also fear that if we listen too carefully, we might discover that our thinking is flawed or that another person's emotions might be too much to bear. And so we retreat into our own heads, talk over one another, or reach for our phones.

Technology does not so much interfere with listening as make it seem unnecessary. Our devices indulge our fear of intimacy by fooling us into thinking that we are socially connected even when we are achingly alone. We avoid the messiness and imperfections of others, retreating into the relative safety of our devices, swiping and deleting with abandon. The result is a loss of richness and nuance in our social interactions, and we suffer from a creeping sense of dissatisfaction.

Not listening reduces the level of discourse. We experience and evaluate our words differently when said aloud to an attentive listener versus when they are in our heads or tapped out in 140 characters. A listener has a reactive effect on the speaker. As a result, careful listening elevates the conversation because speakers become more responsible and aware of what they are saying.

While listening is the epitome of graciousness, it is not a courtesy you owe everyone. That isn't possible. It's to your benefit to listen to as many different people, with as much curiosity as you can muster, but you ultimately get to decide when and where to draw the line. To be a good listener does not mean you must suffer fools gladly, or indefinitely, but rather helps you more easily identify fools and makes you wise to their foolishness. And perhaps most important, listening keeps you from being the fool yourself.

Listening is often regarded as talking's meek counterpart, but it is actually the more powerful position in communication. You learn when you listen. It's how you divine truth and detect deception. And though listening requires that you let people have their say, it doesn't mean you remain forever silent. In fact, how one responds is the measure of a good listener and, arguably, the measure of a good person.

In our fast-paced and frenetic culture, listening is seen as a drag. Conversations unfold slowly and may need to be revisited. Listening takes effort. Understanding and intimacy must be earned. While people often say, "I can't talk right now," what they really mean is "I can't listen right now." And for many, it seems they never get around to it. This, despite what we all want most in life—to understand and be understood—only happens when we slow down and take the time to listen.