



Listening Mindfully

I am fascinated with how older cultures employ their listening skills across an array of environments. Hunters, in traditional societies, can silently wait for long stretches in foliage as they kept an ear open for the cry or call of a prey. They can listen to shifts in the wind, rustles in the underbrush, warning calls from other creatures, and even an inner voice that urges them to wait a bit longer. Hunting communities today continue to pivot around aural and oral traditions. Hunters chant during celebrations, pray for supplications, and share stories to deepen communion with a more-than-human world. Skilled hunters can connect so intimately with the world around them that they are able to artfully imitate the sounds they hear and attract a potential meal.

While very few of us rely on a hunter's ear these days, we each have to bring our own version of attentiveness to work. We each show up in some vocational context that requires us, as a listener, to practice varying degrees of concentration. My responsibilities in the counseling field and my engagements as an improvising musician, typically ask me to hold a listening focus for long stretches. Regardless of one's livelihood, you can't drive a vehicle or shop for groceries without some developed ability to sustain attention. When it comes to listening, though, the impact of not paying heed may not show up immediately or obviously.

We can sometimes give the appearance of being present in a conversation when, in fact, our head is elsewhere. This brings us to the topic of mindfulness.

Listening is all about giving attention to what is happening in any given moment. Ideally, it is about remaining present as a listener regardless of whether one likes or dislikes the soundtrack of the moment. Listening conscientiously, I must receive the remarks of someone or the expression of something regardless of whether it conforms to my preferences or expectations. Truth be told, I don't always succeed in staying open or dialed in. I drift off to the future, ruminate about the past, or simply trip off. However, when it becomes apparent to me (or another person) that I am not paying attention, mindfulness asks me to catch what is going on, refocus my ears, and show up.

Mindful listening offers a universal and pragmatic practice that can be applied anywhere at anytime by anyone. As a deliberate act of paying attention, mindfulness encourages us to center on what is actually happening in the present and to be keenly aware of our inner responses to what is unfolding externally. Each moment invites a listener to notice a range of what is unfolding in his or her reality. Sometimes our focus takes in a wide expanse of detail and sometimes our listening attention narrows to subtle nuances.

One intention of mindful listening is to attend to the aural events of the moment without getting caught up in evaluating those emergences as 'good or bad', 'positive or negative'. As I teach it, mindful listening asks a receiver to become aware of sonic truths, the details on the airwaves just as they are. To the best of my ability, I can remain open to what is happening momentarily and, where possible, learn from my perceptions.

In daily life, listening provides one of the most portable ways to participate in applied mindfulness. The ever-shifting aural patterns in our environment or the unheard influences inside us offer an ideal context to train our muscles of attentiveness and awareness. As in any mindful practice, we sharpen our perceptual focus by following a few guidelines:

- Come into the moment.
- Bring your aural sense to focus.
- Pay attention to what you consciously apprehend.

- Suspend your expectations or judgments.
- Notice your physical, intellectual, and emotional responses.
- Sustain your focus as long as is possible or natural.

After several decades of living, I can now look back and appreciate the people and processes that helped me cultivate the skill of mindful listening. Playing trumpet as a boy taught me how to attend carefully to intonation, tone, timbre, melodic line, and the steadiness of rhythm. Before I picked up a horn though, I received a good education in paying attention simply by being outdoors in the natural world. My Uncle owned a farm, my family camped regularly, and my bike always seemed pointed toward a bush or a river. Listening in these natural environments prepared me for a lifetime of noticing the constantly shifting patterns that may emerge in music, wilderness, conversation, or a cityscape.

I mention the great outdoors as a teacher because, sadly enough, a connection with the natural world is fading for millions of North Americans. Today, a typical adolescent spends an average of 20 hours a week in front of some version of an electronic monitor, be that a television, computer, or iPad. Even more shocking is the speculation that, one generation from now, most people in the U.S. will have spent more time in the virtual world than in nature. Today, with the flick of a mouse or the touch of keypad, any of us can remove ourselves from tangible circumstances and become lost in virtual worlds that offer endless distractions. What impact does this have on attention and audition?

A 2010 documentary film, *PLAY AGAIN*, explores what happens when our human connection to nature disappears down the digital rabbit hole. The film follows six teenagers who each spend from five to fifteen hours a day behind screens. *PLAY AGAIN* unplugs these teens and takes them on their first wilderness adventure – no electricity, no cell phone coverage, no virtual reality. Through the voices of young people, *PLAY AGAIN* investigates the consequences of a life removed from nature. The film asks: What are those screens screening out as individuals are lured away from real life encounters with other human beings, the natural world, or even the sensual body itself? How is the pull to twitter, text, game, or poke detracting individuals from a deep engagement with the animate and acoustic world? How do we inspire young people to interact responsively or responsibly with relationships beyond the screen? Ultimately, how can

the sound of a cricket even compete with a 14 year old who has wired his attention to the explosive, death metal soundtrack of a war game?

While in-depth listening requires practice and dedication it also invites us to, as the film suggests, PLAY AGAIN. Exercising the ear, in my opinion, presents a playful challenge that asks, “What can you notice as you bring your attention to bear?” To get in the game, though, most of us have to start by acknowledging where we suffer from some version of attention deficiency. ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) is considered to be a rampant problem among young people that affects 5 percent of American children and three times more boys than girls. Without downplaying the gravity of those who suffer from ADHD, we each only have to try ten minutes of concentrated listening to discover our own degree of deficient attention span. To re-write the old Zen koan or riddle, “If a tree falls in forest, will anyone hear it?”

A teacher friend, who works in an inner city public school in Toronto gave me his personal assessment about the dearth of concentration (or death of listening) when he grumbled: “My students have the attention span of a gnat.” Today, everyone from junior kindergarten teachers to high school guidance counselors bemoan the declining ability of younger students to overcome either inner or outer distractions long enough to take in a few simple instructions. In many classrooms, mindlessness seems more prevalent than mindfulness.

In looking for causes (or scapegoats) as to why younger students seem so fuzzy or spacey, the usual suspects are trotted out: the quick pace of electronic games versus the slow cadence of human speech; the habit of managing multiple stimuli in the moment (driving the car, drinking coffee, while dialing the cell); the habituation toward web-based information that is delivered in short bytes rather than long explanations; the ongoing rise of noise pollution in urban settings (as an aside, I am writing as jets are screeching overhead during the annual Toronto Air Show).

As someone who teaches in rural African classrooms as much as North American private schools, I have to say that the lack of aural fitness seems universal to me. It not only shows up as a cross-cultural issue but also an inter-generational problem. Regardless of our age, each of us is impacted by a wired world, especially with its insistent invitation to drop into distant, digital relationships.

Even if you are lucky enough to shun emails and voicemails, you are still likely to be influenced by the addiction to multi-tasking, a habit arising from a culture tethered to computers. According to PEW statistics, 57% of Americans watch TV and surf Internet simultaneously. In a multi-tasking and speed-based society, our concentration span for intimately connecting with another person is steadily shrinking to mere bits and bytes. The leisurely tête-à-tête at the café is swiftly being nudged out. Conversations frequently contain either a spoken or unspoken push to 'get to the point'. I attended a memorial service recently where, during a storytelling portion of the eulogy, a relative shouted out, "Get to the point!" Mindful listening sorely suffers in such conditions where velocity is preferred over vulnerability.

Mindful listening serves as an antidote to the prevalent and speedy exchanges that happen when we dash out the door in the morning, answering a call from a colleague while simultaneously asking who is going to pick up pizza for dinner. In sharp contrast, mindful listening contains a genuine intention to remain present for a prolonged cycle of interchange. To pull this off means we have to first slow down and then stop trying to do everything, all at once. Like other mindful practices, listening lowers the rate of superficial exchanges largely by eliminating or limiting sidebar distractions. It says, "Rather than surf or scan, rather than sample or skim, I chose to go as fully as possible into this moment with you". This choice involves more than a social custom anchored in obligation. If anything, the intention to listen is a momentary choice that says I am willing to be affected by what is going on right now. Speed and diversion are no longer employed as a defense against intimacy or intensity. Listening, by definition, lets not only the word in but also lets the world in. When we let others in a bit closer or a bit clearer, we risk being altered, challenged, or changed by the encounter. Maybe this is why we sometimes choose distraction over encounter.

Unless you are solitary shepherd or have taken a vow of retreat from other humans, it's likely that your day presents copious opportunities to give ear to perspectives much different than your own. Listening, therefore, beckons us out of a parochial territory and into a space more complex than might feel comfortable to us. In this way, listening continuously asks me to entertain a healthy curiosity as to what might happen if I entertained a perspective at variance with my own version of

truth. Believe me, I don't have to look far for this to occur. I'm not proposing we each seek out a fundamentalist or fascist to converse with and practice open listening. Simply sit down with your partner or a family member and, should the topic stray into some loaded areas (sex, money, chores, or control) you will likely have a chance to practice the art of staying present to a perspective unlike your own.

As our space for hearing others expands, we inevitably become more aware of our own unconscious biases, psychological projections, or preconceived notions about people different than us. We become cognizant of where our scope of listening remains constricted, contracted, or downright constipated. Opening to larger interactions and letting more complexities in, we find out precisely where we *aren't* receptive, perhaps due to emotional preferences, political opinions, social attitudes, or intellectual beliefs. In fact, not much significantly shifts or deepens in our listening practice until we boldly face the aural equivalent of our 'blind spots'. Each time we become aware of where our openness to new ideas or differences has shut down, we are that much closer to releasing impediments that no longer serve how we relate to others. As a therapist once told me, "Listen for where you don't listen!"