

Teaching the World To Listen

“LANGUAGE MOST SHOWS A MAN: SPEAK, THAT I MAY SEE THEE”, implored Ben Jonson (1573 – 1637). Humans, according to Jonson, are essentially mute souls differing little from the vast array of lower vertebrate creatures except by the singular art of speaking; and thus arises their unique capacity to share their thoughts, inventions, speculations, even deceptions, with others. Speaking, therefore, has become the vehicle that we possess to teach each other, bring comfort to each other, even bind us together in times of adversity.

Life abounds with symmetries: for darkness, there is light; for wealth there is poverty; and for the art of speaking, there is the equally commendable art of listening. And yet when we assemble our generalizations extracted from the realities about us, speaking far outweighs the gentle but fervent skill of listening. The Oxford Book of Notable Quotations, for example, lists but five famous, quotable lines about listening but 58 priceless quotations about speaking. And so too does this proportion reflect every day reality: for every abiding listener, there seems to be at least ten earnest orators; surely then, many speeches must necessarily go astray since there are so few listeners to absorb their imparted wisdom. There is a sadness, then, that entire orations, embroidered with witty sayings, each filled with erudite insight, must flitter to nothingness, lost forever, for want of an eager congregation of avid listeners. In a world of symmetrical pairings, speaking may be paired with listening; or, it may be paired with not speaking, being silent. Yet surely listening is not the same as not speaking.

What type of preparation, what manner of advanced training is needed to transform a sentient human, from a non-speaker into a dedicated listener? And are there educational centers – akin, perhaps, to those colleges teaching adults how to administer businesses – for formal training in advanced and abiding listening?

Listening, listening in eager silence, is a sign of great forbearance and maturity. The wise man, listening in silence, says more than the endlessly talking simpleton. And even the Scriptural Proverbs declare: “Even the fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise.”

So, where, and under what circumstances, does one’s education in listening commence? Perhaps first in learning the rudiments of silence. “I have often repented speaking”, said Xenocrates (396-315 BCE), “but never of holding my tongue.” Silence is a magisterial presence, perhaps because it is so rare. Consider the many reasons for a human to stay silent. Firstly, to increase the likelihood of hearing something advantageous, something that might bring personal benefit to himself. And then, of course, one sometimes remains silent because one has nothing to say. And lastly, some interrupt their flow of words because their rare flashes of silence might bring wonderment and amusement to others.

Listening can be quite conventional especially when enhanced by periodic head-nods and barely audible sounds of approval. Listening can be analytical, with the expressed thoughts

dissected, weighed and thoroughly debated thus indicating their inherent merit.

And then there is that mode of listening that requires an extra-corporeal organ, the third ear. Theodore Reik (1888-1969) discussed listening with the third ear as a crucial part of the armamentarium of the competent counselor: listening, and analytically absorbing not merely the uttered words of the speaker but also the words and ideas not openly expressed but nonetheless revealed by facial expressions, mood changes and the many inferred components of non-verbal communication collectively called body language.

Finally, listening to oneself is one of the great joys of life; it reaffirms the audacity of our thoughts and it gives credence to our dogmas. (“After all, if I said it, then it must be so !”) But to the extent that genuine learning is principally accomplished through listening to others, listening rather than speaking should then be our dominant mode of learning. And the accrued benefits from listening? Gladness, new thoughts, heretofore unrevealed secrets about the world and an endless sense of wonderment. Percy Shelley (1792-1822) said:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then –
As I am listening now.

– STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

Stanley M. Aronson, MD is dean of medicine emeritus, Brown University.

Disclosure of Financial Interests

The author and his spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

CORRESPONDENCE

e-mail: SMAMD@cox.net

