

Tell Me More

On The Fine Art of Listening

By Brenda Ueland

I want to write about the great and powerful thing that listening is. And how we forget it. And how we don't listen to our children, or those we love. And least of all—which is so important too—to those we do not love. But we should. Because 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. You know how if a person laughs at your jokes you become funnier and funnier, and if he does not, every tiny little joke in you weakens up and dies. Well, that is the principle of it. It makes people happy and free when they are listened to. And if you are a listener, it is the secret of having a good time in society (because everybody around you becomes lively and interesting), of comforting people, of doing them good.

Who are the people, for example, to whom you go for advice? Not to the hard, practical ones who can tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners; that is, the kindest, least censorious, least bossy people that you know. It is because by pouring out your problem to them, you then know what to do about it yourself.

When we listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other. We are constantly being re-created. Now there are brilliant people who cannot listen much. They have no ingoing wires on their apparatus. They are entertaining, but exhausting, too. I think it is because these lecturers, these brilliant performers, by not giving us a chance to talk, do not let us express our thoughts and expand; and it is this little creative fountain inside us that begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom. That is why, when someone has listened to you, you go home rested and lighthearted.

Now this little creative fountain is in us all. It is the spirit, or the intelligence, or the imagination—whatever you want to call it. If you are very tired, strained, have no solitude, run too many errands, talk to too many people, drink too many cocktails, this little fountain is muddied over and covered with a lot of debris. The result is you stop living from the center, the creative fountain, and you live from the periphery, from externals. That is, you go along on mere willpower without imagination.

It is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the little fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way.

I discovered all this about three years ago, and truly it made a revolutionary change in my life. Before that, when I went to a party I would think anxiously, "Now try hard. Be lively. Say bright things. Talk. Don't let down." And when tired, I would have to drink a lot of coffee to keep this up.

Now before going to a party, I just tell myself to listen with affection to anyone who talks to me, to be in their shoes when they talk; to try to know them without my mind pressing against theirs, or arguing, or changing the subject. No. My attitude is, "Tell me more. This person is showing me his soul. It is a little dry and meager and full of grinding talk just now, but presently he will begin to think, not just automatically to talk. He will show his true self. Then he will be wonderfully alive."

Sometimes, of course, I cannot listen as well as others. But when I have this listening power, people crowd around and their heads keep turning to me as though irresistibly pulled. It is not because people are conceited and want to show off that they are drawn to me, the listener. It is because by listening I have started up their creative fountain. I do them good.

Now why does it do them good? I have a kind of mystical notion about this. I think it is only by expressing all that is

inside that purer and purer streams come. It is so in writing. You are taught in school to put down on paper only the bright things. Wrong. Pour out the dull things on paper too—you can tear them up afterward—for only then do the bright ones come. If you hold back the dull things, you are certain to hold back what is clear and beautiful and true and lively. So it is with people who have not been listened to in the right way—with affection and a kind of jolly excitement. Their creative fountain has been blocked. Only superficial talk comes out—what is prissy or gushing or merely nervous. No one has called out of them, by wonderful listening, what is true and alive.

I think women have this listening faculty more than men. It is not the fault of men. They lose it because of their long habit of striving in business, of self-assertion. And the more forceful men are, the less they can listen as they grow older. And that is why women in general are more fun than men, more restful and inspiring.

Now this non-listening of able men is the cause of one of the saddest things in the world—the loneliness of fathers, of those quietly sad men who move among their grown children like remote ghosts. When my father was over 70, he was a fiery, humorous, admirable man, a scholar, a man of great force. But he was deep in the loneliness of old age and another generation. He was so fond of me. But he could not hear me—not one word I said, really. I was just audience. I would walk around the lake with him on a beautiful afternoon and he would talk to me about Darwin and Huxley and Higher Criticism of the Bible.

“Yes, I see, I see,” I kept saying and tried to keep my mind pinned to it, but I was restive and bored. There was a feeling of helplessness because he could not hear what I had to say about it. When I spoke I found myself shouting, as one does to a foreigner, and in a kind of despair that he could not hear me. After the walk I would feel that I had worked off my duty and I was anxious to get him settled and reading in his Morris chair, so that I could go out and have a livelier time with other people. And he would sigh and look after me absentmindedly with perplexed loneliness.

For years afterward, I have thought with real suffering about my father’s loneliness. Such a wonderful man, and reaching out to me and wanting to know me! But he could not. He could not listen. But now I think that if only I had known as much about listening then as I do now, I could have bridged that chasm between us. To give an example:

Recently, a man I had not seen for 20 years wrote me: “I have a family of mature children. So did your father. They never saw him. Not in the days he was alive. Not in the days he was the deep and admirable man we now both know he was. That is man’s life. When next you see me, you’ll just know everything. Just your father all over again, trying to reach through, back to the world of those he loves.”

Well, when I saw this man again, what had happened to him after 20 years? He was an unusually forceful man and had made a great deal of money. But he had lost his ability to listen. He talked rapidly and told wonderful stories and it was just fascinating to hear them. But when I spoke—restlessness, “Just hand me that, will you?...Where is my pipe?” It was just a habit. He read countless books and he was eager to take in ideas, but he just could not listen to people.

Well this is what I did. I was more patient—I did not resist his non-listening talk as I did my father’s. I listened and listened to him, not once pressing against him, even in thought, with my own self-assertion. I said to myself, “He has been under a driving pressure for years. His family has grown to resist his talk. But now, by listening, I will pull it all out of him. He must talk freely and on and on. When he has been really listened to enough, he will grow tranquil. He will begin to want to hear me.”

And he did, after a few days. He began asking me questions. And presently I was saying gently, “You see, it has become hard for you to listen.”

He stopped dead and stared at me. And it was because I had listened with such complete, absorbed, uncritical sympathy, without one flaw of boredom or impatience, that he now believed and trusted me, although he did not know this.

“Now talk,” he said. “Tell me about that. Tell me all about that.”

Well, we walked back and forth across the lawn and I told him my ideas about it.

“You love your children, but probably don’t let them in. Unless you listen, people are wizened in your presence; they become about a third of themselves. Unless you listen, you can’t know anybody. Oh, you will know facts and what is in the newspapers and all of history, perhaps, but you will not know one single person. You know, I have come to think listening is love; that’s what it really is.”

Well, I don't think I would have written this article if my notions had not had such an extraordinary effect on this man. For he says they have changed his whole life. He wrote me that his children at once came closer; he was astonished to see what they are; how original, independent, courageous. His wife seemed really to care about him again, and they were actually talking about all kinds of things and making each other laugh.

For just as the tragedy of parents and children is not listening, so it is of husbands and wives. If they disagree, they begin to shout louder and louder—if not actually, at least inwardly—hanging fiercely and deafly onto their own ideas, instead of listening and becoming quieter and quieter and more comprehending. But the most serious result of not listening is that worst thing in the world, boredom; for it is really the death of love. It seals people off from each other more than any other thing. I think that is why married people quarrel. It is to cut through the non-conduction and boredom. Because when feelings are hurt, they really begin to listen. At last their talk is a real exchange. But of course, they are injuring their marriage forever.

Besides critical listening, there is another kind that is no good: passive, censorious listening. Sometimes husbands can be this kind of listener, a kind of ungenerous eavesdropper who mentally (or aloud) keeps saying as you talk, "Bunk...Bunk...Hokum."

Now, how to listen? It is harder than you think. I don't believe in critical listening, for that only puts a person in a straitjacket of hesitancy. He begins to choose his words solemnly or primly. His little inner fountain cannot spring. Critical listeners dry you up. But creative listeners are those who want you to be recklessly yourself, even at your very worst, even vituperative, bad-tempered. They are laughing and just delighted with any manifestation of yourself, bad or good. For true listeners know that if you are bad-tempered it does not mean that you are always so. They don't love you just when you are nice; they love all of you.

In order to learn to listen, here are some suggestions: Try to learn tranquility, to live in the present a part of the time

every day. Sometimes say to yourself, "Now. What is happening now? This friend is talking. I am quiet. There is endless time. I hear it, every word." Then suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piecemeal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole.

Then watch your self-assertiveness. And give it up. Try not to drink too many cocktails to give up that nervous pressure that feels like energy and wit but may be neither. And remember it is not enough just to will to listen to people. One must really listen. Only then does the magic begin.

Sometimes people cannot listen because they think that unless they are talking, they are socially of no account. There are those women with an old-fashioned ballroom training that insists there must be unceasing vivacity and gyrations of talk. But this is really a strain on people.

No. We should all know this: that listening, not talking, is the gifted and great role, and the imaginative role. And the true listener is much more believed, magnetic than the talker, and he is more effective and learns more and does more good. And so try listening. Listen to your wife, your husband, your father, your mother, your children, your friends, to those who love you and those who don't, to those who bore you, to your enemies. It will work a small miracle. And perhaps a great one.

— Brenda Ueland

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How to talk with kids

Advice to the shapers of the next generation

DON'T ask your poor children those automatic questions—"Did you wash your hands, dear?"—those dull, automatic, querulous duty questions (almost the only conversation that most parents have to offer). Note the look of dreadful exhaustion and ennui and boredom that comes into their otherwise quite happy faces. And don't say, "How was school today, dear?" which really means: "Please entertain me (mama), who is mentally totally lazy at the moment with not one witty or interesting thing to offer, and please give me an interesting and stimulating account of high marks."

Years and years ago when my child was 4 years old, I suddenly learned not to do this. I learned—a bolt from Heaven—never to ask an automatic question, so boring, so mentally lazy, so exhausting. No, I would myself tell her something interesting and arresting: "I saw Pat Greaves next door running and bawling because he was being chased by a strange yellow cat." My child's eyes would sparkle with interest, and there we were, in the liveliest conversation, and behold! she was soon telling me the most interesting extraordinary things, her own ideas. At our meals together I felt that it was I, not she, who must be the wit, the raconteur, the delightful one, the fascinated listener to her remarks, the laughter at her jokes. Now, the light in a child's eyes is a splendid gauge and tells you in a split second if you are failing and becoming a bore and a schoolmarm. She has liked me ever since.

Another aspect of the same thing is this: I say to those youngish parents (the vast majority these days) who are exhausted by their children and, with pale, neurasthenic frowns on their foreheads, are always pleading, "Plee-ase go to bed, dear... Now Jack, Sally go in the other room, dear, and look at television."

"No," I say, "you are doing it wrong. You are failing as parents. You should be so vigorous, healthy, in the pink of condition (cut out all the smoking and drinking and coffee breaks), so inexhaustible, rambunctious, jolly, full of deviltry and frolic, of stories, of dramatizations, of actions, of backward somersaults, or athletics and tomfoolery, of hilarity, that your children at last, after hours of violent exercise, worn down by laughter and intellectual excitement, with pale, neurasthenic frowns on their foreheads, cry: "Plee...ease, Mama, go to bed!"

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