

# LISTEN COMPLETELY

Published article By Fred Rivera, ATM-B

**A good listener is always speaking to the speaker, and a good speaker is always listening to the listener.**

*Your friend rushes up to you and excitedly says, "You'll never guess what happened when Dave and Sheila finally met last night!" You, quivering with curiosity, reply, "I'm all ears!" That familiar expression, "I'm all ears," is the best definition I've ever heard for the hard-to-in-down phenomenon called listening. When we really listen, we are all ears.*

I've struggled with and have been fascinated by listening all my adult life. Although it wasn't a conscious decision, I've always chosen work in which listening was of paramount importance: acting, psychotherapy, career life coaching and public speaking. I'd like to share with you some of my experiences with listening and some of the ways I've come to view it.

Sometimes I look at conversation as if it were breathing. Listening is the inhale and speaking the exhale. I'm sure we've all had deadening conversations where nobody was really engaged—it's like holding your breath. But a good conversation breathes like a racehorse: big gives and takes.

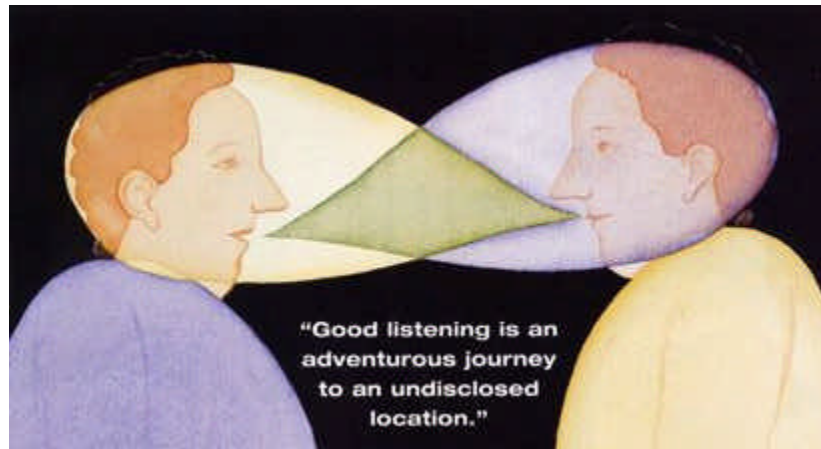
An interesting thing about a conversation that's alive and breathing is that even if the listener doesn't talk at all, his or her physical reactions will "speak" volumes, which a good speaker will pick up on and respond to. So a good listener is always speaking to the speaker and a good speaker is always listening to the listener. They listen with their ears and eyes and feelings—in truth, with their whole being.

Good actors are great listeners. You might wonder, "Why would actors listen so intently? After all, they know what the other actors are going to say." They listen intently because each performance is at least subtly different from the previous ones, and the actors spontaneously respond to that difference. This spontaneity keeps the play alive each night: The actors are not acting like they're having a conversation, they are having a conversation. When they don't listen intently, they can't respond spontaneously, and just as in conversation in everyday life, the result is deadening. The audience of course is the people who are listening to the actors, who in turn are listening to each other and to the audience. The audience as listener and responder plays a vital role in the life of a play at each performance. Actually, I've often felt the audience should be listed in the playbill.

But just what is listening? There is nothing casual or vague about the kind of listening I'm talking about. It is a clear-eyed, specific endeavor that involves far more than your ears. This kind of listening involves your whole being.

The dictionary, being very pragmatic, defines a listener as, "a person who listens." It goes on to say, "A good listener is one who can be relied on to listen attentively or sympathetically." This definition didn't quite cut it for me. It left out any hint of the deep human connection that can occur when people really listen. So I looked up quotations about listening to see if I could find some agreement and shed more light on the kind of listening I'm referring to. I was pleasantly surprised. Oliver Wendell Holmes said: "It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen." Plutarch said: "Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly."

So we have two pretty knowledgeable fellows here, one saying we learn if we listen and the other saying that the wise consider listening a privilege. But Ernest Hemingway provided my favorite quote: "When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."



"Listen completely;" I love that phrase because it goes straight to the heart of what listening is about. You give yourself over to the speaker like you would to a really good movie. In a good movie you lose yourself, and you listen completely. You wrap yourself in the cloak of another world. What a relief and release it is to leave your own familiar world for a while and safely travel into someone else's. Whatever the differences between your world and the movie's world matter little, because your heart is fused to the human similarities. You don't want the story to end. That's the kind of listening I'm talking about.

So what isn't this kind of listening? The early 20th century author Albert Guinon said bad listeners "are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves." Another example of not really listening is a kind of half-listening, our mind being elsewhere as we nod and smile at what we think are appropriate places.

Although there are many ways of not really listening, I'll mention just one more that may not be obvious. It's when we are constantly wondering where the speaker is heading, rather than just going along for the ride. While we're wondering about where the speaker is heading, we have just stepped off the train of thought he or she is on and the speaker is minus a passenger. What can we lose by staying on the train? As Plutarch said, we can profit even from those who speak badly.

Another way of viewing good listening is as an adventurous journey to an undisclosed location. I've learned from my acting experience not to assume or figure out where the speaker is heading. I just leave my usual neighborhood and take a trip with them. When the conversation is good, it's like going on vacation. We extend ourselves toward another and we really listen and respond spontaneously.

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Listening draws us in. At the end of the conversation we are relaxed and enriched by this simple experience. As Hemingway said: We listened completely.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was right. Listening is a privilege of the wise. Although I haven't become wise yet, listening has given me a lot. I have listened in everyday life. I have listened as an actor. I have listened as a psychotherapist. I have listened as a coach. Sometimes I feel I haven't listened at all. That feeling usually comes when I discover something new about this elusive phenomenon called listening.

I've come to the conclusion that listening is hard to pin down because it's God's work. When we listen. When we really listen. When we listen completely, it's like holding a seashell to our ears, where we hear the ocean of our shared humanity.

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