

*The Lost Art
of Listening*

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How Learning to Listen
Can Improve Relationships

SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

Nothing hurts more than the sense that the people we care about aren't really listening. We never outgrow the need to have our feelings known. That's why a sympathetic ear is such a powerful force in human relationships—and why the failure to be understood is so painful.

My ideas about listening have been sharpened by thirty-five years as a psychoanalyst and family therapist. Refereeing arguments between intimate partners, coaching parents to communicate with their children, and struggling myself to sustain empathy as my patients faced their demons has led me to the conclusion that much of the conflict in our lives can be explained by one simple fact: people don't really listen to each other.

Talking without listening is like snipping an electrical cord in half and hoping that somehow something will light up. Most of the time, of course, we don't deliberately set out to break the connection. In fact, we're often baffled and dismayed by feeling left in the dark.

Modern culture has developed conceptions of individualism that picture us finding our own bearings within, declaring independence from the webs of interlocation that formed us. It's as though when we become finished persons we outgrow our need for attention, like training wheels. All this is not to say that we can't be autonomous, in the sense of being self-directing, even original, able to think and act on our own. But we cannot escape the human condition and become secure and satisfied without conversation—conversation in a broad sense, meaning some kind of interchange with others.

Contemporary pressures have, regrettably, shrunk our attention spans and impoverished the quality of listening in our lives. We live in hurried times, when dinner is something you zap in the microwave and keeping up with the latest books and movies means reading the reviews. That's all we've got time for. Running to and from our many obligations, we get a lot of practice in not listening. When we're in the car and the radio is on, sometimes it's interesting and we pay attention, other times we have to concentrate on the road or we get sidetracked with a thought, and minutes go by without our hearing a word of what was said. When we're watching TV and the commercials come on, half the time we don't hear a thing.

We're bombarded with so many images—from television, e-mail, junk mail, the Internet, cell phones, BlackBerrys, iPods, pagers, faxes—that our attention is fractionated. We like to think we're good at multitasking. We check our e-mail while talking on the phone. We look for things to buy in catalogues while watching TV. We fool ourselves into thinking that we can do more than one thing at a time. The truth is that we just end up doing one thing after another poorly.

We've gained unparalleled access to information and lost something very important. We've lost the habit of concentrating our attention. From pop music at the gym to commercials on TV and radio, we're bombarded with so much noise that we've become experts at tuning things out. If a television show doesn't grab our attention in the first two minutes, we change the channel; if we're listening to someone who doesn't get right to something we're interested in, we tune out.

In the limited time we still preserve for family and friends, conversation is often preempted by soothing and passive distractions. Too tired to talk and listen, we settle instead for the lulling charms of electronic devices that project pictures, make music, or bleep across display screens. Is it this way of life that's made us forget how to listen? Perhaps. But maybe the modern approach to life is the effect rather than the cause of the decline of meaningful discourse. Maybe we lead this kind of life because we're seeking some sort of solace, something to counteract the dimming of the spirit we feel when no one is listening.

How we lost the art of listening is certainly a matter for debate. What isn't debatable is that the loss leaves us with an ever-widening hole in our lives. It might take the form of a vague sense of discontent, sadness,

or deprivation. We miss the consolation of lending an attentive ear and of receiving the same in return, but we don't know what's wrong or how to fix it. Over time this lack of listening impoverishes our most important relationships. We hurt each other unnecessarily by failing to acknowledge what the other one has to say. Whatever the arena, our hearts experience the failure to be heard as an absence of concern.

Conflict doesn't necessarily disappear when we acknowledge each other's point of view, but it's almost certain to get worse if we don't. So why don't we take time to hear each other? Because the simple art of listening isn't so simple.

Often it's a burden. Not, perhaps, the perfunctory attention we grant as part of the give-and-take of everyday life. But the sustained attention of careful listening—that takes strenuous and unselfish restraint. To listen well we must forget ourselves and submit to the other person's need for attention.

While some people may be easier to listen to than others, conversations take place between two people, both of whom contribute to the outcome. Unfortunately, when we fail to get through to each other, we have a tendency to fall back on blaming. It's his fault: he's selfish and insensitive. Or it's my fault: I'm too dependent or don't express myself well.

Most failures of understanding are not due to self-absorption or bad faith, but to our own need to say something. We tend to react to what is said, rather than concentrating on what the other person is trying to express. Emotional reactions make us respond without thinking and crowd out understanding and concern. Each of us has characteristic ways of reacting defensively. We don't hear what's said because something in the speaker's message triggers hurt, anger, or impatience.

Unfortunately, all the advice in the world about "active listening" can't overcome the maddening tendency to react defensively to each other. To become better listeners, and to transform our relationships, we must identify and harness the emotional triggers that generate anxiety and cause misunderstanding and conflict.

If this seems too formidable a task, remember that most of us are more capable than we give ourselves credit for. We concentrate pretty hard at work, and most of us still enjoy earnest, open conversation with a few friends. In fact, talking with friends is a model of what conversation can

be: safe enough to talk about what matters, concerned enough to listen, honest enough to tell the truth, and tactful enough to know when not to. More relationships can be like this.

In the process of writing this book, I've tried to become a better listener, in my personal as well as professional life, to listen a little harder to my wife's complaints without getting defensive and to hear my children's opinions before giving my own. However, I've had a few conversations that left me feeling bruised and defeated. My wife would speak sharply to me about not helping out more around the house or not listening to her, and I'd feel attacked; or I'd call my editor one too many times to complain about the burdens of writing and she'd make *me* feel like a burden for complaining; or my friend Rich would call me the part of your anatomy you sit on for acting like I was entitled to some special consideration. Not only didn't I listen at these times—hear and acknowledge what the other person was saying—but I got hurt and angry, and completely unwilling to talk to that person, *ever again, as long as I live.*

I'm sure you know how painful such misunderstandings can be. When my wife “yelled at me,” my editor was “mean to me,” and my friend “picked on me,” I got hurt and withdrew. But what made these incidents especially painful was that just when I thought I was learning to listen better, these setbacks set me all the way back. Instead of just thinking that things hadn't gone well and needed repair, I felt defeated and inadequate. How could I, who couldn't even get along with the people in my own life, have the temerity to write a book about listening? How could I teach anyone anything about communicating?

Maybe you know how that feels. When we try to change something in our lives, whether it's our diet or work habits or listening skills, and we experience a setback, we have a tendency to feel hopeless and give up. Suddenly all the progress we thought we were making seems like an illusion. Maybe if I were reading a book about listening and experienced these setbacks, I would have given up. But since I was *writing* this book, after a while of brooding in hurt silence I'd go back and try to talk to the person I'd quarreled with—only this time with a firm resolve to listen to his or her side before telling mine. In the process, I learned to see how my relationships go through cycles of closeness and distance and, even more important, how I could influence those cycles by the quality of my own listening.

This book is an invitation to think about the ways we talk and listen to each other: why listening is such a powerful force in our lives; how to listen deeply, with sustained immersion in another's experience; and how to prevent good listening from being spoiled by bad habits. Among the secrets of successful communication I'll describe are:

- The difference between real dialogue and just taking turns talking
- Hearing what people mean, not just what they say
- How to get through to someone who never seems to listen
- How to reduce arguments
- How to ask for support without getting unwanted advice
- How to get uncommunicative people to open up
- How to share a difference of opinion without making other people feel criticized
- How to make sure both sides get heard in heated discussions
- How speakers undermine their own messages
- How the nature of relationships affects listening
- How to get people to listen to you

The Lost Art of Listening is divided into four sections. Part I explains why listening is so important in our lives—far more important than we realize—and how, for many people, it's a lack of sympathetic attention, not stress or overwork, that accounts for the loss of enthusiasm and optimism in their lives. Part II explores the hidden assumptions, unconscious needs, and emotional reactions that are the real reasons people don't listen. We'll see what makes listeners too defensive to hear what others are saying and why you may not get heard even though you have something important to say.

After exploring the major roadblocks to listening, I'll examine in Part III how you can understand and control emotional reactivity to become a better listener. And I'll explain how you can make yourself heard, even in the most difficult situations. Finally, in Part IV, I'll explore how listening breaks down in particular types of relationship, including intimate partnerships, family relationships, with children, between friends, and at work. I'll explain how listening is complicated by the dynamics of each of these various relationships and how to use that knowledge to break through to each other.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a set of exercises designed to help you become a better listener. Actually doing these exercises may help transform the passive experience of reading into an active process of improving your ability to listen.

Regardless of how much we take it for granted, the importance of listening cannot be overestimated. The gift of our attention and understanding makes other people feel validated and valued. Our ability to listen, and listen well, creates goodwill that comes back to us. But effective listening is also the best way to enjoy others, to learn from them, and to make them interesting to be with. I hope this book can help take us a step in the direction of showing more of the concern we feel for each other.

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“Did You Hear What I Said?”

Why Listening Is So Important

Sometimes it seems that nobody listens anymore.

“He expects me to listen to his problems, but he never asks about mine.”

“She’s always complaining.”

“The only time I find out what’s going on in his life is when I overhear him telling someone else. Why doesn’t he tell *me* these things?”

“I can’t talk to her because she’s so critical.”

Wives complain that their husbands take them for granted. Husbands complain that their wives nag or take forever to get to the point.

She feels a violation of their connection. He doesn’t trust the connection.

Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood. Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are recognized, and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters.

The yearning to be heard is a yearning to escape our isolation and bridge the space that separates us. We reach out and try to overcome that

separateness by revealing what's on our minds and in our hearts, hoping for understanding. Getting that understanding should be simple, but it isn't.

Joan had seen a suit she'd like to buy for work, but wasn't sure she should spend the money. "Honey," she said, "I saw a really nice suit at the outlet store."

"That's nice," Henry said, and went back to watching the news.

Justin was upset about having had a fender bender, but he was afraid that if he said anything Denise would get on his case about it. So he kept quiet and worried about how he was going to get it fixed. Denise felt Justin's distance and assumed that he was angry at her for something. She didn't feel like having an argument, so she didn't say anything either.

The essence of good listening is empathy, which can be achieved only by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person. Part intuition and part effort, it's the stuff of human connection.

A listener's empathy—grasping what we're trying to say *and showing it*—builds a bond of understanding, linking us to someone who hears us and cares, and thus confirms that our feelings are legitimate and recognizable. The power of empathic listening is the power to transform relationships. When deeply felt but unexpressed feelings take shape in words that are voiced and come back clarified, the result is a reassuring sense of being understood and a grateful feeling of shared humanness with the one who understands.



The art of listening is critical to successful relationships.



If listening strengthens our relationships by cementing our connection with one another, it also fortifies our sense of self. In the presence of a receptive listener, we are able to clarify what we think and discover what we feel. Thus, in giving an account of our experience to someone who listens, we are better able to listen to ourselves. Our lives are defined in dialogue.

It Hurts Not to Be Listened To

The need to be taken seriously and responded to is frustrated every day. Parents complain that their children don't listen. Children complain that their parents are too busy scolding to hear their side of things. Even friends, usually a reliable source of shared understanding, are often too busy to listen to one another these days. And if we sometimes feel cut off from sympathy and understanding in the private sphere, we've grown not even to expect courtesy and attention in public settings.

Our right to be heard is violated in countless ways that we don't always remember, by others who don't always realize. That doesn't make it hurt any less.

When I told a psychiatrist friend that I was collecting experiences on the theme "It hurts not to be listened to," he sent me this example:

"I called a friend and left a message asking if we could meet at a particular time. He didn't answer, and I felt a little anxious and confused. Should I call again to remind him? After all, I know he's busy. Should I wait another day or two and hope he'll answer? Should I not have asked him in the first place? All this leaves me uneasy."

The first thing that struck me about this example was how even a little thing like an unanswered phone message can leave someone feeling unresponded to—and troubled. Then I was really struck—like a slap in the face—by the realization that my friend was talking about me! Suddenly I was embarrassed, and then defensive. The reason I hadn't returned his call—doesn't matter. (We always have reasons for not responding.) What matters is how my failure to respond hurt and confused my friend and that I never had any inkling of it.

If an oversight like that can hurt, how much more painful is it when the subject is of urgent importance to the speaker?



**Listening is so basic that we take it for granted.
Unfortunately, most of us think of ourselves as better
listeners than we really are.**



When you come home from a business trip, eager to tell your partner how it went, and he listens but after a minute or two something in his eyes

goes to sleep, you feel hurt and betrayed. When you call your parents to share a triumph and they don't seem really interested, you feel deflated and perhaps slightly foolish for having allowed yourself to even hope for appreciation.

Just as it hurts not to be listened to when you're excited about something special, it's painful not to feel listened to by someone special, someone you expect to care about you.

Roger's best friend in college was Derek. They were both political science majors and shared a passion for politics. Together they followed every detail of the Watergate investigation, relishing each new revelation as though they were a series of deliciously wicked Charles Addams cartoons. But as much as they took cynical delight in the exposure of corruption in the Nixon White House, their friendship went beyond politics.

Roger remembered the wonderful feeling of talking to Derek for hours, impelled by the momentum of some deep and inexplicable sympathy. There was the pleasure of being able to say anything he wanted and the pleasure of hearing Derek say everything he'd always thought but never expressed. Unlike most of Roger's other friends, Derek wasn't a competitive conversationalist. He really listened.

When they went to graduate schools in different cities, they kept up their friendship. Roger would visit Derek, or Derek would visit Roger, at least once a month. They'd play pool or see a movie and go out for Chinese food; and then afterward, no matter how late it got, they'd stay up talking.

Then Derek got married, and things changed. Derek didn't become distant the way some friends do after one marries, nor did Derek's wife dislike Roger. The distance that Roger felt was a small thing, but it made a big difference.

"It's difficult to describe exactly, but I often end up feeling awkward and disappointed when I speak with Derek. He listens, but somehow he doesn't seem really interested anymore. He doesn't ask questions. He used to be involved rather than just accepting. It makes me sad. I still feel excited about the things going on in my life, but telling Derek just makes me feel unconnected and alone with them."

Roger's lament says something important about listening. It isn't just not being interrupted that we want. Sometimes people appear to be listen-

ing but aren't really hearing. Some people are good at being silent when we talk. Sometimes they betray their lack of interest by glancing around and shifting their weight back and forth. At other times, however, listeners show no sign of inattention, but still we know they aren't really hearing what we have to say. It feels like they don't care.

Derek's passive interest was especially painful to Roger because of the closeness they'd shared. The friends had reached an impasse; Roger couldn't open himself to his friend the way he'd done in the past, and Derek was mystified by the distance that had grown between them.

Friendship is voluntary, and so talking about it is optional. Roger didn't want to complain to Derek or make demands. Besides, how does one friend tell another that he feels no longer cared about? And so Roger never did talk to Derek about feeling estranged. Too bad, because when a relationship goes sour, talking about it may be the only way to make things right again.



It's especially hurtful not to be listened to in those relationships we count on for understanding.



After a while most of us learn to do a pretty good imitation of being grownups and shrug off a lot of slights and misunderstandings. If, in the process, we become a little calloused, well maybe that's the price we pay for getting along in the world. But sometimes not being responded to leaves us feeling so hurt and angry that it can make us retreat from relationships, even for years.

When a woman discovered that her husband was having an affair, she felt as if someone had kicked her in the gut. In her grief and anger, she turned to the person she was closest to—her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law tried to be understanding and supportive, but it was, after all, difficult to listen to the bitter things her daughter-in-law was saying about her son. Still, she tried. Apparently, however, the support she offered wasn't enough. Eventually the crisis passed and the couple reconciled, but the daughter-in-law, feeling that her mother-in-law hadn't been there when she needed her most, never spoke to her again.

The mother-in-law in this sad story was baffled by her daughter-in-

law's stubborn silence. Other people's reactions often seem unreasonable to us. What makes their reactions reasonable to them is feeling wounded by a lack of responsiveness.

To listen is to pay attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved . . . appreciate. Listening is so central to human existence as to often escape notice; or, rather, it appears in so many guises that it's seldom recognized as the overarching need that it is. Sometimes, as Roger, the estranged daughter-in-law, and so many others have discovered, we don't realize how important being listened to is until we feel cheated out of it.

Once in a while, however, we become aware of how much it means to be listened to. You can't decide whether or not to take a new job, and so you call an old friend to talk it over. She doesn't tell you what to do, but the fact that she listens, really listens, helps you see things more clearly. Another time you're just getting to know someone but you like him so much that, after a wonderful dinner in a restaurant, you take a risk and ask him over for coffee. When he says, "No thanks, I've got to get up early," you feel rejected. Convinced that he doesn't like you, you start avoiding him. After a few days, however, he asks you what's wrong, and once again you take a risk and tell him that your feelings were hurt. To your great relief, instead of arguing, he listens and accepts what you have to say. "I can see how you might have felt that way, but actually I would like to see you again."

Why can't it always be that way? I speak, you listen. It's that simple, isn't it? Unfortunately, it isn't. Talking and listening creates a unique relationship in which speaker and listener are constantly switching roles, both jockeying for position, each one's needs competing with the other's. If you doubt it, try telling someone about a problem you're having and see how long it takes before he interrupts to describe a similar experience of his own or to offer advice—advice that may suit him more than it does you.

A man in therapy was exploring his relationship with his distant father when he suddenly remembered the happy times they'd spent together playing with his electric trains. It was a Lionel set that had been his father's and grandfather's before him. Caught up in the memory, the man grew increasingly excited as he recalled the pride he'd felt in sharing this family

tradition with his father. As the man's enthusiasm mounted, the therapist launched into a long narrative about *his* train set and how he had gotten the other kids in the neighborhood to bring over their tracks and train cars to build a huge neighborhood setup in his basement. After the therapist had gone on at some length, the patient could no longer contain his anger about being cut off. "Why are you telling me about *your* trains?!" he demanded. The therapist hesitated; then, with that level, impersonal voice we reserve for confiding something intimate, he said lamely, "I was just trying to be friendly."



**It takes two people to share a feeling—one to talk
and one to listen.**



The therapist had made an all-too-common mistake (actually he'd made several, but this is Be Kind to Therapists Week). He assumed that sharing his own experience was the equivalent of empathy. In fact, though, he switched the focus to himself, making his patient feel discounted, misunderstood, unappreciated. That's what hurt.

As is often the way with words that become familiar, *empathy* may not adequately convey the power of appreciating the inner experience of another person. Empathic listening is like the close reading of a poem; it takes in the words and gets to what's behind them. The difference is that while empathy is actively imaginative, it is fundamentally receptive rather than creative. When we attend to a work of art, our idiosyncratic response has its own validity, but when we attend to someone who's trying to tell us something, it's understanding, not creativity, that counts.

Bearing Witness

Listening has not one but two purposes: taking in information and bearing witness to another's experience. By momentarily stepping out of his or her own frame of reference and into ours, the person who really listens acknowledges and affirms us. That validation is essential for sustaining the confirmation known as self-respect. Without being listened to, we are shut up in the solitude of our own hearts.

A thirty-six-year-old woman was so unnerved by a minor incident that she wondered if she needed psychotherapy. Marnie, who was executive vice-president of a public policy institute, had arranged a meeting with the lieutenant governor to present a proposal she'd developed involving the regulation of a large state industry. Of necessity she'd invited her boss to the meeting, although she would have been able to make a more effective presentation without him. The boss, in turn, had invited the institute's chief lobbyist, who would later have to convince legislators of the need for the proposed regulation. The meeting began, as Marnie expected, with her boss rambling on in a loose philosophical discussion that circled but never quite got to the point. When he finished, he turned not to Marnie but to the lobbyist to present the proposal. Marnie was stunned. The lobbyist began to speak, and fifteen minutes later the meeting ended without Marnie's ever having gotten to say a word—about *her* proposal.

Marnie couldn't wait to tell her husband what had happened. Unfortunately he was in Europe and wouldn't be back for three days. She was used to her husband's business trips; what she wasn't used to was how cut off she felt. She really needed to talk to him. As the evening wore on, Marnie's disappointment grew and then changed character. Instead of simply feeling frustrated, she began to feel inadequate. Why was she so dependent on her husband? Why couldn't she handle her own emotions?

Marnie decided that her problem was insecurity. If she were more secure, she wouldn't need anyone so much. She wouldn't be so vulnerable; she'd be self-sufficient.

Marnie's complaint—the unexpected urgency to be heard—and her conclusion, that if she'd developed more self-esteem growing up, she wouldn't need to depend so much on other people's responsiveness, is a common one. Needing someone to respond to us tempts us to believe that if we were stronger we wouldn't need other people so much. That way they wouldn't be able to disappoint us so much.

Being listened to does help us grow up feeling secure; but, contrary to what some people would like to believe, we never become whole and complete, finished products, like a statue or a monument. On the contrary, like any living thing, human beings require nourishment not only to grow up strong but also to maintain their strength and vitality. Listening nourishes our sense of worth.

The more insecure we are, the more reassurance we need. But all of us, no matter how secure and well adjusted, need attention to sustain us. In case this isn't immediately evident, all you need to do is note how we all have our own preferred ways of announcing our news. If my wife has news, for example, she's likely to call me at work or tell me as soon as she gets home. If she has something to say, she says it. Not me. If I have good news, I hoard it, save it up to announce with a fanfare—dying to be made a fuss over.

I once worked for months trying to land a book contract. My wife knew I was working on the book, but I didn't let her know that a contract was imminent. Waiting and hoping, and trying not to let myself hope for too much, I had extravagant fantasies about getting good news—no, about sharing it. Telling my wife would be the payoff. What I didn't want to do was simply tell her; I wanted—I needed—my announcement to be a big deal. The day the contract finally arrived I was ecstatic. But the best part was looking forward to telling my wife. So I called her at work and told her I had a surprise for her: I was taking her out for a fancy dinner. She said fine and didn't ask any questions. (She's only known me for thirty years.)

By the time I got home, my wife had changed into a silk dress and was ready to go out. She could tell I was excited, but she waited patiently to find out why. At the restaurant, I ordered a bottle of champagne, and when it came she asked, still patient, "Do you have something to tell me?" I pulled out my contract and presented it with all the *savoir faire* of a ten-year-old showing off his report card. She saw what it was and her face lit up with a huge grin. That look—her love and pride—was indescribably sweet. My own smile was wet with tears.

What elaborate lengths we go to for such moments! Those of us who feel the need to arrange special occasions for our announcements share a good deal with those who don't need to calculate so. The period of time during which we're waiting to tell our news is charged with anxious anticipation. We can feel the tension building. The tension has to do with an aroused impulse—to confess or confront or show off or propose—to make an impact on another person and be responded to. The excitement comes from hope for a positive response; the anxiety comes from fear of rejection or indifference.

Whom you choose to tell what says something about your relationship to yourself—and to the other people in your life. Your presentation of self involves pride and shame—and whom you choose to share them with. With whom do you feel safe to cry? To complain? To rage? To brag? To confess something truly shameful?



A good listener is a witness, not a judge of your experience.



As soon as you're able to say what's on your mind—and be heard and acknowledged—you are unburdened. It's like having an ache suddenly relieved. If this completion comes quickly, as it often does in day-to-day conversations, you may hardly be aware of your need for understanding. But the disappointment you feel when you're not heard and the tension you feel waiting and hoping to be heard are signs of how important being listened to is. There are times when all that can be thought must be spoken and heard, communicated and shared, when ignorance and silence are pain, and to speak is to try to alleviate that pain.

"Guess What!"

Remember the last time something really wonderful happened to you. Do you remember waiting to tell someone? Whom did you choose and how did it work out?

Being Heard Means Being Taken Seriously

The need to be heard, which is something we ordinarily take for granted, turns out to be one of the most powerful motives in human nature. Being listened to is the medium through which we discover ourselves as understandable and acceptable—or not. We care about the people who listen to us. We may even love them. But, for a time at least, we use them.

When we're activated by the need for appreciation, we relate to others as *selfobjects*, psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's telling expression for a responsive other, someone we relate to not as an independent person with his or her own agenda but as someone-there-for-us.¹

¹Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

Perhaps the idea of using listeners as selfobjects reminds you of those bores who are always talking about themselves and don't seem to care about what you have to say. When they listen, their hearts aren't in it. They're only waiting to change the subject back to themselves.

This lack of appreciation can be especially painful when it occurs between us and our parents. It's maddening when they can't seem to let us be people in our own right, individuals with legitimate ideas and aspirations. Watching our parents listen to other people right in front of us can be especially aggravating. Why don't they show *us* a little of that attention? Here's the writer Harold Brodkey in *The Runaway Soul* dramatizing this irritating experience through the conversation of a young woman and her boyfriend. The boyfriend speaks first:

"Does your dad ever listen, or does he just do monologues?"

"He just does monologues. Doesn't he let you talk?"

"Only if I insist on it. Then we do alternate monologues."

"Well, that's it, then. He talks to you more than he does to me now."

Of course the woman's father talks to her boyfriend more than he does to her. The boyfriend is a fresh audience, new blood.

The people who hurt us most are invariably the ones with whom we think we have a special relationship, who make us feel that our attention and understanding are particularly important to them—until we see how easily they shift their interest to someone else. Right in the middle of confiding in us, they'll catch someone else's eye and break off to talk to that person. We discover that what we thought was an understanding shared only with us is something they've told a dozen people. So much for our special status as confidants! What's so hurtful about these promiscuous "intimates" isn't that they use us, but that they rob us of the feeling that we're important to them, that we're special.

Although none of us likes to see (especially in ourselves) the kind of blatant narcissism that disregards the feelings of others, the truth is, much of the time we're all hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. The subject of narcissism turns out to be crucial in exploring the art of listening. I mention it here only to note that one aspect of our need for other people is entirely selfish. Being listened to maintains our narcissistic equilibrium—or, to put it more simply, it helps us feel good about ourselves.

When Roxanne and her parents finished unloading the car, she felt a sinking sensation and was conscious for the first time of all the things she didn't have. Anxiously she watched as the other students and their families trooped into the dormitory, loaded down with beautiful pillows and down comforters, iPods and DVDs, straightening rods, laptops, tennis rackets, and lacrosse sticks. Roxanne had never even seen a lacrosse stick. By the time her parents drove off, leaving her standing alone in front of South Hall, her excitement about starting college had given way to dread.

Roxanne never did get over her sense of isolation that first year. Everyone else seemed to make friends so easily. Not her. She called home a lot and tried to tell her parents how awful it was. But they said "Don't worry, honey; everybody's a little lonesome at first," and "You should make more friends," and "Maybe you just have to study a little harder." If only it were that easy!



Reassuring someone isn't the same as listening.



By the first of December Roxanne was skipping classes, missing meals, and crying herself to sleep. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she made an appointment at the counseling center.

Roxanne was surprised when the therapist said to call her Noreen. She wasn't used to that kind of openness in adults. Noreen turned out to be the most sympathetic person Roxanne had ever met. She didn't tell Roxanne what to do or analyze her feelings; she just listened. For Roxanne, it was a new experience.

With Noreen's help, Roxanne was able to get through that first year and the three years that followed. Noreen helped her discover that her feelings of insecurity stemmed from never feeling really loved by her parents. Roxanne had always thought they were pretty good parents, but she could see now that they never actually knew her very well. Her father was always busy, and her mother never really took her seriously as a person.

Eventually Noreen convinced Roxanne that she would never be free of her anger—and vulnerability to depression—until she worked things out with her parents. When Roxanne agreed, Noreen suggested that she get in touch with me for a few family therapy sessions.

Roxanne and her parents arrived separately for our first meeting, and although they were all smiling, the three of them seemed as wary as cats

circling a snake. I had suggested to Roxanne over the phone that we go slow in this first meeting, that she try not to unload the full weight of her anger on her parents but rather search for some common ground. But that wasn't the truth about what she was feeling, and the truth was what she was after. She started in on her father. When she was little, she'd loved him, she said, but as she got older she increasingly saw him as ridiculous and irrelevant. (He worked hard, had a crew cut, voted Republican, and was a patriot. Almost nothing in his life caused him second thoughts.) After listening to his daughter's ungenerous assessment, Roxanne's father said, "So that's how you see me?" and then retreated into silence, his own brand of armor.

Then Roxanne turned to her mother. She called her "shallow," "phony," and—the cruelest thing a child can say to a mother—"interested only in yourself." Roxanne's mother tried to listen but couldn't. "That's not true!" she protested. "Why do you have to exaggerate everything?" This only infuriated Roxanne more, and the two of them lashed back and forth at each other with increasingly shrill voices.

I tried to calm them down but wasn't very successful. Roxanne was hell-bent on communicating—not talking, that old-fashioned process of give-and-take, but communicating—that important development where one insistent family member imparts some critical information to the others, confronting them with "the truth" whether they want to hear it or not. Roxanne's mother left the session in tears.

The following week I met with Roxanne alone. She was sorry the meeting hadn't gone better but was glad to have gotten her feelings out. She thought her mother had shown herself to be the unaccepting person Roxanne knew her to be. They weren't on speaking terms, and that was just fine with Roxanne.

Six months later, much to my surprise, Roxanne called to say that she and her parents wanted to come for another meeting. This time the conversation was friendly but superficial. Roxanne complimented her mother on her shoes and asked about her younger sister. Her mother asked Roxanne how she was doing. Had she gotten over all that bitterness? Roxanne, feeling once again patronized and dismissed, tried to avoid reacting but couldn't. Furiously, she accused her mother of not really being interested in how she was feeling and caring only about polite formalities. My heart sank. But this time Roxanne's mother didn't react angrily or cut her daughter off. She didn't say much, but she didn't interrupt to defend her-

self either. What enabled her to listen to her daughter's angry accusations this time? I don't know. But she did.

One of a mother's heaviest burdens is being the target of her children's primitive swings between need and rage. The rage is directed at the hand that rocks the cradle no matter how loving its care. It's part of breaking away. Roxanne's mother seemed to sense this, seemed to remember that her daughter was still a little girl in some ways.

Roxanne seemed to expect retaliation from her mother. But when it wasn't forthcoming, she calmed down considerably. She had wanted, it seemed, only to be heard.

After that, Roxanne's relationship with her family changed dramatically. Previously limited to monologues or muteness, they entered into dialogue. Roxanne phoned and wrote. She shared confidences with her mother. Not always, of course, and not always successfully, but Roxanne had become more open to her mother as a person, rather than perceiving her simply as a mother, who was somehow supposed to make everything right. She, in turn, became less a child and more a young woman, ready for life on her own.

Roxanne's unfulfilled need to be listened to had cut her off from other people and filled her with resentment. Unburdening herself was like breaking down a wall that had kept her from feeling connected to other people. That her feelings were somewhat infantile says only that they were a long time unspoken. Talking to Noreen, who didn't have a stake in defending herself, helped Roxanne find her voice.

That second meeting with Roxanne and her parents had produced one of those moments that happen once in a while in families, when someone says something and everything shifts. Only it wasn't what Roxanne said that caused the shift; she'd said it all before. It was that her mother put aside her own claims to being right and just listened.

When we learn to hear the unspoken feelings beneath someone's anger or impatience, we discover the power to release the bitterness that keeps people apart. With a little effort, we can hear the hurt behind expressions of hostility, the resentment behind avoidance, and the vulnerability that makes people afraid to speak or truly listen. When we understand the healing power of listening, we can even begin to listen to things that make us uncomfortable.

Being heard means being taken seriously. It satisfies our need for self-expression and our need to feel connected to others. The receptive listener allows us to express what we think and feel. Being heard and acknowledged helps us clarify both the thoughts and the feelings, in the process firming our sense of ourselves. By affirming that we are understandable, the listener helps confirm our common humanity. Not being listened to makes us feel ignored and unappreciated, cut off and alone. The need to be known, to have our experience understood and accepted by someone who listens, is food and drink to the human heart.

Without a sufficient amount of sympathetic understanding in our lives, we're haunted by an amorphous unease that leaves us anxious and lonely. Such feelings are hard to tolerate, and so we seek solace in passive escapism; we snap on the TV, treat ourselves to Ben and Jerry's, or escape into popular fiction about people whose lives are exciting. There is, of course, nothing wrong with relaxing. But why do we turn on the TV even when there's nothing to watch? And why do we feel restless without the car radio playing, even when it's just noise?

We usually associate passive escapism with release from stress. While it's true that many of us feel used up at the end of the day, it may not be overwork that wears us down, but a lack of understanding in our lives. Chief among the missing elements is the attention and appreciation of responsive selfobjects, people who care and listen to us with interest. When the quality of our relationships isn't sufficient to maintain our equilibrium and enthusiasm—or when we're not up to making them so—we seek escape from morbid self-consciousness. We seek stimulation, excitement, responsiveness, gratification—the same kinds of feelings that can be had from a heart-to-heart talk with someone we care about. But without the ballast of someone to talk to, some of us will continue to drown out the silence, as though without some kind of electronic entertainment to distract us, we may hear the low rumblings of despair.

Exercises

1. Who is the best listener you know? What makes that person a good listener? (Not interrupting? Asking interested questions? Acknowledging what you've said?) What is being with that person like?

What can you learn from that person that would make you a better listener?

2. What do you hesitate to talk to your partner about? Why? What happens to those withheld thoughts and feelings? What are the consequences of that withholding for you? For the relationship?
3. If you improved the way you listen, who would you want to notice? What conversations would you like to go differently?
4. If people think you aren't listening to them, what will they assume it means? What will this lead to?
5. If people think you are listening to them, what will they assume it means? What will this lead to?
6. The next time something is really bothering you, notice how you feel about wanting to talk with someone. Does something hold you back? What do you worry about? If you do share your feelings with someone, what happens?