Thoughts About Listening

“I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

Conventional wisdom has it that 15 to 20 billion years ago the blank page of the universe exploded and our story began. I’m referring, of course, to the big bang—which is really something of a misnomer, because the conditions for sound didn’t arise until at least a billion years later and the condition for ears for a considerable time after that.

Think of your ear as the brain’s antenna—as part of the brain poking out into the world, always on, always scanning for information. Millions of years in the land of mammals have shaped up a superb acoustic warning system—one that allows us to track the size, distance, and direction of everything from a mosquito to a jet plane. This is as it should be, because we lived as hunter-gatherers for a long, long time. It’s no accident that we can sleep through a raging storm but awaken to the faintest creak of a floorboard or the snapping of a twig.

But what we hear is a tiny fraction of what we are able to hear, which is a tiny fraction of what there is to be heard.

We tend to think of speaking as the active form of communication and listening as the passive. Actually, almost the opposite is true. It is in listening that meaning is created, and the meaning that is created is the listener’s, not the speakers’.

It’s said that human beings evolve only as fast as their language evolves. There’s no great mystery about evolving language: it involves saying new and intelligent things to one another. But that process begins not with speaking, it begins with listening; it begins with checking and examining the accuracy of the meaning we as listeners create—and checking it not merely with the voice in our heads but with the person with whom we are in conversation, the person sending the message.

It is essential to remember that meaning is created. It does not exist in the abstract, any more than a beginning exists in the abstract. Meaning does not come in pre-formed, coin-sized denominations. To get at the meaning of what’s being said—what’s being heard—we need constantly to run it to the ground—to hold it still long enough so that speaker and listener can agree that “yes, that’s what is meant,” that is the “meaning” we both understand, the meaning we can both stand under and look at, together.

Doing this takes a lot of practice because, contrary to popular belief, we do not think before we speak. Speaking is a form that thinking takes. Said differently, the speaking is the thinking. Indeed, speaking, along with writing, are the two principle ways open to
our species of determining (and looking at) thought and meaning, of constituting thought and meaning.

Active listening, as opposed to merely hearing, is a skill. It is a type of listening where one is willing to be modified by another’s words.

Strategies for Active Listening:

1) Pay attention to the meaning of what the other speaker is saying; pay attention to the body language.

2) Let no meaning escape you: clarify, summarize, and paraphrase.

3) When you notice that your mind has wandered, instantly return your attention to the speaker’s meaning and body language. Do this as often as necessary.

We speak at a rate of 200 wpm but we can process information at 300 to 500 wpm, and it’s this lag time that can lead us to think about something else.

Remember--

a) to keep your focus on reality, and

b) that thinking is a verb, thought is a noun

4) Do not rehearse your next remark. Trust your body to make the appropriate response at the appropriate time. Said differently, pay attention to what you say as you say it, not before.

Barriers to listening to be on the lookout for

1. Stylistic
   - Faking listening
   - Interrupting
   - Listening only with your head

2. External

3. Physical
   - Fatigue
   - Time-lag factor

4. Semantic--we commonly use about 500 words in our core vocabulary, but since
each has between 20 and 25 meanings, two people can use 500 words with the possibility of over 12,000 different meanings.

5. Internal. Remember to differentiate between reality and experience: the former is external, the latter is internal.