What It Means to Be a Man

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Chapter 11
LISTEN

In today’s hyper distracting environment, listening seems to be one of the hardest and least employed skills that we possess. The competition for attention can be overwhelming at times. When coupled with an ego that believes you can multitask and still perform every task successfully, it makes for a great deal of nonlistening. Maybe this is why the general population is experiencing an epidemic of suicides. The electronic isolation caused by the constant interface with a smart phone rather than someone standing right next to you is profoundly disturbing. So many people today walk around in groups or gather to eat and totally ignore each other. Some are texting, while others are listening to something with earphones inserted. None are involved in one of the most basically satisfying events that we, as humans, can participate in—a face-to-face conversation where each side is actively listening and contributing to the discussion appropriately.¹ This skill

¹ For the purposes of this discussion, the term active listening refers to when you listen attentively to a speaker, understand what they are saying, respond and
is older than recorded history. It may even predate coherent language among humans because it is something we all need so deeply. With the growth of technology and all the methods for diverting one’s attention, is active listening a lost skill?

Part of the problem may be that listening, truly listening instead of thinking about what we will say next or something else entirely, is hard to do. We generally have so many things on our minds, and so little of the mental discipline required to shut out distractions and focus on the person speaking, that we have become seriously deficient listeners. As Joseph McCormack explained in *Noise*, “Few people know how to listen well, or even care to learn. It’s tough on so many fronts. We’re super busy, generally distracted, and more concerned about our own thoughts, perspectives, and plans. Who has the time and mental energy to listen actively and deeply to someone else? It’s draining to listen.”

Maybe it is better to say that we are handicapped by distractions and a lack of focus. We are encumbered by an impatience that leads to interrupting the person we are talking to because we cannot wait to voice our own thoughts. We are largely incapable of performing one of the oldest, and perhaps most important, skills that humans have developed and used since we first started communicating with each other verbally. It is a skill as old as time and one that is required for peace of mind. As the “Father of the Field of Listening” Dr. Ralph G. Nichols once said, “The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.”

reflect on what is being said, and retain the information for later. This keeps the listener and the speaker engaged in the conversation. See Hilary I. Lebow, “Become a Better Listener: Active Listening,” PsychCentral, 27 September 2021.


The truth of the matter is that listening is one of the most important things we can do to help those in our lives, as sometimes simply listening to them is enough to alleviate their troubled mind. Genuinely listening shows others that we care about them, and we never have to say a word because actions speak much louder. The sense of connection that develops between two human beings who are having a deep and respectful discussion is mesmerizing for anyone participating and even for those watching it. Maybe that is why talk radio and daytime talk shows on television are so popular. Listening is also one of the sincerest forms of respect that we can offer to one another. When people get respect from those around them, they feel better about themselves, which can lift their mood better than anything else. Listening has certainly saved the lives of those who were contemplating suicide. The mere fact that someone stopped what they were doing and listened to a troubled person cut the chain of events that had the person tumbling down a steep mental slope with suicide at the bottom of it.

My wife and I are inveterate dog lovers. During the course of our marriage, we have had dogs for 26 of the 34 years we have been married. Our current dog, Ali, is a Catahoula Leopard and Australian Shepherd mix. She is just shy of being a puppy and so full of energy that she can be a lot to handle. The challenges she presents are more than worth it though, because dogs are the best listeners. They are always present in the moment and are so obvious in their devotion and affection that it is truly heartwarming. It is no wonder that they are so prevalent as service and emotional support animals, providing comfort to those with disabilities of all kinds.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an explosion of dog adoptions and purchases because people had more time on their hands.⁴

While not everyone will keep their dogs’ long term, unfortunately, I hope most will. Dogs love and listen unconditionally, which is likely why they are so popular as pets despite the downsides of ownership: shedding hair, chewing on everything, barking incessantly, “accidents” in the house, allergies, and many others. Why would we tolerate this if they were not such good companions? Dogs listen with their whole heart; you can see this in their eyes. They look at you with an expression that leaves you with the impression that you are the smartest and most wonderful person in the world. They never interrupt you by cutting you off to tell you their problems and, most importantly, they never betray a confidence. Maybe humans should try to be more like dogs.

Listening is beneficial in another way, because we learn a great deal more by listening than by talking. The Dalai Lama believes that “when you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. When you listen, you may learn something new.” Taking in information and synthesizing it to determine its usefulness are silent acts. Despite how much we believe we can multitask and be incredibly efficient with the use of our time, this is a myth brought on by our own ego. We tell ourselves that we excel at multitasking despite abundant evidence that we actually do not. Instead of giving someone our undivided attention, we give each task only part of our attention. Since listening and thinking about what is being said takes enormous concentration and self-discipline to do properly, anything short of undivided attention means we are not really listening. Without really listening, what the person you are interacting with, however inadequately, is saying becomes noise. Listening is largely a silent act. Maybe that is why *listen* is spelled with the same letters as the word *silent*.

George Washington personified good listening skills. He was not necessarily a great speaker, because he was always conscious of the

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5 For more on the teachings of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, see “Training the Mind,” DalaiLama.com, accessed 15 August 2022.
Figure 22. Ali Mullen, Catahoula Leopard/Australian Shepherd mix
Source: courtesy of the author.
limits of his own education, especially when compared with many of the other Founding Fathers. He knew how to listen though. This incredible skill was best illustrated in 1787 when he attended the Philadelphia convention that formed the U.S. Constitution as we know it today. He had enormous prestige due to all he had endured leading colonial forces to victory during the Revolutionary War and was elected president of the convention shortly after it convened that summer. The convention was assembled with the idea of modifying the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, which had been guiding the governance of the United States since their adoption in 1777 and later ratification in 1781. They made for a weak government that could not pay its bills and allowed each of the 13 original states to forge their own path. It did not work. Instead of making tweaks to the articles, the convention, in secret, scrapped them to form something else—the Constitution of the United States, which has been the governing document since ratification and enactment in 1789.6

Throughout the long, hot summer of 1787, the framers worked in secret in Carpenters’ Hall (now known as Independence Hall) in Philadelphia. Throughout the debate, tempers flared in the miserable conditions. George Washington sat at the head table in the hall quietly listening and only weighing in when absolutely required. Each time he did so, it was clear his attention was focused solely on the proceedings, much as you would see with the captain of a ship that only need-

Figure 23. George Washington, ca. 1796
Source: Gilbert Stuart, oil on canvas, in the open collection of the Brooklyn Museum.
ed slight course corrections on occasion but was generally heading in the right direction. His role was recognized as indispensable by those who attended, which was made evident by the fact that he was drafted to become the first U.S. president and won the election unanimously without wanting or campaigning for the position.\(^7\) He truly was the father of our country.

We must also remember that there is a difference between listening and hearing. Hearing refers to passively taking in what someone else is saying. Body language and facial expressions add to the whole picture of what someone is trying to communicate. Going back to the topic of dogs, the fact that they do this innately is probably why they seem almost telepathic at times. They focus on “reading” their owner. They see things that people are not conscious of and react accordingly. This is one of the reasons why they assign service dogs to epileptics; they can sense an episode and provide early warning and support because they are so attentive to the signs their owner gives off, most of which are invisible to humans. The same is likely true of character, because dogs tend to be a good judge of character too. Did you ever notice how dogs react to certain people, even avoiding or responding aggressively to some? There is usually a good reason for this reaction.\(^8\)

Active listening is the best form of taking in information and requires the most self-discipline. Active listening requires taking in every aspect of the person talking to you—words, expressions, body language, etc.—and offering supportive comments that encourage them to continue talking or asking guiding questions that enable them to explore areas where they may have been previously unwilling to go. How many times have we met someone who is genuinely good at active lis-

\(^7\) See John R. Vile, “Constitutional Convention of 1787,” First Amendment Encyclopedia, Middle Tennessee State University, 2009.

tening and came away from the experience with the thought that they were one of the nicest people? Sometimes, we do not realize that we have not learned much about them, but they know all about us because they drew it out by active listening. Having others think about us in the same terms because of our ability to actively listen is something to aspire to. Change consultant Dr. Jonathan H. Westover describes a similar experience:

Years ago, as a young college student trying to learn the ropes and figure out my path in life, I found myself in the office of an older, very sage professor, seeking advice. I was contemplating switching majors (again!), but the university didn’t then offer the specific program I was seeking. This professor, who became a dear mentor to me, sat there and patiently listened as I expressed my scattered, naïve, probably incoherent thoughts. Instead of offering any specific advice, he simply listened intently, only speaking at times to restate something I had said in order to confirm understanding or to ask a thought-provoking question. As I left that brief meeting, I was amazed by the clarity I had regarding my conundrum and how to move forward. My questions and concerns had been heard, I felt understood, I felt genuine compassion and caring, and I felt empowered to make my decision. Upon further reflection, I realized that I experienced firsthand the power of listening.9

This is the type of power that can and does change lives. It makes us better human beings because we are participating in one of the oldest and most valuable human activities. We cannot lose this skill amid the distractions caused by all the other activities in our lives. To en-

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sure we do not lose it, we have to deliberately choose—there is that word again—to listen. We have to make time to listen and demonstrate the mental discipline to close off all other distractions and focus on listening. Consider how good it feels when we are listened to and extend that consideration to others. Time spent actively listening is never wasted time.

One last consideration—and back to Epictetus again—who purportedly said that we should take a tip from nature: we have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.10

Questions to Consider

1. Do you believe you are effective at multitasking?
2. Do you have the ability, patience, and self-discipline to focus on one important thing at a time?
3. Do you have the ability to actively listen to someone and actually hear what they are saying as they are saying it?

Suggested Further Study


The story of how the Constitution of the United States of America was created is not well known, but it is so important to understanding the foundation of our country—the compromises that were necessary, the resistance, and how they eventually got the country to accept it. As truly amazing as that piece of paper and the bill of rights that accompany it are, this solid foundation is

10 Ancient and modern proverbs abound on this topic and, though it is frequently attributed to Epictetus, there is no documentation as yet supporting that theory.
the reason why this country held together and became what it is today.


I love reading about dogs and this title is a very good one for helping humans understand them better.