**THE LOST ART OF LISTENING**

Let me tell you a true story about listening. Two men were sitting next to each other on a flight across the United States. One was from a rich Texan oil family. He loved mountaineering and also loved talking about it. So he regaled the other man with stories of the mountains he had climbed and the views he had got from them all flight long. As the plane came into land, he then said to the other man: ‘*Sorry, I didn’t ask your name.*’ To which the other said: ‘*Hi, pleased to meet you. I’m Neil Armstrong*’.

Sometimes it pays to listen to what the other one has to say. Especially those who don’t say very much.

If our culture is becoming angrier and more polarised, there will be many reasons for it. But one usually not remarked on is the lost art of listening. We are all so busy telling our own stories and pulling the conversation back to us when we lose the floor that we aren’t listening properly to what we are being told. Without that simple commitment, we can’t show empathy to another person. Without empathy, the other person is not affirmed. Without affirmation, a person either withdraws into themselves or they get angry and start to voice this. And when they are still not listened to, the withdrawal or the anger intensifies.

Social media, an invention that was supposed to bring us closer together, has had mixed results. There’s a lot to cheer, but too much to mourn for comfort. Social media is a platform on which we do the talking, not the listening. What happens online starts to impact on behaviour offline and the whole thing becomes a vicious circle.

I used to think I was a good listener. It is part of my role, listening to people talk. I’ve done a lot of it over the last three decades of ministry. And being an introvert, was convinced I must be good at it because usually other people are doing the talking. But I suspect the skill of listening is a bit like hearing loss. Once it starts to go, the whole process is so slow and subtle that you don’t realise you’ve lost capacity until you find a way of measuring it.

In 2020 I found a way of measuring my listening. Here, in this book by New York Times journalist Kate Murphy. And I now know I’ve fallen short. I mentioned this book to a New Yorker once and she said to me: *that figures; no-one listens to anyone in New York*. The practice of hearing another person out has fallen into disuse in our shouty, polarised, dogmatic culture, and not just in the Big Apple. But skills can be re-learned, especially when we have critical reflectors like Kate Murphy to help us.

I’ve picked twelve things out of this book to share today, among lots of pieces of wisdom. And in case you think I’ve just copied my homework, what I’m about to say is divided up into two parts. Each heading comes from Kate Murphy. What follows is my commentary.

1. *If we show signs we are not listening to the other person, they will curtail their story.*

Listening requires curiosity. Attentive listeners get more information and relevant detail out of the other person. As Murphy, who works for the New York Times said: *The most valuable lesson I have learned as a journalist is that everyone is interesting if you ask the right questions.* To put it more negatively, pastoral care is not served if people feel they must hurry their story to an end to satisfy us. I can’t be alone in having the experience that I must rush what I’m saying because the other person doesn’t look interested. It’s really demoralising.

1. *People often disclose their deeper worries to the people they know less well.*

Research suggests that the most energising conversations tend to be had with strangers. The feel-good brain chemical, Dopamine, is released when we have chance encounters because our brains are wired to feel more alive in unfamiliar situations. That looks a lot like Jesus’ one to ones in John’s Gospel to me. People he meets on the road who then follow him on the Way because he gave them the time of day. But we also draw on our biases in dealing with strangers, which can inhibit conversation. We size them up quickly, and often wrongly, thus closing off why God might have brought us to them.

1. *It takes much longer to speak than to think, so our minds race off when we are listening to someone.*

The ‘bandwidth’ available when listening to someone needs to be fully used to concentrate, but we easily get diverted to think about unrelated things and miss half of what they are saying. I can’t be alone in having had mental holidays in the middle of conversations that leave me floundering. We shouldn’t always beat ourselves up over this. Tiredness and anxiety make us distracted. We also get caught up in thinking what to say next, especially if we fear silences. One reason introverts are not good listeners just because they are introverts is because their minds are often full of thoughts that are not being articulated. That can crowd out the capacity to listen.

1. *We should listen for evidence we might be wrong, not just for reasons to disagree with someone.*

As Kate Murphy says: *Good listeners have negative capability. They are more able to cope with contradictory ideas and grey areas. Good listeners know there is usually more to the story than first appears and are not so eager for tidy reasoning and immediate answers.*

This is the root of creativity as it leads to new ways of thinking about things. And it is especially frustrating when you sense the other person wants to sum you up and write you off by telling your story back to you on their terms.

1. *The ability to pick up intricate clues through intense listening is a deep skill*

There is a complexity in listening linked to how we hear certain words and ideas. We need to be aware of how we might react in these situations as it is easy to jump to the wrong conclusion. As Murphy says: *We incorrectly assume other people’s logic and motivations resemble our own. But, of course, they have different backstories and baggage.*

That is especially important in listening to people who do not share our faith, or who express their faith differently to us. One way the task of evangelism can be blunted is by assuming we know what the other person is thinking just by how they are talking.

1. *We should be aware of our own inner voice and how it affects us*

Our inner voices often echo those we heard in childhood, including in their tone. Listening to our inner voice is something many of us avoid because downtime brings us face to face with problems that need fixing. The more people we listen to, the more variety of inner voices we will cultivate. And when we are stressed, there is sometimes no clear blue water between the inner voice and the voice of God. We pin the nagging, the judging, the guilt-inducing inner voice on God, with bad consequences not just for us, but those we talk about God with.

1. *Beware conversational narcissism*

Looking for opportunities to turn the conversation round to us corrodes friendship. Where two do it in conversation it leads to each talking over the other – using the other person’s words as a springboard to tell them something better or more interesting that’s happened to us, so that it becomes a competition. We’ve all seen it, and we’ve all done it. And it’s not pretty. On the other hand, open ended questions allows the other person to take control rather than us wresting it from them and allow for greater depth and self-disclosure.

1. *People aren’t usually looking for solutions from us, but for a sounding board*

We should avoid:

* Suggesting we know how the person feels
* Identifying the cause of the problem
* Telling the person what to do about the problem
* Minimising their concerns
* Bringing perspectives with forced positivity and platitudes
* Admiring the person’s strength
1. *Too much time looking at screens reduces a person’s ability to read facial expressions*

This is especially important in how a child engages with their world, but we need to figure out what the use of Zoom is doing to us because it is here to stay. Looking at faces on a screen gives relationships a one dimensional feel and it is easier to miss cues when words and facial expressions do not precisely coincide. We need to audit this development properly if we are to develop and not reduce our empathy. We worry about children spending too much on their phones because of what the content is doing to them. But there is an even deeper question about the risks of not developing empathy. And in my experience, talking about the risks of children having too much screen time can be a displacement exercise for adults who spend just as much time scrolling and swiping.

1. *Words can conceal but silences might reveal*

We are uncomfortable with long silences, especially in the UK and US, apparently (unlike in countries like Japan and Finland). Jumping in can interrupt a person’s thought processes and close down conversation. Kate Murphy says: *Garrulousness fills the silence but erects a kind of word wall that separates you from others. Silence is what allows people in.*

As we emerge from the pandemic, everyone has a story to tell but not everyone will have the ears to listen. The duty of a Christian is to love and listening should be one of the easiest first steps to take in caring about someone else, but this step feels more difficult today, like the first step we make out of bed after a long sleep rather than the next step on a country walk.

Kate Murphy draws her book to an end by saying:

*Listening is no easy task. Our magnificent brains race along faster than others can speak, making us easily distracted. We overestimate what we already know and, mired in our arrogance, remain unaware of all we misunderstand. We also fear that if we listen too carefully, we might discover that our thinking is flawed or that another person’s emotions might be too much to bear. And so we retreat into our own heads, talk over one another, or reach for our phones.*

Coming out of the pandemic, you’ll know I’ve repeated this mantra time and again: hit the ground listening. For this is how we will find the deepest victims of these last two years. How we find God and what he is doing. It’s not necessarily the first person you meet or the one who talks the loudest or the longest. In fact, true victims often have little energy left and may be wary of sharing their story if they think it is going to be minimised and summarised with a spiritual platitude.

What I have said today has largely been about how we listen to one other person or in a small group of people. But it may equally apply to bigger bodies, like a whole church or community group. I’ll end with three questions on that score:

* What kind of voice is the local community hearing from their parish church?
* Whose voices are not being heard as decisions are being made?
* Who is not in the room at all when decisions are made?

We can hone our listening skills all we like, but if we can’t hear some people because they are voiceless or they are not there – the skill is found wanting. And so is the opportunity, because it seems these are the very places God gravitates to first.