

) that dominates your relationship
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closest to does that you find irritating
 like a woman!" or "Isn't that just like a
 illy accepting of her or him, including

Listening

I really like hearing what other people have to say. After nearly 60 years of listening, I still feel a sense of wonder at this remarkable activity called "speaking to each other" that we humans do together. I have a similar fascination with performance and the theatre; I've always been absolutely intrigued and entranced by what I see and hear on a stage. When I settle into my theatre seat, I'm not there as a critic — I'm not looking to judge whether the performance is "good" or "bad," or whether it's a work of "art" or not. I feel no need at all to judge it — still less to have someone else judge it for me. I'm just moved and delighted that people are up there performing, imitating, acting, putting on a show, creating something. I think it's wonderful, I appreciate it, and I clap like mad at the end.

And that's exactly how I feel about speaking. It's a performance, and I'm in the play. It's marvelous to me that people create meaning together, and no less marvelous for the fact that most of us take it completely for granted. So when I say that I really like listening, I'm not just talking about listening to certain people talk about certain subjects in a certain way — I mean that I like listening, period. I find speaking fascinating, regardless of what the speaker is saying (or how he or she is saying it).

Listening is the quintessential completing activity; it's what the other person or people (whoever is not speaking) has to do, or give, for communication to take place. By "completing," I'm not talking about finishing, or putting closure on, what someone has said, but about continuing the activity — initiated by the speaker — of communicating. If someone speaks but no one listens, the speaker (whether he or she is physically alone or not and regardless of his or her intentions) isn't communicating. Think of the exasperated father who says to his teenage son: "Talking to you is like talking to the wall!" or the hurt wife who says to her husband: "You haven't heard a word I've said!" or the irritated bus driver who says to a passenger: "I just told you that I don't go across town. Are you deaf?" What the speakers are expressing in these situations is their experience of not being completed, of not communicating. It's not "enough" that they're speaking; the people they're speaking to aren't listening. At this point in the non-dialogue, the father, the wife, and the driver may decide to start shouting, or swearing, or both — which makes it even more unlikely that the son, the husband and the passenger will be inclined to listen.

As with other social activities, there are many kinds of listening. Passively keeping your mouth closed while another person talks to you is very different from active listening. Just as people can play tennis more or less intensely, make love more or less passionately, and dance with more or less oomph, there's listening — and there's listening. It's possible to listen without really hearing, or to listen "with just half an ear." It's also possible to listen so closely and attentively that you do more than simply hear the words being said; you actually experience the other person as a whole human being engaged in the effort to communicate — to create — with language being the instrument, like a shared paint brush, for doing so.

Listening actively in this way is a kind of "performance." Active listeners show they're listening — they nod their heads; they smile; they express their surprise and their concern; they ask questions. They don't need to get anything from the speaker. They participate by hearing.

I think many people have a hard time listening. I'm not the only person to think so, by the way; for the last two decades or so, a number of major American corporations have been spending significant amounts of money on training their employees to listen. Of course, ordinary folks at home

have been aware of the "con didn't discover that people do therapeutic approach just has

Why is listening so hard? tion of many people to focus on the totality of the speaker's meaning). Their listening is the speaker is talking about. incidental at best, inconvenient the point!" they say impatiently. At these times, people a "turn" comes they'll be able to "turn" with what's been said ble categories. This way of r according to what may or n judgmental.

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Anthony is a junior in hi he doesn't want to go to co that he was trying to "punis! He now reads a comic bool guidance counselor has com is "dumping" on her. Accor has to confront the authorit tional risks involved in doi "evidence" for this "analysi the guidance counselor and

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have been aware of the "communication gap" for a lot longer than that. I didn't discover that people don't listen to one another very well; the social therapeutic approach just has a cure (not a solution!) for it.

Why is listening so hard? In my opinion, it has to do with the inclination of many people to focus on particular products (meanings) rather than on the totality of the speaking activity (the qualitative process of creating meaning). Their listening is overdetermined by their need to know what the speaker is talking about. That someone is speaking is often related to an incidental at best, inconvenient or downright annoying at worst: "Get to the point!" they say impatiently to the speaker. "Spit it out!"

At these times, people are listening primarily so that when their own "turn" comes they'll be able to explain, interpret, make analogies or "identify" with what's been said by putting it into pre-existing, comprehensible categories. This way of relating to speaking — categorizing what's said according to what may or may not be "worth" listening to — is typically judgmental.

When language is overidentified with meaning, therefore, it stops being an instrument of communication and creation. It becomes, instead, a barrier to the understanding that comes from participating together in the joint activity of people speaking to each other. This can be enormously painful and frustrating, particularly when people are speaking of their emotional experiences. Yet this "language-overdetermined-by-meaning" often dominates traditional, so-called "insight-oriented" talk therapy, and the kinds of conversations between friends, family members and lovers that are modeled on it (or that it is modeled on).

Anthony is a junior in high school who told his guidance counselor that he doesn't want to go to college. When she responded "understandingly" that he was trying to "punish" his parents, Anthony stopped talking to her. He now reads a comic book whenever he's summoned to her office. The guidance counselor has complained to his parents that their 17-year-old son is "dumping" on her. According to her, Anthony is "at that stage where he has to confront the authority figures in his life and he's afraid of the emotional risks involved in doing that, especially with his mother." Her only "evidence" for this "analysis" is that Anthony's mother is the same age as the guidance counselor and is studying to be a guidance counselor herself!

You may think that this is an extreme example of judgmental, insight-oriented categorizing being substituted for the activity of listening. Unfortunately, in my experience, it's simply extremely common.

The trouble with such categorical and judgmental listening is that it doesn't allow those who are "listening" to hear much. They're so preoccupied with getting particular meanings that they miss, or dismiss, the totality of what the other person is saying. It's been my experience that when we don't listen "for" meaning in what other people say, we're much more likely to discover the person who's speaking — and whatever brilliance, wit, subtlety and charm that may be there.

In social therapy, we work to create an environment in which people can engage in the activity of listening to one another. We do that by challenging the meaning-dominated, "insight-oriented" categorical listening that's typical in a culture of getting. When one member of the group, A, speaks and another member of the group, B, responds judgmentally/categorically/insightfully, someone in the group is likely to tell B: "I don't think you heard what A said. Stop trying to get it. Instead, give something to the activity of speaking together."

Although I don't listen to people merely because I believe that it's morally correct to do so, there is a morality to that activity. As a practitioner of social therapy, I place a high value on people's efforts to create meaning through speaking. I think it is one of the principal ways in which we give expression to our humanity.

EXERCISE:

Here's a completing game that will help you to practice creating a listening environment: Tell a collective story. Each person says one sentence, and no one can contradict what someone has said earlier. Example: The first person says, "I flew to the moon the other night." The next person says, "It took me much longer than usual, because of the accident." And so on.

For the last hundred years or analyzed by social scientists o me, have had some valuable ti

There's all the difference people, straight or gay, who to be a family (your family, n (with a capital F), which as a ence over all of us (whether w view the institution as both a

Most people tend to act c "written" for roles in the pla Father, Daughter, Son, Sister cast primarily on the basis o much less likely to "improvise

It is very typical, for exar each other like: "Don't talk r that's why you should come v The Family drama scho