

On Listening

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Listen.

To listen is to “give attention,” as one dictionary meaning states. The act of listening is one of engaged compassion, a surrendering of one’s self to the never-ending sonic world around us – to the breeze that scatters dry leaves on an autumn afternoon; to the gravitational pull that causes waves to lap against a coastline; to the aesthetic mathematics that result in the composition of a melody; to the friend whose problems are temporarily eased by our willingness to attend to their utterances.

In an era where daily life is thick with the bombardment of mediated information, the act of truly listening is a radical downshifting of expected priorities, a trap sidestepped. As Salomé Voegelin has stated, sound has been “sublimated to the visual and its linguistic structure” within Western culture’s hierarchical approach to the senses. Deep, attentive listening therefore begins to break sound out of this subservient position, frees it from the chains of vision. There is an irony to the fact that sound has been subjugated by vision, yet linguistically the two senses can be interchangeable:

“I see what you mean.”

“I hear you.”

Listening begets understanding. It defines the boundaries of a dark space. It resolves conflict. It is a paradoxically concrete yet poetic connection between our selves and our surroundings. As many have observed, we can’t turn off our sense of hearing; our bodies constantly hear, absorbing the sounds around us. Hearing may be ceaseless but without listening, we are directionless. Hearing is reflexive while listening is interpretive – a cognitive, communicative act.

This cognition and communication is also inherent when we direct our ears inwards to listen to ourselves. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, “listening opens (itself) up to resonance and that resonance opens (itself) up to the self.” When we grant ourselves the respect of our own ear it affirms our true selves, the ones that actually resonate with the world at large – not the ones we construct to keep that world at bay. Within the self lies a set of powerful tools to help guide one along the creative path: insight, intuition, and instinct.

As external listening offers one possible system of way finding, so internal or “intralisting” helps us find our own way, affirms the solitude of artistic pursuits, and offers us the encouragement to proceed in a manner that best supports our essential goals. Listening to our instincts is simultaneously an act of independent self-determinism and the key to unlocking how we relate to others, and others to us.

Within each of us lies truth, if we only allow ourselves to listen to it.