

# THE ART OF LISTENING

By Helen Morrison

Listening is an art. Most of us believe we are better listeners than we really are. You perhaps can name several situations and reasons for having not heard or been heard. This could be anything from distractions to actually not hearing. Listening is a skill for all ages. Barring some unusual circumstance everyone can improve their “art” of listening.

“Active Listening” is what we will focus upon in this piece. As its name suggests active listening requires using all the senses and concentrating on what is being said. These include: smile, eye contact, posture and mirroring. Sometimes these are easy to mimic. However, a bit more difficult is to mimic comprehension.

Listening is the first language mode children acquire; frequently used and the least studied communication skill. It is a skill that must be developed through practice. The first step in learning about listening is to understand the distinction between hearing and listening. Hearing is simply the act of receiving sound. Whereas listening is the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.\* (*\*Definition is from the International Listening Association which was formed in 1981*).

While most people take listening for granted, it is something that just happens. It is when you stop to think about listening and what it entails that realization sets in and one sees the need to nurture and develop this skill.

In a three panel cartoon Peanuts Classic, Charles M. Schultz captures the elements that illustrates what a conversations is all about. Picture this if you will. First panel: Lucy asks Charlie Brown, “*So what do you think?*” Charlie responds, “*What difference does it make? You never listen anyway.*” 2nd panel: Lucy: “*I was just making conversation.*” Charlie: “*When you make conversation, you have to listen too!!*” 3rd panel: Lucy: “*You Do?*” The look on Charlie’s face reads, I give up!

Effective listening is very often the foundation of strong relationships with others at home, socially, in education and in the workplace. A significant amount of research has been done and continues to be a strong area of interest in this topic (Wolvan & Coakley 1996).

In spite of all we know we so often hear it is the lack of communication that is responsible for what does/does not happen. Communication is a many faceted subject. It is said that we spend about 70% of our day using some form of communication; be it listening, talking, reading or writing.

How do we measure listening? Do we listen in phrases? Like we read? When we listen to a person just what influences what we hear? Do learning styles play a role in our listening ability? How do we respond to someone who says, “I hear you, but I am

not listening..." It is said that most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. Do you agree with that statement? How do you listen?

As "Active Agers" many of us have learned to accommodate to changes, pace, loss of hearing and some physical changes. Joan Chittister in her book *The Gift of Years, Growing Old Gracefully*, says it this way. "Active Aging requires us to go on living life to the fullest no matter how differently." She then goes on to cite the Harvard University Longitudinal Study of Adult Development in which they said, "Lifelong learning makes the difference between healthy and unhealthy aging...it determines the degree to which we will be interesting, valuable, and life-giving to others."

Rachel Naomi Remen (*Kitchen Table Wisdom*) also notes, "The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen, just listen. Perhaps the best thing we give each other is our attention." (I met Rachel in 1998 when she spoke at Michigan State University and she exudes warmth - you want to spend a lot of time with her - she listened.)

If we truly take the International Listening Association's definition to heart which says, "Listening is the active process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or non verbal messages" we will give it our all. Oh, how we will improve our relationships.

In these past years we've learned so much about how people learn and process information. Howard Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences ([www.niu.edu/facdev](http://www.niu.edu/facdev)) and Steven Covey's 5th Habit (*Seven Habits*) that listening is autobiographical, are two examples that add to our understanding of listening and processing information. The education profession has been designing curriculum to address the different learning styles. A number of our congregations are using "multiple intelligences curriculum" and found that children are more apt to listen.

Madelyn Burley-Allen adds another dimension to our listening. She suggests that we hear through filters. These include: values, memories, interests, strong feelings, images (past & future), beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, past experiences, expectations, physical environment and prejudices. Since research shows that the brain processes one thought at a time we can appreciate how difficult it is to keep an open mind. It takes work to listen. There is more helpful information in her book which is listed in the bibliography.

May this article be a resource for continuing awareness about the art of listening in ways that are helpful for all ages. Listed below in the bibliography are a few books and websites that may provide resources.

Bibliography (selected items)

- *LISTENING IS A 10 PART SKILL*, Ralph Nichols, [www.listen.org10](http://www.listen.org10) Part Skill
- *LISTENING: The Forgotten Skill*, Madely
- Burley-Allen. c1995 2nd ed John Wiley & Sons Publisher. A Self Teaching Guide with exercises helpful in work settings.
- *THE LOST ART OF LISTENING: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, Michael P. Nichols PhD. c 2009 The Guilford Press, NY. Dr. Nichols, Professor of Psychology, College of Wm. Mary, is a therapist, author and speaker.
- *CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIP*, Clark, D. R. (2004). Retrieved from <http://nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leadcon.html>. Excellent piece on communication & leadership.
- Howard Gardiner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* published by Northern Illinois University Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center. Gardiner & colleagues at Project Zero introduced the Multiple Intelligences theory in the early 1980's that there are separate human capacities ranging from musical intelligences to the intelligence involved in understanding oneself. [www.niv.edu/facdev](http://www.niv.edu/facdev)

*LISTENING ISN'T A NEED WE HAVE, IT'S A GIFT WE GIVE*

- Michael P. Nichols

**Helen Morrison** is a career life consultant who also conducts seminars on leadership, management development, communication skills, team building, work/family issues, and many facets of older adult ministry. Her work experience includes both the non-profit and for-profit arenas. Helen has served at all levels of the PC(USA) and on many boards and councils. Helen received a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology/psychology from the University of Michigan and then earned 15 postgraduate hours in human resources. She appeared in the University of Michigan's 1977 production *Worlds of Women* segment "Careers after 40," and was the recipient of the PC(USA)'s 2014 *Women of Faith* award presented at the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly. She is a widow with three sons and four grandchildren. She loves reading, jazz, theater, travel and meals with friends.