

Julian Treasure – 5 Ways to listen

“We are losing our listening” begins the authors. Then he goes on to briefly quote a study, ‘proving’ that we don’t retain what we listen. Then he talks about well-known psycho-physical phenomena such as discrimination, noise to signal and filtering. The purpose of mentioning these facts is unclear but may be to establish his scientific credentials or perhaps to sound authoritative. In any case, these facts are not at all connected to the main point of the presentation.

People, the author makes the point, are losing our listening skills. No concrete evidence is provided of any time trend based on a scientific study, so we have to believe the man at face value. The arguments he quotes are anything ranging flat out ridiculous to plausible, but certainly none is compelling:

- We have ways to record, therefore we don’t feel the pressure to pay attention
- We isolate ourselves with headphones because the world is noisy
- We are impatient, as we are constantly stimulated
- The art of conversation is being replaced by broadcasting
- We are desensitized, media have to become ever more aggressive to capture our attention

The author proposes our loss of listening abilities is impairing our understanding of reality. Somehow, he also seems to correlate the lack of listening to torture and wars in a surprisingly oversimplified view of causality. Mr Treasure appears to believe, like most academics, that somehow the past was better in most aspects, and in particular people had better communication. Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt him to read some Sigmund Freud to find out how repressed women were in the early 20th century, or read MLK to find out about how blacks lived in mid 20th century America. Communication was great then, for sure. Evidence really support his thesis.

A salient point is that the presenter constantly switches the meaning of ‘listening’ between the physical skill (sense 1) and the intellectual/emotional skill that requires understanding and empathy (sense 2).

He proposes the following advice to improve our listening skills (whatever that means, he is not sure):

1. Silence for 3 minutes a day. This somehow resets your ears. (sense 1)
2. Pay attention to how many multiple sounds you can discriminate (sense 1)
3. Enjoying mundane sounds, like a tumble dryer (and impose a waltz rhythm on it?)
4. Move our listening positions (active / passive, reductive / expansive). The audience is supposed to experiment with different positions. It is unclear what he means by it exactly (sense 2)
5. RASA (sanskrit word for juice), receive appreciate summarize and ask. These are well known business-book type advice for effective listening (in the second sense)

The authors seems to ignore that we are better informed today than ever before. This information got there somehow (probably by listening). We have more liberties than any generation in the past. We listen to, respect and understand each other likely better than all prior generations. How is communication worse than before? Frankly the author seems to live in a different world than the rest of us. The presentation is fast paced, the author has done a good job at keeping the listener overwhelmed and attentive. But ultimately it is just another shallow TED talk in which some pseudo-expert spews his unfounded preconceptions and provides advice which may not be useful at all. Of course, he advocates that his specialty (listening) should be taught in school. We would then transform the world into a world of connection, understanding and peace. All thanks to some cheap conversation advice (RASA) and teenagers who can waltz to the sound of a tumble dryer.