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Listening

I want to take a break from legal articles. Instead, I will talk about the skill of listening. Lawyers are notoriously bad at listening, and I am no exception. We all seem to talk more than we listen.

Max Ehrmann wrote a famous poem, “Desiderata” in 1927. The poem begins,

Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible without surrender,
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly,
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.

There is great wisdom in these lines.

Since this is an article about listening, I should start by telling you to listen. I should tell you that listening is the key to success in business and sales. I should tell you that, when listening, give up the little voice in your head (a.k.a. your ego). But all this telling would be a failure to listen on my part and would just be more verbiage.

Instead, I will give some “how-to” tips that I really try to use myself (on the rare occasions that I remember to listen). Without further ado, in sequential order....

#1. Listening comes out of a peaceful mind. We must be mindful of ourselves first, before being able to listen to another. Notice your body movements and your breath. Are you twitching or breathing irregularly? Are there negative thoughts in your mind, or rationalizations or anxiety?

#2. Be mindful of your breathing. Breathe slow.

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#3. Listen to the speaker's voice. Notice the speaker's body movements. Notice good things about the speaker – maybe her shoes or his posture. Look for anything positive.

#4. Understand the speaker's story, his feelings. Remember that the speaker's heart and your heart are the same.

#5. Ask questions of the speaker to understand what is being said. Don't ask questions to prove anything about yourself (for example, to prove how good a listener you are). Don't ask rhetorical questions or questions that put a person on the defensive.

#6. Enjoy the speaker and your time with the speaker.

#7. Let the speaker finish and signal to you that it is your turn to talk. Then breathe slowly one time before you start to speak.

#8. If the speaker's story is painfully negative (for example, gossip), remember that you are not obligated to listen forever. Politely excuse yourself and get away.

Admittedly I spend most of my social encounters in blatant violation of these rules. But on occasion I return to these rules, and I am always grateful for trying once again to be a good listener. Lastly, please forgive me for the spaciness of this article. If you decide that you must poke fun at me in public for this article, remember – I'm not listening to you.

Ideas

We all want to know *why*. Man is the asking animal. And while the finding, the belief that we have found the Answer, can separate us and make us forget our humanity, it is the seeking that continues to bring us together, that makes and keeps us human. – *Daniel Boorstin*, from "The Seekers."

Why am I a liberal? Because I am skeptical about everything human, about our collective self; because for me there are no institutions, persons, or concepts that are sacrosanct or above criticism. . . . Liberalism is, first of all, a style: worldly, civilized, personal, ironic. – *George Konrad*.

Most people are as happy as they make up their minds to be. – *Abraham Lincoln*.

