Listen!

(A Tribute to the Listen Inn, Shaftesbury, Dorset, UK)

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Text 1

"Beuys' primary requirement for true communication was the existence of a reciprocal relationship between individuals. 'For communication it's necessary that there be someone who listens…There's no sense in a transmitter if there's noone who receives.'"

Panel entitled "Communication" at the Joseph Beuys Exhibition, Royal Kilmainham Hospital, Dublin, read on June 2nd 1999.

Abstract

The argument is presented that, for participation and connectedness to be possible, we need to learn to listen, and to value listening, rather than being "given our voice".

Some benefits of listening are presented: as are side effects, which reflect qualities often thought of as being among the most desirable human qualities.

Finally, examples of a demonstration and a workshop presented at the conference, concerned with developing listening skills, are introduced.

Text 2

"Academics study precisely those areas in which they are least personally competent."

Academic Sod's Law, Ranulph Glanville.

Preamble

The pianist enters the auditorium, and sits at the piano. The murmur in the audience subsides. He opens the keyboard and sits still for four and a half minutes. During this time, he makes no sound, plays no notes. At the end of this time, he gets up, takes his bow, and leaves. He has been performing John Cage's piece, 4'32". (See Cage's 1966 book, Silence.)

You are in a community where no one will respond to anything you say, and no one will talk to you. You have been sent to Coventry. Or you write asking for a reply (for instance to a lawyer representing someone you are in dispute with) and are studiously ignored.

Silence. In both cases, we are talking about silence. In the first case, benevolent silence; in the second malevolent silence.

In the first case, the pianist's performance of silence gives the audience a chance to listen, and to listen carefully and creatively. The sounds that in a normal concert would be annoyances, to be ignored if at all possible, become the substance of the piece. You listen to a small symphony of coughs, shuffles, murmurs, the sounds coming through the windows (often intentionally left open)—the street, trees rustling, birds. You listen as you have never listened to these sounds before. This is the way of wonder, as Fisher writes in his recent book (1998).

In the second case, you are the sound source. But noone listens. You are rejected, left alone, not listened to: as a result your confidence and your self-esteem begin to decrease. No one bothers with what you say: you have nothing to say. You are irrelevant, dismissed, worthless. For social animals who gain at least part of their reinforcement in being, their sense of identity, through communication, this is the cruellest blow (see von Foerster 1991). And we know this well. We use the silence of not listening to systematically demean and destroy eachother. We remove social connectedness by applying the silence of acquired deafness, chosen deafness.[1] In contrast, we feel good when we are listened to: when others show us we are significant. And we feel good, too, when we listen.

The difference between the two cases lies not in the silence but in the listening. In the first case, the silence gives an opportunity to listen. In the second, the silence of acquired deafness undermines the individual: you are not worth listening to.

There may be other differences, but our attitude to listening is a major one, and the one we will concentrate on here.

Participation

"Give the People their Voice!" say our wily politicians.[2] They are talking of participation (in a democracy). We have come to think of participation, and through participation connection, as dependant on being allowed to speak. We have come to think of participation as being allowed our voice, with which to say what we think and mean.

This is perhaps even more so in the case of our computer given means of communication. Email and the internet allow us to speak, to enquire and to inquisition. The world wide web allows as many of us as can access a computer with a phone line and an IP address or internet gateway to publish freely. Here, more than anywhere, we see the notion of participation and connection through being given our voice.

But there are few characters on stage who participate and connect less than the three in Samuel

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[1] Consider the use made of isolation, lack of response etc (ie, being placed in an environment that does not listen) in prisons of all sorts. Or the cruelty of refusing a response practised against those we love, when angry.

[2] This was written before the US Presidential election of 2000 gave us such a wonderful example, where such a fuss being made over Giving the People their Voice.

Beckett's "Play" (Beckett 1963), who are given their babbling voices at the prompting of and controlled by the searchlight which, alighting on their faces above their enurned bodies, command them to utter.

Beckett's Woman 1 and Woman 2, and Man have their separate voices, when turned on by the light of prompting and inquisition: but having voice does not equate to being listened to, to that feeling of being valued and validated by another. They are alone: alone in their aloneness. Alone in their being alone in their aloneness. Alone in their uttering voices. There is no participation, there is no connection.

This terrible aloneness appears in even more extreme form in the agonised, incessantly jabbering mouth of Beckett's "Not I" (Beckett 1973), that talks on and on at breakneck speed and without pause, for the play's duration, without movement other than the movement of enunciation.

I want to insist that, in contrast to Beckett's aloneness, the key to participation and to connectedness lies in what Michael Nichols (1995) has so sensitively and saliently reminded us of: that forgotten art, "The Lost Art of Listening".[3] Not in being given our voice. And the reason is this:

> *when we talk, we simply utter into a void; but when we listen, we join with the sounds we hear*

It is in this joining (in) that we become, I believe, open to participation and to connectedness.

> ***Text 3***
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> *"A Zen master had an important visitor who came to LEARN about Zen. Rather than listening, the visitor kept on talking about his own ideas. The master served tea. He poured tea into his visitor's cup until it was full, then he kept on pouring.*
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> *The visitor could not restrain himself. 'Stop it! It's full! You can't get any more in!'*
>
> *'That's right.' replied the master, stopping. 'And just like this cup, you are full of your own ideas. How can you hope to understand Zen unless you offer me your cup empty?'"*
>
> Traditional Zen Story.

Benefits

When we listen we open ourselves up to what's available. From this we make meanings for what we find. Thus we become participants in what is on offer, and connect to it. It is not the offering that makes the connection that permits participation. It is the learning to receive, to become party to, to join in through listening. This, our generosity in listening, in turn turns those we listen to into the generous, as opposed to the screaming. And it allows us to learn, to discover what we did not know: through listening, through being open to that which is not from us, or of us.

But there are benefits other than participation and connectedness that derive from listening.

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[3] I use the aural verb to listen in an extended and metaphorical sense that reaches beyond the aural to include all senses and to any other ways we may have of engaging with what we find on offer around us.

These are added benefits that come to us when we have learnt to listen and put this skill into operation. Here are some of them:

When we listen we can take onboard (our understanding of) the understanding of others. This gives us a way of transcending our own limitations, of moving beyond what we can imagine. Thus, we can expand our horizons, and open ourselves up to the thrill of the new.[4] What we take from others is not, however, what they give, but is how we hear what they offer. The act of listening involves us in an active and creative act (which is why listening is not just picking up information transmitted). It is therefore our interpretation of what is offered,[5] rather than simply what is offered. In this act of interpretation there is another source of newness: what you offer me will be new to me. My interpretation of it, not being yours, will be new to you. When we put together two or more people offering their own views and interpretations, we have that rolling fund of novelty which we call a conversation. (See Pask 1996 for Pask's most ambitious attempt to locate his theory.)

Because we are listening and taking on what others offer us (or what is on offer to us) and interpreting that, we have a mechanism to initiate learning. Thus, from listening we can develop learning. It is important to keep this in mind, especially when confronted by ideas such as teacher responsibility for student learning. The students learn: teachers cannot learn for them. Through listening we learn.

(A comment here on "misunderstanding": we understand differently. Thus, what I understand from what you tell me (of what you understand) is not what you understand. This is not misunderstanding. It is inevitable. This is how we understand eachother. We do not pass meanings one to another: we build our own understandings. This is why what we call, in the vernacular, "misunderstanding" is so potentially creative. That is why, when politicians and others say "I have made it perfectly clear" and "you have misrepresented me", they are talking a form of nonsense. It matters not how clear they have made themselves: what matters is how I understand, and that is up to me, is my responsibility.)

Listening also offers us connectedness. This is implicit in the above, and it is central to the thesis presented in this paper. When I talk, I cannot guarantee that anyone listens. I can hope they do. But the response I may be looking for is not within my gift: it is in the gift of the listener. To listen is to connect and to participate. To listen is to sign on. To talk is only to utter into a void where, if we are lucky and if others are well disposed, they may chose to connect: but that is not up to us. (Of course, if we speak interestingly, we are more likely to connect. But the initial decision to connect comes from the listener, not from the speaker. This brings to mind EM Forster's adage "Only Connect", taken up as its motto by the Whole Earth Catalogue.) Participation and Connection depend on listening rather than talking.

Last, as already noted, listening gives us entry to conversation and thus to the prototypical

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[4] Philip Fisher, in his contemporaneous magical and perceptive book "Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Asethetics of Rare Experiences" (1998), discusses the wonder of the new in depth.

[5] Taking a constructivist position, I would actually want to reword this. I would not talk of interpreting what is given, as if there was something that existed for me regardless of my intepretation (understanding), but rather as creating something. While I consider this way of talking to be more accurate, it adds a layer of complexity which complicates the discussion and is not central to the point I am trying to make here, or the way I am trying to make it—that is, within an uncontroversial framework. What I am saying may already be controversial enough, without my adding to it by insisting in talking within a constructivist frame of reference.

embodiment of interaction: with which come all the delights of being in a conversation and in an interaction. We share with others, we discover, we gain affirmation and re-affirmation of who we are and of our worth. And we gain delight (and, occasionally, irritation). Conversation is one of the most magical structures and processes we have in our lives (Pask 1996, von Foerster 1991).

Text 4

"According to our analysis, this metaphor [of communication down a tube, RG] is basically false. It presupposes a unity that is not determined structurally, where interactions are instructive, as though what happens to a system in an interaction is determined by the perturbing agent and not by its structural dynamics. It is evident, however, even in daily life, that such is not the case with communication: each person says what he says, or hears according to his own structural determination; saying does not ensure listening. From the perspective of an observer, there is always ambiguity in a communicative interaction. The phenomenon of communication depends not on what is transmitted, but on what happens to the person who receives it. And this is a very different matter from 'transmitting information.'"

"The Tree of Knowledge" Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela.

Side Effects

There are consequential side effects that come, part and parcel, with listening.

The first side effect concerns the qualities involved. Listening relies on a number of qualities that it must be assumed listening participants have. These are qualities that we happen to tend to think of as very desirable human qualities. These qualities are discussed (though not in this form) in Nichols (1995, qv). They include the following.

a) keeping an open mind

We cannot listen to what another is saying if we refuse to hear, or if we already know. These are qualities of a closed mind. A closed mind is not open to what it does not already know. To listen we must hear, without either prejudging or pre-knowing.

b) willingness and tolerance

Open-mindedness implies willingness and tolerance. Whether counted as an integral part of listening, or as additional requirements, willingness and tolerance are essential. We cannot listen if we do not consider that what we hear, no matter how apparently personally unsympathetic, is worth listening to and considering carefully before we judge it (or reach any other conclusion). Nor can we benefit from what we might hear unless we are tolerant (especially of difference). For a comment on valuing, and particularly the need in valuing to keep in mind the possibility that there may be no value at all! See Glanville (1994a).

c) enjoying difference and supporting variety

One of the greatest benefits of listening is that we may discover things we did not

know, ways of constructing the world that are different to what we (thought we) knew, and completely new things. If we do not support a variety of views and enjoy differences between them, we reduce our chances of discovering the new, and thus learning.[6] We also miss the fun of engaging with others celebrating and playing with variety and difference. See Glanville (1994b, 1998).

d) being generous

If there is one quality that lies behind all the above, it is generosity: generosity of spirit permits, supports and encourages each and every one of them. Generosity is central to human experience, and is one of the most desirable of our human qualities. It is a prerequisite for many human activities, such as conversation, that I argue elsewhere to be basic (Glanville 1996, 1997).

e) trusting

Trust is the bootstrapping precondition for the above. Generosity is both an expression of and a precondition for trust: and a response to a situation in which we find we do trust. With trust, we can afford to be generous. With generosity, we can keep an open mind, which allows the willingness and tolerance that lie behind our enjoyment of difference and support of variety. With generosity we can also trust (and conversely without generosity we cannot trust) I have argued the centrality and benefit of trust in a recent paper (Glanville in press).

No doubt there are other qualities. But these are both central and essential

The second side effect is more individually personal for each of us: we seem to feel better when we are listening and/or when we are listened to. This, along with the need to listen and an explanation of why we do not listen is also discussed at length in Nichol's book: I shall not attempt a precis. But I refer to the anecdotal and personal evidence of those who do listen, who insist they find this rewarding. As someone who thought he listened and found he did not, I have found the challenge of learning to listen, at least a little, exciting, and the rewards great. I benefit from learning to listen, not only in ways described above under "Benefits", but also in how I feel. Equally, the anecdotal (and my personal) evidence is that being listened to is a health giving process. I feel valued when someone listens to me. There is therapy in listening and in being listened to.

Conclusion

To listen is to join in with what has been said. To speak is not to join in: to speak maybe to offer, but it is not to join in. To listen is to respond: to speak is not. Speaking, we have no influence and no companionable listeners unless others chose to listen. It is the listeners who collaborate. The speaker cannot require listening, except under the special, exceptional, restricted and restricting circumstances of the unilateral imposition of will. Listening is a choice that is made by the listener. It may not even need a speaker, in a conventional sense, any more than Cage's 4'32" requires that the pianist actually plays the piano.

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[6] Gordon Pask (1961) insisted that the human being is a machine for learning. Learning, in Pask's view, is the major activity of human beings.

If we want to participate, to be connected, we must learn as a priority to listen once again. We need to rediscover "The Lost Art of Listening".

Workshop and Demonstration

My contribution to the conference consisted of more than making the argument and plea expressed in written form above.

At the end of my verbal presentation I played a very rare recording of an excerpt from a performance of LaMonte Young's (1969) "Studies in the Bowed Gong" by Marian Zazeela and Young himself. The piece involves bowing (with double bass bows) a giant tamtam, which generates an astonishing, ever modulating sound. This (deeply unfamiliar) sound may be dismissed or it may be listened to in order to find out what it offers. The audience was divided. Some listened in a trance-like way, transported by the amazing sound. Others used the opportunity to make notes for their own presentations, isolating themselves from the excerpt, too busy to listen. Some talked. One stormed out.[7]

The reactions illustrated to me differences between those who might be willing to try to learn to listen, to see what was on offer, and those who were not interested in hearing something new.

I chose this piece of music because it was not only unfamiliar, but outside the range that I believed most would consider music. Therefore, it challenged, and required a response.

I also ran a workshop that depended on the participants listening. After a warm up blowing over the necks of bottles, we formed into an Academic Choir to perform my choral piece "48 to 52", first performed in Baden Baden in the summer of 1995 (Glanville 1995). The room was filled by the sound of a 50 Hz square wave, which, as participants moved, changed its perceptible frequency and harmonic structure (which effect is explained by the physics of standing waves). The movement of the others in this space equally changed the sound to be heard at any point in the space of the room because they acted as mobile, absorbing pillars.

Participants learned a technique called harmonic singing, and, moving around the room, listened both to the (changing) ambient sound and to the sound of other singers near at hand. Each singer "borrowed" the pitches thus heard, picked them up and sang using the harmonic singing technique.

The piece was completed when all singers stopped singing.

The reaction of the participants was in line with the reactions to LaMonte Young's piece.

Clearly there is much to be learnt through exercises like these about the range of reactions to the notion that we need to learn to listen: and, consequently, what we might do about this.

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[7] In all fairness, I must say that, at least until recently, I would also probably have made notes, talked or stormed out!

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