

section one

DEEP LISTENING



The first duty of love is to listen.

—Paul Tillich

*All of a man's life among his kind is nothing other
than a battle to seize the ear of others.*

—Milan Kundera

one

THE LISTENING EAR



It began humbly enough. Perhaps in a few stolen minutes before class or, like Avery and Michelle, in a café after a busy day. Do you remember the first time you realized your spouse was really listening to you? Like a seed in the ground, that moment may have passed unnoticed by anyone. But not by you! You felt it. You knew it.

Avery and Michelle met while standing in line at a local coffee shop; she ordered chai tea, and he ordered café Americano. Unfortunately, the barista mistakenly switched cups, and the two collectively sipped and sputtered in dismay over their drinks. The barista apologized quickly and served up their correct beverages. While they waited, Avery introduced himself, and Michelle self-consciously fiddled with her necklace. She loved his outgoing personality, and he felt drawn to her quiet sweetness.

They decided to meet the following morning to see if the barista could get it right. A month later, they were still meeting for coffee and an occasional dinner date. Two months later, Avery proposed. Michelle planned a June wedding, and Avery surprised her with a cruise.

And they lived happily ever after—or at least until a series of misunderstandings led to what they now call their honeymoon disaster. But more about that later.

All love, yours as well as Avery and Michelle's, begins its life as a tiny seed forming roots. A tough little strand breaks through the shell of its seed and sends its fingers down into the soil, seeking the nutrients that will sustain growth and health throughout its life. For roots, as for lovers, this search never ends. It keeps growing deeper and wider in pursuit of its goal. Using tiny, delicate tips called root hairs, roots absorb the necessary elements from the soil and move them up to the rest of the tree. The trunk, branches, and leaves all depend on this nourishment for life, growth, and beauty. A tree can be only as healthy as its roots.

A loving listener follows this pattern by probing and digging deep into the heart and soul of the other to find nourishment for the relationship. Deep listening anchors strong conversation, and strong conversation, in turn, helps produce a vibrant, healthy intimacy.

BULKING UP

Every conversation needs two people: a talker and a listener. This seems pretty simple, but it's amazing how often we forget it. It's so easy to talk! And sometimes we even think our talking accomplishes something. So on we go—talk, talk, jabber, jabber, gab, jabber, gab, gab, talk. It happens every day. But nothing is added to your relationship until someone listens. You may as well be that poor tree falling in the forest, wasting all those crackling and sizzling airborne vibrations when no one is there to hear.

On the other hand, when listening happens, those sizzling airborne vibrations of your voice actually produce something. What you say instantly becomes part of your shared experience,

The Listening Day

Once a month declare a “Special Listening Day.” During this day, dedicate yourself to listening to your partner all day long. Rather than expect the gift of listening to be returned, stay in the listening mode. Keep engaging. Keep asking. Keep showering your attention with love and gusto. Take time at the end of the day to reflect on what you’ve heard and learned.

This is also a great trick to try on your kids. You may be amazed at what you hear from them, but probably not as amazed as they’ll be that you listened to them so intently.



part of your relationship. It may be a small part, as when you ask for a small favor or comment on the attitude of the cashier at the grocery store. At other times conversation adds in large chunks, as when you talk about your mother or relate a frightening experience.

Listening closes the circle. When your voice finds a listening ear, it happens. The giver finds the receiver. From that moment on, whatever you're saying enters the realm of togetherness. Some is forgotten quite quickly—no need to deny that. But remembered or forgotten at some level, what you've said and how you've said it lies there between you. Whether in small bites or large chunks, this beautiful exchange of talking and listening continually adds bulk to your relationship. This bulk settles in deeply, providing stability, like ballast on a sailboat or feet on an adolescent boy. It keeps upright what seems very shaky.

In this way your relationship resembles the miracle of the standing tree. And what a miracle it is! It may be 70 or 80 feet tall. It opens its leaves like tiny sails to the breezes and sways in the wind. As tall and as comparatively slender as it is, however, under normal conditions it remains upright. You walk without worry under these magnificent living structures in the forest or along the street. The thought of one falling scarcely enters your mind.

What keeps these tall, heavy objects from tipping over? The tree's foothold stretches both deep and wide. The extensive structure of roots under the ground forms an immense, clinging network that firmly grasps the earth and won't let go. As long as that grasp remains healthy, the tree will stand to face nearly all combinations of wind and weather. Separate a tree from its roots, however, as lumberjacks do every day, and it inevitably falls. Roots provide stability.

In a similar fashion, the process of good listening brings a sense of stability and constancy to your relationship. As you pay concentrated attention to what you hear, as you open the doors

for an ever-deepening conversation, as you provide a listening ear to the expression of thoughts, feelings, or memories that have lain long-hidden deep within, you anchor your relationship deeply in the soil of your soul.

FEEDING LOVE

In addition to stability, your relationship also needs a constant flow of nourishment. Good love needs good food. Malnutrition poses a serious threat to your relationship's health. A lack of listening paves the path to that arid state. A couple who stops listening stops sharing, stops thinking, stops planning, stops laughing. By listening to each other, you release a fountain of new information, new perspectives, new ideas, new plans, and new jokes.

The constant flow of newness jolts your relationship with life and interest. Bored? Who has time to be bored? Boredom is a stranger in a listening relationship. Some couples confuse themselves by inverting the connection between listening and boredom. Have you ever heard this statement?—"I'm bored with you, so I've just stopped listening." Actually it works the other way around: "I've stopped listening to you, so I'm bored."

After 14 years of marriage to Jessica, Bob shared how their listening habits had changed. "I was in the Navy when we were dating and during those first few years of our marriage. There were times when I was deployed, and we wouldn't see each other for weeks. When I returned we would just gobble up every second we could to be together. I remember longing to hear her voice. It didn't matter what she was talking about—I just wanted to listen. I soaked in every word. Somehow it relaxed me, made me feel good, filled me up after all those weeks on the ship.

"Now it's different—I'll admit it. I don't listen the way I used to. I'll let her rattle on, but I have one ear tuned to the TV

or one eye on the paper. I guess I can't blame her for feeling alone."

Jessica chimes in. "We've tried things to spice up our marriage: a vacation together, some new friends, theater tickets, stuff like that. And we've had some fun—we know how to have fun together when we want to. But soon we drag back down into that old routine—as if there's something missing."

Jessica has touched on a strategy many couples employ when boredom creeps in. You may have tried a few of them yourself: buy a new car, get a different job, experiment with new sexual experiences, have another baby, or take an exotic vacation. All of these have their place as solutions to various problems, but all solutions fail to solve the boredom problem unless they're accompanied by a new commitment to listen to each other. As Bob said, there's a fullness and sense of pleasure that comes with good listening. Listening remains the most extensive and least expensive path to a thriving, well-fed relationship.

The strength of your relationship is not found in how often you talk but in how deeply you listen to each other. Imagine yourself tunneling deeply and widely into the mind and heart of the one you love. The more you find there, the stronger your love can be. The more deeply you listen, the higher you grow. The farther down into the soul you dig, the stronger your relationship will be in the face of the winds and storms of life. To secure intimacy, follow the roots of listening.