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You're Not Listening

What You're Missing & Why it Matters

KATE MURPHY

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Journalist Kate Murphy is a *New York Times* contributor whose eclectic and much-shared pieces have explored an extraordinary range of topics including health, technology, science, design, art, business, finance, fashion, dining, travel, and real estate. Kate is known for her fresh and accessible way of explaining complex subjects, particularly the science behind social interactions, helping readers understand why people behave the way they do.

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For anyone who has misunderstood or felt misunderstood

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Introduction

When was the last time you listened to someone? *Really* listened, without thinking about what you wanted to say next, glancing down at your phone, or jumping in to offer your opinion? And when was the last time someone *really* listened to you? Was so attentive to what you were saying and whose response was so spot-on that you felt truly understood?

In modern life, we are encouraged to listen to our hearts, listen to our inner voices, and listen to our guts, but rarely are we encouraged to listen carefully and with intent to other people. Instead, we are engaged in a dialogue of the deaf, often talking over one another at cocktail parties, work meetings, and even family dinners; groomed as we are to lead the conversation rather than follow it. Online and in person, it's all about defining yourself, shaping the narrative, and staying on message. Value is placed on what you project, not what you absorb.

And yet, listening is arguably more valuable than speaking. Wars have been fought, fortunes lost, and friendships wrecked

for lack of listening. Calvin Coolidge famously said, "No man ever listened himself out of a job." It is only by listening that we engage, understand, connect, empathize, and develop as human beings. It is fundamental to any successful relationship—personal, professional, and political. Indeed, the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus said, "Nature hath given men one tongue but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak."

So it's striking that high schools and colleges have debate teams and courses in rhetoric and persuasion but seldom, if ever, classes or activities that teach careful listening. You can get a doctorate in speech communication and join clubs like Toastmasters to perfect your public speaking, but there's no comparable degree or training that emphasizes and encourages the practice of listening. The very image of success and power today is someone miked up and prowling around a stage or orating from behind a podium. Giving a TED Talk or commencement speech is living the dream.

Social media has given everyone a virtual megaphone to broadcast every thought, along with the means to filter out any contrary view. People find phone calls intrusive and ignore voicemail, preferring text or wordless emoji. If people are listening to anything, it's likely through headphones or earbuds, where they are safe inside their own curated sound bubbles; the soundtracks to the movies that are their walled-off lives.

The result is a creeping sense of isolation and emptiness, which leads people to swipe, tap, and click all the more. Digital distraction keeps the mind occupied but does little to nurture it, much less cultivate depth of feeling, which requires the

resonance of another's voice within our very bones and psyches. To really listen is to be moved physically, chemically, emotionally, and intellectually by another person's narrative.

This is a book in praise of listening and a lament that as a culture we seem to be losing our listening mojo. As a journalist, I've conducted countless interviews with everyone from Nobel laureates to homeless toddlers. I view myself as a professional listener, and yet, I, too, can fall short, which is why this book is also a guide to improving listening skills.

To write this book, I have spent the better part of two years delving into the academic research related to listening—the biomechanical and neurobiological processes as well as the psychological and emotional effects. There is a blinking external hard drive on my desk loaded with hundreds of hours of interviews with people from Boise to Beijing, who either study some aspect of listening or whose job, like mine, is listening intensive; including spies, priests, psychotherapists, bartenders, hostage negotiators, hairdressers, air traffic controllers, radio producers, and focus group moderators.

I also went back to some of the most accomplished and astute individuals I've profiled or interviewed over the years—entertainers, CEOs, politicians, scientists, economists, fashion designers, professional athletes, entrepreneurs, chefs, artists, authors, and religious leaders—to ask what listening means to them, when they are most inclined to listen, how it feels when someone listens to them, and how it feels when someone doesn't. And then there were all the people who happened to sit next to me on airplanes, buses, or trains or who perhaps encountered

me at a restaurant, dinner party, baseball game, grocery store, or while I was out walking my dog. Some of my most valuable insights about listening came from listening to them.

Reading this book, you'll discover—as I did—that listening goes beyond just hearing what people say. It's also paying attention to how they say it and what they do while they are saying it, in what context, and how what they say resonates within you. It's not about simply holding your peace while someone else holds forth. Quite the opposite. A lot of listening has to do with how you respond—the degree to which you elicit clear expression of another person's thoughts and, in the process, crystallize your own. Done well and with deliberation, listening can transform your understanding of the people and the world around you, which inevitably enriches and elevates your experience and existence. It is how you develop wisdom and form meaningful relationships.

Listening is something you do or don't do every day. While you might take listening for granted, how well you listen, to whom, and under what circumstances determines your life's course—for good or ill. And, more broadly, our collective listening, or the lack thereof, profoundly affects us politically, societally, and culturally. We are, each of us, the sum of what we attend to in life. The soothing voice of a mother, the whisper of a lover, the guidance of a mentor, the admonishment of a supervisor, the rallying of a leader, the taunts of a rival are what form and shape us. And to listen poorly, selectively, or not at all is to limit your understanding of the world and deprive yourself of becoming the best you can be.

1

The Lost Art of Listening

I was sitting on the floor of my bedroom closet interviewing Oliver Sacks. Construction across the street from my apartment made the closet the quietest place I could go. So there I was, sitting cross-legged in the dark, pushing dangling dresses and pants legs away from the mic of my telephone headset while talking to the eminent neurologist and author, best known for his memoir *Awakenings,* which was made into a film starring Robin Williams and Robert De Niro.

The purpose of the interview was to talk about his favorite books and movies for a short column in the Sunday Review section of *The New York Times*. But we had left Baudelaire behind and plunged headlong into a discussion of hallucinations, waking dreams, and other phenomena that affect what Sacks poetically called the "climate of the mind." As my dog scratched at the closet door, Sacks described the climate of his own mind, which was at times clouded by an inability to recognize faces, including his own reflection. He also had no

sense of direction, which made it hard for him to find his way home even after taking a short walk.

We were both pressed for time that day. In addition to the column, I had another story to turn in for *The Times,* and Sacks was squeezing me in between seeing patients, teaching, and lecturing. But we got immersed in our conversation, which, at one point, had us trading weather metaphors for states of mind: sunny outlook, hazy understanding, bolt of inspiration, drought of creativity, torrent of desire. I might have been sitting in a dark closet, but, listening to him, I experienced flashes of insight, recognition, creativity, humor, and empathy. Sacks died in 2015, a few years after we talked, but our conversation is alive in my memory.

As a frequent contributor to *The Times* and occasional correspondent for other news outlets, I have been privileged to listen to brilliant thinkers like Oliver Sacks as well as less well-known, but no less insightful, intellects, from couturiers to construction workers. Without exception, they have expanded my worldview and increased my understanding. Many have touched me deeply. People describe me as the type of person who can talk to anyone, but it's really that I can *listen* to anyone. It's worked for me as a journalist. My best story ideas often come from random conversations. Maybe with a guy running fiber-optic cable under the street, the hygienist at my dentist's office, or a financier turned cattle rancher I met at a sushi bar.

Many of the stories I have written for *The Times* have landed on the most-emailed and most-read lists, and not because I took down someone powerful or uncovered a scandal. It was because

I listened to people talk about what made them happy, sad, intrigued, annoyed, concerned, or confused and then tried my best to address and expand on what they said. It's really no different from what needs to happen before you can design a successful consumer product, provide first-rate customer service, hire and retain the best employees, or sell anything. It's the same thing that's required to be a good friend, romantic partner, or parent. It's all in the listening.

For every one of the hundreds of stories I have written in which you might see four or five quotes, I likely talked to ten or twenty people for corroboration, background information, or fact-checking. But as my closet conversation with Oliver Sacks suggests, the most memorable and meaningful interviews to me were not the ones that broke open or nailed the story but rather the ones that veered off topic and into the personal—maybe about a relationship, closely held belief, phobia, or formative event. The times when a person would say, "I've never told anyone that before," or "I didn't realize I felt that way until I just said it."

Sometimes the disclosures were so profoundly personal, I was the only other person who knew, and may still be. The person seemed as surprised as I was by what lay between us. Neither of us knew quite how we reached that moment, but it felt important, sacred, and inviolate. It was a shared epiphany wrapped in a shared confidence that touched and changed us both. Listening created the opportunity and served as catalyst.

Modern life is making such moments increasingly rare. People used to listen to one another while sitting on front

porches and around campfires, but now we are too busy, or too distracted, to explore the depths of one another's thoughts and feelings. Charles Reagan Wilson, an emeritus professor of history and Southern studies at the University of Mississippi, recalled asking the short-story writer and novelist Eudora Welty why the South produced so many great writers. "Honey," she said, "we didn't have anything else to do but sit on the porch and talk, and some of us wrote it down."

Instead of front porches, today's homes more likely have front-facing garages that swallow up residents' cars at the end of a hectic day. Or people live compartmentalized in apartments and condominiums, ignoring one another in the elevator. Stroll through most residential neighborhoods these days and it's unlikely anyone will lean over the fence and wave you over for a word. The only sign of life is the blue glow of a computer or television screen in an upstairs window.

Whereas in the past, we caught up with friends and family individually and in person, now we are more likely to text, tweet, or post on social media. Today, you can simultaneously ping tens, hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people, and yet, how often do you have the time or inclination to delve into a deep, extended, in-person conversation with any one of them?

In social situations, we pass around a phone to look at pictures instead of describing what we've seen or experienced. Rather than finding shared humor in conversation, we show one another internet memes and YouTube videos. And if there is a difference of opinion, Google is the arbiter. If someone tells

a story that takes longer than thirty seconds, heads bow, not in contemplation but to read texts, check sports scores, or see what's trending online. The ability to listen to anyone has been replaced by the capacity to shut out everyone, particularly those who disagree with us or don't get to the point fast enough.

When I interview people—whether it's a person on the street, CEO, or celebrity—I often get the sense that they are unaccustomed to having someone listen to them. When I respond with genuine interest to what they are saying and encourage them to tell me more, they seem surprised; as if it's a novel experience. They noticeably relax and become more thoughtful and thorough in their responses, assured I'm not going to rush them, interrupt, or glance at my phone. I suspect that is why so many end up sharing such tender things—unsolicited by me and wholly unrelated to the story I am writing. They find in me someone who will finally, at last, listen to them.

People get lonely for lack of listening. Psychology and sociology researchers have begun warning of an epidemic of loneliness in the United States. Experts are calling it a public health crisis, as feeling isolated and disconnected increases the risk of premature death as much as obesity and alcoholism combined. The negative health impact is worse than smoking fourteen cigarettes per day. Indeed, epidemiological studies have found links between loneliness and heart disease, stroke, dementia, and poor immune function.

Perhaps the canary in the coal mine for the current scourge of loneliness was an anonymous person who, back in 2004, just as the internet revolution was taking firm hold, posted,

"I am lonely will anyone speak to me" on a little-known online chat room. His cri de coeur went viral, accumulating a massive number of responses and media attention as the thread spawned similar threads still active on multiple online forums today.

Reading the posts, you'll notice that many people are lonely not because they are alone. "I'm surrounded by so many people every day but I feel strangely disconnected from them," one person wrote. Lonely people have no one with whom to share their thoughts and feelings, and, equally important, they have no one who shares thoughts and feelings with them. Note that the original post asked to be spoken to. He didn't want to talk to someone; he longed to listen to someone. Connectedness is necessarily a two-way street, each partner in the conversation listening and latching on to what the other said.

The number of people feeling isolated and alone has only accelerated since that 2004 post. In a 2018 survey of twenty thousand Americans, almost half said they did not have meaningful in-person social interactions, such as having an extended conversation with a friend, on a daily basis. About the same proportion said they often felt lonely and left out even when others were around. Compare that to the 1980s when similar studies found only 20 percent said they felt that way. Suicide rates today are at a thirty-year high in the United States, up 30 percent since 1999. American life expectancy is now declining due to suicide, opioid addiction, alcoholism, and other so-called diseases of distress often associated with loneliness.

It's not just in the United States. Loneliness is a worldwide phenomenon. The World Health Organization reports that in

the last forty-five years, suicide rates are up 60 percent globally. The UK was moved in 2018 to appoint a "minister for loneliness" to help its 9 million citizens who often or always feel lonely, according to a 2017 government commissioned report. And in Japan, there's been a proliferation of companies such as Family Romance that hire out actors to pretend to be lonely people's friends, family members, or romantic partners. There's nothing sexual in the arrangements; customers are paying only for attention. For example, a mother might rent a son to visit her when she's estranged from her real son. A bachelor might rent a wife who will ask how his day went when he arrives home from work.

Loneliness does not discriminate. The latest research indicates no major differences between men and women or between races when it comes to feeling disconnected. However, it does show that those in generation Z, the first generation raised on screens, are the most likely to feel lonely and self-report that they are in worse health than other generations, including the elderly. The number of school-age children and adolescents hospitalized for suicidal thoughts or attempts has more than doubled since 2008.

Much has been written about how teenagers today are less likely to date, hang out with friends, get a driver's license, or even leave home without their parents. They are spending more time alone; blue in affect, as well as in appearance, thanks to the reflected glow of their devices. Studies indicate the greater the screen time, the greater the unhappiness. Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of clinical depression by 27 percent and are 56 percent more likely to say they are unhappy than their peers who

spend less time on platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Similarly, a meta-analysis of research on youths who habitually play video games showed they were more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

To combat loneliness, people are told to "Get out there!" Join a club, take up a sport, volunteer, invite people to dinner, get involved at church. In other words, get off Facebook and meet "face-to-face." But as mentioned previously, people often feel lonely in the presence of others. How do you connect with people once you're "out there" and "face-to-face"? You listen to them. It's not as simple as it sounds. Truly listening to someone is a skill many seem to have forgotten or perhaps never learned in the first place.

Bad listeners are not necessarily bad people. You likely have a dear friend, family member, or maybe a romantic partner who is a terrible listener. Perhaps you, yourself, are not the best listener. And you could be forgiven since, in many ways, you've been conditioned not to listen. Think back to when you were a little kid. If a parent said, "Listen to me!" (perhaps while holding you firmly by the shoulders), it's a good bet you weren't going to like what was coming next. When your teacher, Little League coach, or camp counselor beckoned, "Listen up!" what followed was usually a bunch of rules, instructions, and limits on your fun.

And certainly the virtues of listening are not reinforced by the media or in popular culture. News and Sunday talk shows

are more often shouting matches or exercises in "gotcha" than respectful forums for exploring disparate views. Late-night talk shows are more about monologues and gags than listening to what guests have to say and encouraging elaboration to get beyond the trite and superficial. And on the morning and daytime shows, the interviews are typically so managed and choreographed by publicists and public relations consultants that host and guest are essentially speaking prepared lines rather than having an authentic exchange.

The dramatic portrayal of conversation on television and in the movies is likewise more often speechifying and monologues than the easy and expanding back-and-forth that listening allows. Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, for example, is praised as a master of dialogue. Think of his characters' breathless banter and verbal jousting on *The West Wing, A Few Good Men,* and *The Social Network*. His walk-and-talk scenes and epic confrontations, of which there are endless compilations on YouTube, are fun to watch and full of great lines—"You can't handle the truth!" But instructive on how to listen so you have a mutually responsive and fulfilling conversation, they are not.

All this, of course, is in the grand tradition of conversational grandstanding that dates back to the Algonquin Round Table—a group of writers, critics, and actors in the 1920s who met daily for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan to trade wisecracks, wordplay, and witticisms. Their competitive and razor-sharp repartee, which was published in major newspapers at the time, captivated the country and arguably still defines clever conversation in the popular imagination.

And yet, many of the regular members of the Round Table were profoundly lonely and depressed people, despite being part of a lively group that met almost every day. For example, the writer Dorothy Parker made three suicide attempts, and theater critic Alexander Woollcott was so beset with self-loathing that shortly before he died of a heart attack, he said, "I never had anything to say." But then, this was not a group that listened to one another. They were not trying to truly connect with others around the table. They were just waiting for an opening, for someone to take a breath, so they could lob their verbal firecrackers.

In her more reflective later years, Dorothy Parker said, "The Round Table was just a lot of people telling jokes and telling each other how good they were. Just a bunch of loudmouths showing off, saving their gags for days, waiting for a chance to spring them . . . There was no truth in anything they said. It was the terrible day of the wisecrack, so there didn't have to be any truth."

Our political leaders are not model listeners, either. Consider the spectacle of U.S. congressional hearings, which are not so much hearings as occasions for senators and representatives to pontificate, pander, chastise, berate, or otherwise cut off in mid-sentence whoever is unfortunate enough to appear before them. The most common feature of transcripts of congressional hearings is the all-caps insertion of the word CROSSTALK, which indicates everyone is talking over one another, and the transcriber, or recorder, of the debate can't make sense of what anyone is saying.

Similarly, Prime Minister's Questions, the weekly questioning of the British prime minister by members of Parliament, is seen as less an exercise in listening than Kabuki theater. The showboating has gotten so extreme that many MPs no longer attend. During his tenure as Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow told the BBC, "I think it is a real problem. A number of seasoned parliamentarians, who are not shrinking violets, not delicate creatures at all, are saying, 'This is so bad that I am not going to take part, I am not going to come along, I feel embarrassed by it.'"

The blowhard factor is in part responsible for ongoing political upheaval and divisiveness both in the United States and abroad, as people feel increasingly disconnected from and unheard by those in power. Those feelings seem justified, as political leaders, the mainstream media, and the upper echelons of society were gobsmacked by the disaffection laid bare in election results, most notably the 2016 victory of President Donald J. Trump and the British vote to exit the European Union the same year. Voters did the equivalent of throwing an electoral grenade to get their leaders' attention. Few saw it coming.

Polling proved a poor substitute for actually listening to people in their communities and understanding the realities of their everyday lives and the values that drive their decisions. Had political forecasters listened more carefully, critically, and expansively, the election results would have come as little surprise. Data derived from unrepresentative samples (i.e., people who answer unknown numbers popping up on their caller ID and who honestly answer pollsters' questions when they do)

was misleading. So, too, was media coverage that relied heavily on social media to gauge public sentiment.

And yet, social media activity and polling continues to be used as a proxy for what "real people" are thinking. Tempted by the ease and seemingly broad access, it's now common for print and television journalists and commentators to quote from Twitter and Facebook rather than going out and getting quotes that come from actual people's mouths. Seen as efficient and data driven, looking at what's trending on social media or conducting online surveys is largely how listening is done in the twenty-first century by the press, politicians, lobbyists, activists, and business interests.

But it's questionable that social media activity reflects society at large. Repeated investigations have shown that fake or bot accounts are responsible for much of the content. It's estimated that 15–60 percent of social media accounts do not belong to real people. One study showed 20 percent of tweets related to the 2016 U.S. election came from bots. Audits of the Twitter accounts of music celebrities, including Taylor Swift, Rihanna, Justin Bieber, and Katy Perry found that the majority of their tens of millions of followers were bots.

Perhaps even more pervasive are *lurkers** on social media. These are individuals who set up accounts to see what other people are posting but who rarely, if ever, post anything them-

* The pejorative term *lurkers* was coined by internet companies to describe non-revenue-generating users. Online platforms typically make their money by collecting personal data that users volunteer (likes, dislikes, comments, clicks, etc.) and selling it to advertisers.

selves. The 1 percent rule, or 90-9-1 rule, of internet culture holds that 90 percent of users of a given online platform (social media, blogs, wikis, news sites, etc.) just observe and do not participate, 9 percent comment or contribute sparingly, and a scant 1 percent create most of the content. While the number of users contributing may vary somewhat by platform, or perhaps when something in the news particularly stirs passions, the truth remains that the silent are the vast majority.

Moreover, the most active users of social media and commenters on websites tend to be a very particular—and not representative—personality type who a) believe the world is entitled to their opinion and b) have time to routinely express it. Of course, what generates the most interest and attention online is outrage, snark, and hyperbole. Posts that are neutral, earnest, or measured don't tend to go viral or get quoted in the media. This distorts dialogue and changes the tenor of conversations, casting doubt on how accurately the sentiments expressed track what people would say in the presence of a live, attentive listener.

To research this book, I interviewed people of all ages, races, and social strata, experts and nonexperts, about listening. Among the questions I asked was: "Who listens to you?" Almost without exception, what followed was a pause. Hesitation. The lucky ones could come up with one or two people, usually a spouse or maybe a parent, best friend, or sibling. But many said, if they were honest, they didn't feel like they had anyone who truly listened to them, even those who were married

or claimed a vast network of friends and colleagues. Others said they talked to therapists, life coaches, hairdressers, and even astrologers—that is, they paid to be listened to. A few said they went to their pastor or rabbi, but only in a crisis.

It was extraordinary how many people told me they considered it burdensome to ask family or friends to listen to them—not just about their problems but about anything more meaningful than the usual social niceties or jokey banter. An energies trader in Dallas told me it was "rude" not to keep the conversation light; otherwise, you were demanding too much from the listener. A surgeon in Chicago said, "The more you're a role model, the more you lead, the less permission you have to unload or talk about your concerns."

When asked if they, themselves, were good listeners, many people I interviewed freely admitted that they were not. The executive director of a performing arts organization in Los Angeles told me, "If I really listened to the people in my life, I'd have to face the fact that I detest most of them." And she was, by far, not the only person who felt that way. Others said they were too busy to listen or just couldn't be bothered. Text or email was more efficient, they said, because they could pay only as much attention as they felt the message deserved, and they could ignore the message or delete the message if it was uninteresting or awkward. Face-to-face conversations were too fraught. Someone might tell them more than they wanted to know, or they might not know how to respond. Digital communication was more controllable.

So begets the familiar scene of twenty-first-century life—at

cafés, restaurants, coffeehouses, and family dinner tables, rather than talking to one another, people look at their phones. Or if they are talking to one another, the phone is on the table as if a part of the place setting, taken up at intervals as casually as a knife or fork, implicitly signaling that the present company is not sufficiently engaging. As a consequence, people can feel achingly lonely, without quite knowing why.

And then there were the people who told me that they were good listeners, though their claims were often undercut by the fact that they were talking to me on their mobile phones while driving. "I'm a better listener than most people," said a trial lawyer in Houston returning my call in his car during rush-hour traffic. "Wait, hold on a second, I have another call." Also unconvincing were the people who said that they were good listeners and then immediately pivoted to a wholly unrelated topic, in the vein of *The New Yorker* cartoon where a guy holding a glass of wine at a cocktail party says, "Behold, as I guide our conversation to my narrow area of expertise." Other self-described good listeners repeated what I had just said as if it were an original thought.

Again, this is not to say that poor listeners are necessarily bad or boorish people. When they finish your sentences for you, they truly believe that they are being helpful. They may interrupt because they thought of something that you would really want to know or they thought of a joke that was too funny to wait. They are the ones who honestly think that letting you have your say is politely waiting for your lips to stop moving so they can talk. Maybe they nod very quickly to move

you along, sneak glances at their watches or phones, lightly tap the table, or look over your shoulder to see if there is someone else they could be talking to. In a culture infused with existential angst and aggressive personal marketing, to be silent is to fall behind. To listen is to miss an opportunity to advance your brand and make your mark.

But think of what would have happened had I been preoccupied with my own agenda when interviewing Oliver Sacks. It was a short column, and all I needed were a few circumscribed answers from him. I didn't need to listen to him wax poetic about the climate of the mind or describe the challenge of living without a sense of direction. I could have interrupted and made him cut to the chase. Or, wanting to express myself and make an impression, I could have leapt in to share things about my life and experiences. But then I would have disrupted the natural flow of the conversation, halted the unfolding intimacy, and lost much of the joy of the interaction. I would not, to this day, carry his wisdom with me.

None of us are good listeners all the time. It's human nature to get distracted by what's going on in your own head. Listening takes effort. Like reading, you might choose to go over some things carefully while skimming others, depending on the situation. But the ability to listen carefully, like the ability to read carefully, degrades if you don't do it often enough. If you start listening to everyone as you would scan headlines on a celebrity gossip website, you won't discover the poetry and wisdom that is within people. And you withhold the gift that the people who love you, or could love you, most desire.

2

That Syncing Feeling

The Neuroscience of Listening

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg gave himself a "personal challenge" in 2017 to "talk to more people about how they're living, working, and thinking about the future." But he wasn't going to engage with just anybody. He had an advance team fan out across the country to find just the right people in just the right locations for him to talk to. When Zuckerberg arrived, he was accompanied by an entourage of up to eight aides, including a photographer to capture him "listening." The images were posted on, no surprise, Facebook.

What Zuckerberg got right was listening is a challenge. What he got wrong—and made him the object of considerable mockery online and in the press—was thinking contrived listening was the same as actual listening. You've probably had experiences with people who made a show of listening. Maybe they went through the motions, nodding earnestly with knitted