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Some Thoughts on Listening, and the Book You're Not Listening and Why It Matters – by Kate Murphy

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Friday, April 24th, 2020

I have been thinking about some aspects of listening recently. For quite a long while I have been listening to myself, trying to work out where I stand on the skill of listening, its use and its limits professionally in mediation, conflict management, and coaching, and privately, and also on my own needs to be listened to. And I have been concerned too with the social relevance of listening in times when societies are polarized – here too professionally as a facilitator of public meetings, and privately as a citizen. I think it would help to have someone who would listen to me, ask me the right questions, and help me get my thoughts on listening in order. I believe that listening is crucial, and yet I do not want to overstate the case.

I came across a book on the subject. *You're Not Listening and What You're Missing and Why It Matters* (published 2019) is by Kate Murphy, a journalist who writes for *The New York Times*.^[1] She has interviewed and listened to many people in the course of her work. Sometimes, I find, books on popular psychology and communication state their case in their titles and could be much shorter, given their simple messages. Murphy's message is simple too, but the book is well worth reading through. It is full of everyday examples of good listening by ordinary people, and different perspectives on listening backed up by research.

I will share four ideas from Murphy that resonated with me – to which I really sat up and listened, and add a few ideas of my own to each.

One theme is the **shift response**, where we listen only to shift the conversation away from the speaker and toward the respondent. This is a large feature of everyday conversation and interaction, and it is nothing but human. I think we should be wary of being overly strict, chastising ourselves and others for this, and yet it remains a key reason why conversations are unsatisfactory. In mediation, mediators try to suspend this pattern by listening and supporting one story at a time (with the caucus a physical manifestation of this mediator strategy). Reading Murphy, I thought less about my work as a mediator, however, and more about my own interaction with colleagues, friends and family. Where is the symmetry?

Dotted throughout this book are some very resonant examples of good **question-asking** by people who really listen. They acknowledge what they have heard, then ask questions that invite the listener to go on and expand. An example Murphy gives is a conversation with a friend who has just lost his job and is worried about how to tell his family. A common response might be some form of empathy like "I'm sorry," and some form of evaluative encouragement, such as "I'm sure

you will find another job soon.” Murphy suggests that instead it might be better to pick up on the concern heard and invite more: “So now you have to break the news to your family. That’s rough. How do you think they are going to react?” This will seem familiar to many mediators reading – the book is full of wonderful examples from outside our profession.

I am not comfortable with cellphones in restaurants, sometimes on the table, and at social events, and I am uneasy with phones, tablets and laptops at business meetings. Even if the phones are not used, or “only” to be used to take a photograph of the here and now, I am always sensing that the people with me are potentially somewhere else. In meetings, people might be using their devices for the business at hand, but mostly they are doing something else. Their heads are often down, faces at the screen, their attention is not fully with the people they are really with.

There is a chapter in this book on **distraction and the effects that phones are having on our listening**. It is sobering reading. Entitled “Addicted to Distraction,” this chapter makes a compelling case for us to stop using our phones or other devices whenever we are in company. This would include in meetings or at lectures and events. The moment we feel slightly less than fully involved, we go to our fallback devices. There are not many places where these are not ubiquitous today – perhaps the theatre and the cinema are havens, but I have had more than one sobering experience in opera houses and concerts where the phones of others have distracted not just them but me. The great Bob Dylan interrupted his encore in a 2019 concert to tell people that they could either listen or take pictures, and if they wanted the latter, he would pose. Out of protest he had his band play the final song of the set as an instrumental, and he left the stage. In my mediations and training there are no cellphones. Most participants, myself included, immediately go for them in breaks.

This book also contains a very encouraging chapter on the **limits of listening** – entitled “When to Stop Listening.” Murphy writes that “while you can learn something from everyone, that doesn’t mean you have to listen to everyone until they run out of breath. Obviously you can’t.” This applies to everyday listening, what we might call non-professional listening, and it entails a form of very pragmatic mindfulness. If someone won’t shut up, best to leave. For professional listeners, which might include mediators, our roles and the parameters of the conversation are different, but there are limits. Mindfulness is significant. Listening can be exhausting, for participants and mediator alike. In many listening professions, the idea of a whole-day session with one listener-in-chief (therapist, coach, counsellor) would be very unusual. In much mediation this is the norm, and the day may extend into the evening and the next day. In in-house and workplace mediation I schedule a number of sessions of two to three hours over several months, and work with longer and more complex formats. This gives parties and the mediator time to listen to themselves between these sessions. I recommend the [recent Kluwer mediation blog by Bill Marsh](#) here on the timing of mediations.

Kate Murphy has written a wonderful book on listening, and she has given examples from many different professions, from diplomats, to professional carers, to businesspeople, and also children. She never once mentions mediation or mediators, and these terms are not included in the book’s index. I prefer not to see this as an unfortunate oversight, and rather as an inadvertent lesson. As mediators we rightly emphasise the value of listening, and sometimes we think that we are rather good at it. There are many other good listeners out there.

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

References[+]

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