

COMMENTARY

# You Talkin' to Me?

By John C. Cavanaugh | JANUARY 13, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

In his farewell address to the nation, President Barack Obama passionately exhorted his fellow citizens to engage actively in the democratic process, to argue about the merits of alternative ways of addressing major challenges, and even to acknowledge that one's opponents make important and meaningful points. He pushed us to get out of our comfortable bubbles in which we only consider ideas

and content that are consistent with what we already believe. He made a convincing case that such actions would not only make the process and, ultimately, society better, but also make us better citizens.

What he didn't say is that few of us have actually been taught how to do that. That's because achieving President Obama's vision requires us to listen, which we are not very good at. Consider that even those who are college graduates, and so presumably have acquired stated learning outcomes, typically demonstrate poor listening skills. They are often far better at feigning listening, repeating arguments derived from preconceived ideas, and simply ignoring or talking over the speaker.

The problem is that we do not help people learn how to listen. It is a fundamental, perhaps fatal, flaw in the learning outcomes that we have long argued underlie the educated person. We do not presume that people naturally acquire any of the other "Essential Learning Outcomes" espoused by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, yet we make that presumption about listening by not including it in that list

of essential skills. That must end: The inclusion of contemplative, or deep, listening as a core skill is indeed essential.

Contemplative listening is not the same as "listening" in the colloquial sense. The latter, which tends to be the default way listening is practiced, is rooted in how listeners are consumed with how a conversation affects them, spending their "listening time" waiting for their turn to talk and planning what they will say rather than actually paying attention to, that is, listening contemplatively, to the speaker. When their turn to talk comes, these listeners tend to restate ideas or opinions they already have or they debate the speaker to whom they are supposed to be listening. In contrast, contemplative listening reflects openness to new ideas or points of view, based on what the other person is saying. Contemplative listening forces us to be present.

From a learning-outcomes perspective, contemplative listening is not the same thing as inquiry and analysis or critical and creative thinking. Contemplative listening requires focus on what is being said, an ability to separate one's personal needs and interests from those being expressed by the speaker, a mind open to new or different possibilities, and interpersonal trust. True contemplative listening is hard cognitive and emotional work, and it is grounded in the skills we already claim to be teaching; that is, it is difficult to engage in contemplative listening without also being able to inquire or think.

Considerable neuroscience research shows that the integration of emotion and logic, key ingredients in contemplative listening, emerge first in young adulthood and are honed at least through middle age. This is one major reason why the reasoning processes undergo fundamental change during the traditional college years and continue thereafter.

Contemplative listening forces us to stop using self-oriented and reactive thinking and to start being open to and comfortable with the unexpected and the uncertain. At its best, it also embeds acknowledgment or reflection of what another has said into what we ourselves think about and say. When done well, it may involve significant amounts of silence. All of this takes patience, practice, and courage. It is not the stuff of instant reaction on social media.

Calls to engage in contemplative listening in higher education have come from a wide variety of scholars, including Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, Megan Scribner, Daniel Barbezat, Mirabai Bush, and Beth Berila. Contemplative listening also has a long history in all of the spiritual traditions as well as in social justice as a way to consider and confront difficult issues that make us uncomfortable, and as a way to focus our thoughts and feelings. It has been viewed as a way to come to consensus around controversial and otherwise divisive issues and feelings.

Arguably, contemplative listening helps us become deeper thinkers and feelers, people who reflect first and speak later from a firm conviction, not a knee-jerk reaction. It requires us to be truly present — to others, to our discomfiture, to productive paths forward. To be considered as a great listener is one of the highest compliments a person can receive. It also provides a path to self-knowledge. As Palmer puts it, "when we learn how to listen more deeply to others, we can listen more deeply to ourselves."

There are many examples of how contemplative listening, once mastered, can be used to bridge divides and create new paths of understanding, policy, and practice. Barbezat and Bush have proposed using contemplative practices to transform teaching and learning. Their approach builds on the traditional learning outcomes by using contemplative practices as a capstone skill that provides students ways to apply their own lived experiences, inquiries, analyses, questions, and emotions to every type of problem they encounter. This is exactly the approach we need now to move us beyond the false practice of listening that so permeates current education and social discourse.

This could become an approach used not only across the curriculum, but also in everyday experiences. Imagine if campus leaders demonstrated contemplative listening in situations involving racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or other issues that left students, faculty, staff, or others feeling unsafe. Imagine an intense political debate in which contemplative listening was a ground rule. Imagine the opportunities for even greater learning of critical thinking and inquiry that could result.

I challenge our institutions and all our academics colleagues to take the need for contemplative listening as seriously as they take the other "Essential Learning

Outcomes" we claim our graduates must master. It's high time we and our students learned to listen, contemplatively, much more. It would provide richer input for our inquiry, thinking, and communication, and in the process would help us achieve the society President Obama envisions. Perhaps we might also see more reflective tweets. Imagine that.

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