

The Fun, Wonder and Pure Selfishness of Listening



Michelle Strutzenberger immersed in the art of listening during a recent generative interview.

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Trying to listen well — like striving to live healthy — can easily erode into a guilt-heavy, anxiety-stabbed experience.

What would it take to rediscover and soak in the fun, wonder and even pure

selfishness of it?

I have feeling-thick memories of joining conversations among parents, older siblings, neighbours, where I was the child listener. Their murmuring for hours, their words and stories soaked into me like warm honey into bread.

Whether I was just a strange child or my circles had all manner of marvellous things to say or I'd stumbled upon some wonderful gift of life without knowing it, I relished those times of listening as much — if in different ways — as hours of soaking in the river on hot days.

That childlike joy in listening has grown into something different over the decades. While I still like to listen, sometimes it's more of an effort than I would like it to be. There is so much to distract.

I am not naïve enough to think that discovering that exact same joy can or even should be the Holy Grail.

I am a different person. I've walked a long and often piercing road.

But I do think that pausing to reflect on those childhood experiences can at the very least offer a bit of encouragement. Not lessons. Not techniques. Just encouragement.

Here are three encouragements coming up for me now:

1. **Listening can be selfish.** Not selfish as in I will listen to you to impress you or make you like me or even to make myself better (though I think it's okay if that's the case sometimes). But the purest selfish listening can be done, I think, just because I believe you're such an amazing person whom I respect and how can I do anything other than take in that amazingness?
2. **Listening can be fun.** At the risk of over-generalizing, I've gotten this sense that listening in our culture has become like the diet trend of the past. It's the right thing to do. It's good for my career and humanity. It's a duty. Here's a book on how to listen better. What if there were ways to see it as just plain fun? To actively make it fun?

3. Listening can be a doorway into rediscovering the wonder of life. What if some of the sadness and jadedness of our current culture — okay, my own life, I'll avoid projecting — has to do with that we're always talking — whether that's in person or on social media? Or that we're always talking with those who seem the most like us? I've found some of my most wonder-filled moments have come from listening, really listening, to the imaginings of my children, the stories of my parents and grandparents, and the reflections of people who appear to be at a jarringly different place in life than I am.

Okay, enough talking. I'm off to listen.

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