CHAPTER VII

With the Mind's Ear

Everyone, when they are young, has a little bit of genius; that is, they really do listen. They can listen and talk at the same time. Then they grow a little older and many of them get tired and listen less and less. But some, a very few, continue to listen. And finally they get very old and they do not listen anymore. That is very sad; let us not talk about it.

Gertrude Stein, as reported by Thornton Wilder

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The ears have nothing comparable to eyelids, but they can be as effectively sealed as eyelids can be closed. Sometimes both close at the same time, but it is often the case that the ear is turned off while the eyes are open. That matters little if, in either case, the mind's attention is turned to other matters than what is being heard or seen. What the senses register are then sounds and sights that lack significance.

Listening, like reading, is primarily an activity of the mind, not of the ear or the eye. When the mind is not

actively involved in the process, it should be called hearing, not listening; seeing, not reading.

The most prevalent mistake that people make about both listening and reading is to regard them as passively receiving rather than as actively participating. They do not make this mistake about writing and speaking. They recognize that writing and speaking are activities that involve expenditures of energy, unflagging attention, and the effort to reach out to the minds of others by written or oral communication. They also realize that some persons are more skilled in these activities than others and that increased skill in their performance can be acquired by attention to rules of art and by putting the rules into practice so that skilled performance becomes habitual.

As I pointed out in *How to Read a Book*, the first lesson to be learned about reading is that reading—with the mind, not just with the eye—must be every bit as active as writing. Passive reading, which is almost always with the eyes in motion but with the mind not engaged, is not reading at all.

That kind of reading is on a level with watching television for the sake of relaxation or just to fill some empty time, letting the images that pass across the screen flit before one's eyes. The habit of watching television in this way, endemic among the young who spend hours before the screen in a state of intellectual somnolence, turns them into passive readers who flip the pages of a book with little or no attention to the meaning of the words on the page or to the structure and direction of the discourse that the book contains.

Let me repeat an analogy that I have used before. The catcher behind the plate is just as active a baseball player as the pitcher on the mound. The same is true in football

of the end who receives the forward pass and the back who throws it. Receiving the ball in both cases requires actively reaching out to complete the play. Catching is as much an activity as throwing and requires as much skill, though it is skill of a different kind. Without the complementary efforts of both players, properly attuned to each other, the play cannot be completed.

Communication through the use of words is comparable. It does not occur unless the reader's or listener's mind reaches out to catch what is in the mind of the writer or speaker. This has been directed to the reader or listener through the medium of written or spoken words. If we use only our eyes or ears to take in the words, but do not use our minds to penetrate through them to the mind that delivered them, we do not perform the activity that is essential to either reading or listening. The result is failure of communication, a total loss, a waste of time.

Of course, the fault may not always lie with the reader or listener. The failure to catch a wild pitch is not the catcher's fault. So, too, some pieces of writing and some spoken utterances are either so devoid of meaning and coherence or so befuddled and confusing in their use of words that the best reader and listener can make little sense of them. Some are such defective presentations of what is in the mind of the writer or speaker that they are not worth paying much attention to, if any at all.

In considering the effort and the skill required for active and effective listening, I am going to assume that the spoken utterance deserves close attention and will repay all the effort one can exert and all the skill at one's disposal to follow what has been said, so as to understand it to a degree that approximates the understanding that the speaker wishes to achieve.

For the moment, we can ignore the differences between the sales talk and the lecture, the differences in purpose and in style. We shall subsequently consider how, in the one case, listeners must be on guard against the tricks of persuasion that may occur in the effort to sell them something, to enlist their support for a political policy or candidate, or to get them to carry out a managerial decision to do business in a certain way. Similarly, in the other case, we shall subsequently consider how listeners must be both docile and critical, both predisposed to learn rather than resistant or indifferent to what is being taught, yet at the same time not wishing to swallow whole what is laid before them.

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The importance of listening is generally acknowledged. It is also generally recognized that, of the four operations involved in communication through words—writing, reading, speaking, and listening—the last of these is rarely well performed.

No one who gives a moment's thought to the matter would hesitate to confess that whatever degree of skill he has acquired in writing, reading, and speaking, he has acquired less—if any at all—in listening. If asked why this is so, one response may be that instruction in writing played a part in his schooling and that some attention, though much less (to a degree that is both striking and shocking) was paid to developing the skills of reading and speaking. Almost no attention at all was given to skill in listening.

Another response may be forthcoming from the person who reveals the mistaken impression that listening involves little more than keeping quiet while the other person talks. Good manners may be required, but not much skill.

We are all indebted to Sperry, a major American corporation, for the campaign it has conducted, both in the advertisements it has published and in the brochures it has distributed, to counteract the widespread apathy and misunderstanding that exists concerning listening. Sperry has also devoted corporate time and funds to developing courses of instruction in listening and has made these courses available to all levels of its personnel, because, in Sperry's view, deficiencies in listening and the failures of communication that ensue from such deficiencies are a major source of wasted time, ineffective operation, miscarried plans, and frustrated decisions in every phase of the businesses in which the corporation is engaged.

In one of Sperry's brochures, it is pointed out that of the four basic activities involved in communication, listening is learned first in the development of the child, used most in the course of one's life (46 percent of the time), and is the least taught throughout all the years of schooling.

In contrast, speaking is learned next in the developmental sequence, used 30 percent of the time, and is almost as untaught in school as listening is. Reading is learned before writing; it is engaged in more frequently than writing (15 percent of the time as compared to 9 percent); and less instruction is devoted to it than to writing.

Whether these facts and figures as presented can go unquestioned, it is certainly the case that the skills of speaking and listening are much less well developed in the population at large than those of writing and reading. However poor is the performance of our average high

school and college graduates in writing and reading (and it would be difficult to exaggerate the inadequacy of their skills in these fundamental activities), it is many times worse with regard to speaking, and listening is certainly the worst of all.

The Sperry brochure to which I have been referring lists a number of bad habits that interfere with or detract from effective listening. Among them are paying more attention to the speaker's mannerisms of speech than to the substance of what is being said; giving the appearance of paying attention to the speaker while allowing one's mind to wander off to other things; allowing all sorts of distractions to divert one's attention from the speaker and the speech; overreacting to certain words or phrases that happen to arouse adverse emotional responses, so that one is then predisposed to be negative in one's prejudgment about what the speaker is actually saying; allowing an initial lack of interest in the subject to prevent one's hearing the speaker's explanation of why it is important and should be of interest; and, worst of all, taking an occasion for listening as nothing more than an occasion for indulging in daydreaming, and so not listening at all.

To overcome these bad habits, which all of us have detected in others if not in ourselves, the Sperry brochure then lists "ten keys to effective listening." Many of these recommendations are little more than injunctions to overcome or eliminate the bad habits already mentioned that stand in the way of effective listening.

Of the few recommendations that are positive, all concern the use of one's mind in listening. That, of course, is the nub of the matter. But it is not enough to say that one's mind must be actively engaged in listening, that its

perceptions must not be clouded by irrelevant emotions, that the mental effort expended must be equal to the task set by the difficulty or complexity of what the speaker is saying.

Nor is it enough to say that the listener must have at least the intellectual courtesy of initially assuming that what is being said is of sufficient interest and importance to be worthy of attention. The speaker may fail to confirm that assumption, but at the beginning he should be listened to with an open mind and an attentive one.

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What more can be said, and must be said, to provide positive rules that one can follow and, through applying them, develop habits of effective listening?

My answer is that the rules are essentially the same as the rules for effective reading. That should not be surprising. The two processes are alike in what they require the mind to do.

In both, the mind of the receiver—the reader or listener—must somehow penetrate through the words used to the thought that lies behind them. The impediments that language places in the way of understanding must be overcome. The vocabulary of the speaker or writer is seldom if ever identical with the vocabulary of the listener or reader. The latter must always make the effort to get at a meaning that can be expressed in different sets of words. The listener must come to terms with the speaker, just as the reader must come to terms with the writer. This, in effect, means discovering what the idea is regardless of how it is expressed in words.

In listening as in reading, it is necessary to note the statements that convey the main points the speaker or writer is trying to make. Not everything said or written is of equal importance. In most discourses, whether spoken or written, the number of truly important propositions being advanced is relatively small. The listener, like the reader, must detect these and highlight them in his mind, separating them from all the contextual remarks that are interstitial, transitional, or merely elaborative and amplifying.

Like a written document, however long or short, the speech being listened to is a whole that has parts. If it is worth listening to, its structure (the way the parts are organized to form the whole) and its sequence (the way one part leads to or connects with another) will be perspicuous and coherent. Therefore, the listener, like the reader, must make the effort to observe the relation and sequence of the parts as constituting the whole.

Like the writer, the speaker proceeds with some overarching and regulative purpose or intention that controls the substance and style of what is being presented. The sooner the listener, like the reader, perceives the focus of this controlling purpose or intention, the better he or she is able to discriminate between what is of major and what is of minor significance in the discourse that is to be understood.

Understanding what the speaker is trying to say, perceiving how he or she is managing to say it, and noting the reasons given or the arguments advanced for the conclusions that the speaker seeks to have adopted are indispensable to effective listening, just as they are indispensable to effective reading. But they are never enough. With regard to anything that one understands, either by reading or listening, it is always necessary to make up one's own mind about where one stands—either agreeing or disagreeing.

One may be unable to do either because one recognizes that what has been said has not been sufficiently understood to warrant agreement or disagreement. Another reason for withholding agreement or disagreement is that one wishes further elucidations or arguments that have not yet been forthcoming. In either case, the critical listener, like the critical reader, should suspend judgment for the time being, and pursue the matter further at another time.

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In *How to Read a Book*, I set forth the rules for the adequate reading of a book that, because of its substance and style, deserves careful reading. After explaining each of the rules in detail, and showing how to apply them, I presented all of them in a single compact summary. Here it is.

I. The Analysis of a Book's Structure

1. Classify the book according to kind and subject matter.
2. State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity.
3. Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and analyze these parts as you have analyzed the whole.

4. Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.

II. The Interpretation of a Book's Contents

1. Come to terms with the author by interpreting his basic words.

2. Grasp the author's leading propositions through dealing with his most important sentences.

3. Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.

4. Determine which problems the author solved, and which he did not, and of the latter, decide which the author knew he failed to solve.

III. The Criticism of a Book as a Communication of Knowledge

A. General Maxims

1. Do not begin criticism until you have completed analysis and interpretation. (Do not say you agree, disagree, or suspend judgment until you can say, "I understand.")

2. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously.

3. Respect the difference between knowledge and opinion, by having reasons for any critical judgment you make.

B. Specific Criteria for Points of Criticism

1. Show wherein the author is uninformed.

2. Show wherein the author is misinformed.

3. Show wherein the author is illogical.

4. Show wherein the author's analysis or account is incomplete.

Note: Of these, the first three are criteria for disagreement. Failing in all of these, you must agree, in part at least, though you may suspend judgment on the whole, in the light of the fourth point.

As stated, these rules are obviously intended for reading an important book—even better, a great book—to which one is willing to devote a great deal of time and effort because of the profit to be gained.

No speech, however important or extensive, has the magnitude or complexity of an important or great book. The rules of reading must, therefore, be simplified and accommodated to the limitations of oral as contrasted with written discourse.

In addition, one can devote an unlimited amount of time to the reading and rereading of a book in order to improve one's understanding of it and to determine one's critical response to it.

Unlike reading, listening is subject to the limitations of time. We can only listen once to what is being said to us

and the pace of our listening is determined by the pace set by the speaker. We cannot stop the speaker and ask him to repeat something that was said earlier, as we can stop going forward to the next page to review pages read earlier. We cannot hold up our hand to signal the speaker to pause while we ponder something he has just said, as we can put the book down for as long as we wish to ponder what we have just read.

All these differences between listening and reading not only explain why effective listening is much more difficult than effective reading; they also call for a much simpler set of rules to guide us in the effort to use our minds actively in listening well.

The essence of being a good reader is to be a demanding reader. A demanding reader is one who stays awake while reading, and does so by asking questions as he reads. Passivity in reading, which really renders the process null and void, consists in using one's eyes to see the words, but not using one's mind to understand what they mean.

The good listener, like the good reader, is a demanding listener, one who keeps awake while listening by having in mind the questions to be asked about the speech being listened to.

I have formulated elsewhere the four main questions that a demanding reader must ask of anything that is worth the effort to read well, for profit or pleasure, not just to kill time or put oneself to sleep. I will now try to adapt them to listening to a speech.

Listening to a speech, or any other form of spoken utterance, is analogous, in the length of time required, to reading an article or an essay rather than a whole book. Like an article or essay, the speech will be shorter and will be a simpler whole, a less complex organization of parts.

Therefore, the questions to be used in listening to a speech can be simpler than the ones recommended for reading a book. Here they are.

i. *What is the whole speech about?* What in essence is the speaker trying to say and how does he go about saying it?

ii. *What are the main or pivotal ideas, conclusions, and arguments?* What are the special terms used to express these ideas and to state the speaker's conclusions and arguments?

iii. *Are the speaker's conclusions sound or mistaken?* Are they well-supported by his arguments, or is that support inadequate in some respect? Was the speaker's thinking carried far enough or were matters that were relevant to his controlling purpose not touched on?

iv. *What of it?* What consequences follow from the conclusions the speaker wishes to have adopted. What are their importance or significance for me?

It is possible to have all these questions in mind while listening, but most of us would find it impossible to try to answer them at the same time that we are listening to an ongoing speech. Yet answering them later when reflecting upon what one has listened to is an indispensable adjunct to listening. If these questions cannot be answered as the speech goes on, they must be answered retrospectively when one reflects on what one has listened to.

The active reading of a long book or even a short essay calls for more than the persistent use of one's mind with a maximum effort of attention. It can seldom be done without using pen or pencil, either marking the book itself, writing in the margins or on the end papers, or jotting

notes down on a pad that lies beside the book on one's desk.

Since listening to a speech or any other form of oral discourse is intrinsically more difficult than reading a book or an essay, it is even more necessary to put pen or pencil to paper in the process. Skillful listening involves skillful note-taking, both while the speech is going on and after it is over, when one reviews one's notes and reflects on them. Then one should make a new series of notes that is a better record of what one has listened to and how it has affected one's mind.

One may seldom be able to answer, while the speech is going on, all the questions that I have recommended to keep in mind while listening. But one can certainly make a sustained effort to answer all of them in retrospect and in the light of the notes one made while listening.

CHAPTER VIII

Writing While and After Listening

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Of all the books I have written, *How to Read a Book* has been most often reprinted since its publication in 1940, has reached the widest audience, and has elicited what has been for me the most gratifying expressions of appreciation from readers whose lives it has affected. It has made reading for them both more profitable and more pleasurable, and, opening the pages of the great books for them, it has given them a lifelong pursuit.

Of all the articles I have written, none has been reprinted more frequently in anthologies or textbooks for students than an essay I wrote in 1941 for *The Saturday Review*, entitled "How to Mark a Book." *How to Read a Book* had insisted upon the necessity of actively using one's mind while reading, always by reading with a questioning mind. That can be done without pen, pencil, or pad. But the best way to make sure that you are incessantly active while reading is by making notes, page by page, as you read—not in bed or in an armchair, but at a table or desk.

Making notes while reading is highly useful, certainly to be recommended to anyone who may lapse back into pas-