

AN OPINION

IS ANYONE LISTENING? BY RALPH KEYES

One of my less pleasant fantasies is that in the middle of a party some evening, I'll interrupt a conversation to ask my listener, "Could you tell me what I've just been saying?"

Probably he or she won't be able to, but I've often been tempted to ask such a question because at least it would jerk their eyes from wandering over my shoulder, and back to my face.

We've all suffered this over-the-shoulder syndrome, conversing intently with another person at a social occasion, drinks in hand, only to have his eyes float over the room in search of someone better to be with. Only then do we have proof of what we suspected all along—that our conversation had little to do with communication, and our words just weren't being heard.

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It's so rare to feel actually *listened to* that I've wondered why it is we spend so much time talking. Relief of tension? Courtesy? Or is it a primitive radar function, knowing that our voice bouncing off another body is substantial evidence of really being here?

Psychologist Richard Farson says most social conversations consist of "parallel monologues." "We use each other for occasional stimulation," he explains, "not communication. In the over-the-shoulder phenomenon, there's very little contingency in the conversation. What I say has little to do with what you say."

Most such social dialogue ends up as a bargain for mutual boredom: I'll let you bore me for a few minutes if you'll let me bore you. I don't think this represents rudeness as much as tension. When all wound up inside, when my brain is still racing along the freeway or fighting wars at work, it's inconceivable that I'll really hear another person, no matter how frequent the bobbing of my head.

When tense I'm not really all that different from the talk-show hosts who seem to listen to their guest, but rarely connect questions with the answer preceding. "How's your life been going?" the host may ask.

"My mom just died."

"Great. And tell us about your new movie."

But talk shows are really just a paradigm of social conversation generally, all participants struggling desperately to look like they're listening to each other while obviously composing their next comment, and waiting to leap in with it.

One movement for men's liberation defines their biggest problem in rap groups as the "self-listening" participants engage in, using another person's words only as the occasion for formulating their own. A technique such groups have developed to cope with this problem is allowing each participant an un-interrupted few minutes at the outset of every meeting to report the state of his life.

Since "self-listening" seems to charac-

terize most conversations, one wonders why we presume the need for other listeners at all.

In New York especially, growing numbers of talkers have faced this dilemma squarely and given up the pretense that one needs an audience to talk. New York is the only city I know where several times a day one passes solitary orators—not the odd lunatic babbling to himself one sees in all cities but ordinary citizens whose clothes are pressed and hair is combed. Where sensory overload makes it rare that anyone hears (though many speak), muttering to one's self has become less a sign of lunacy than sincerity—a rejection of the hypocrisy that for permission to talk, another ear needs to feign listening.

The other side of this problem are those ears which must feign hearing when not really present at all. A friend who runs a guest ranch tells me the main social skill he's developed over several years as a host is the ability to inject "um hm's" and "oh yes's" as guests' ramble on and his mind drifts off to Bermuda, or the bed of a girlfriend.

One devotee of this method recently wrote Abby that she'd learned to deal with her husband's endless stories by absenting her mind and planning the weeks' meals

while murmuring regular "oh really's?" and "Is that so's?"

"I can see one built-in danger to this," the woman wrote. "If he ever suspects what I'm doing and slips in the story of 'The Three Bears' where he usually tells me how many shots it took his brother to win a turkey, I may be in serious trouble."

Tension, I think, is really at the heart of our listening problem. No matter how much I want to listen to another person, to really *hear* what he's saying, if my stomach's tied in knots while my mind races like an over-tuned engine, there's no way I can pay attention to another person's talk, *really* pay attention.

Often in my own work as a journalist, I'll tape interviews with people. Inevitably this is a little uncomfortable for both of us. Later, when I listen to the playback, I'm always amazed at what went right by me, how much I didn't hear, at the time of the interview. Because no matter how well done, an interview is always tense to some degree, and when tense, I just can't hear all that's being said to me.

This is why a recent flood of "solutions" to the listening problem don't necessarily seem helpful—the "active listening" emphasized by some schools of psychology, "creative listening," or even the "Kellogg Listening Model and Procedure" developed and taught by a Dr. Kellogg. Listening has become a growth market with a variety of courses being offered to improve one's ear, such as the Xerox Learning System's "Effective Listening" course which offers three LP records, and two practice response books with pre- and post-tests.

I'm sure that the graduate of such a course might follow my words more closely, and establish better eye contact—even at parties. But I doubt they'd really *hear* me better because what I have to say often falls between my words, and can only be picked up by a listener who's relaxed enough to hear what I mean, not just what I'm saying. What never fails to strike me after a few days away from work is how much easier it becomes to chat with people, and how much more I seem to hear.

But this is the antithesis of most party settings, where word-clashing and eye-wandering are the rule. One way to approach this problem is to get mad at others for not listening to you. Another way is to get mad at yourself for not listening to others. Or, one could avoid social situations altogether.

None of these alternatives feels especially helpful to me, any more than would taking a course in how to train my ear for better listening. Because the problem is not so much in our ears as our stomachs. Therefore to be a better listener I need to find ways of reducing my tension. And to be heard I must seek social situations where others can be calm enough to do so. *Ralph Keyes is a Fellow of the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California, and is currently working on a book called Is There Life After High School? (Little, Brown).*