

What Does It Mean to ‘Listen to Listeners?’

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1.

The academic arena known as “communication theory and research” drew on numerous established disciplines in the 1930s and 40s to define itself and reach a kind of maturity in the years after the war. Today it has taken its place on virtually every major American university campus, as well as numerous European campuses. It began with an all-out emphasis on the “sender” of messages; its central image was the hypodermic needle—a belief, in short, that whoever sent the message controlled the message’s outcome. Wielders of propaganda were assumed to be very powerful forces indeed.

Research studies by the hundreds, almost all of them meticulously empirical, were undertaken by communications scholars of both psychological and sociological bent (despite their commonalities, still two distinct research traditions). Virtually all of the studies made the same assumption of an *active* message sender and a *passive* message receiver. The goal of the research throughout those early decades was always the same: to develop scientific means of *predicting* how receivers would act when confronted with a given message. There just had to be empirically-identifiable “laws” that govern communication behavior. Or so it was thought.

In the 1950s, though, a bewildering impasse settled over the communications research establishment. Researchers were realizing that no such empirical “laws” of message communication were emerging. Just when such a “law” seemed to be in sight, another group of studies would undermine or even disprove it. Moreover, it was increasingly apparent that the sources, or the senders, of messages were simply not much in control of the communication situation. While a few things had been inadvertently learned along the way, what was most significant was that the fundamental empirical premise of active-sender/passive-receiver had also been stunningly disproved.

It was Raymond Bauer, one of those communication researchers, who wrote a seminal essay saying all of this out loud. Bauer proposed that communications research had been looking in the wrong place: that it was not the sender of the message who ultimately controlled the situation—but the *receiver*. As easy as that was to see in retrospect, it was an awareness that changed the focus of the entire communications research world. A newer, more broadly-based form of empirical research emerged, drawing on other disciplines and perspectives. Now the motivating questions of the research became: How did the receiver come to understand the message in a particular way? What function did the message play for its receiver? And, what did the receiver of the message do with it and to it? With that, communications research entered a much more vigorous and fruitful era.

This shift took place in the decade and a half before I entered graduate school at the University of Illinois in the late 1960s to study communication theory and research. It was a heady time. New theories were everywhere, theories about “receivers” of messages, about “hearers” and “watchers” of the countless messages with which we were then and are still

bombarded. While we all as Ph.D. students had to prove ourselves with the old empirical research methods, the doors were open for being critical of those methods, and even supplementing them with other, decidedly more effective and well-rounded, methods for doing research.

My own specialization revolved around what was known as “content analysis.” It involved, at one level, a process of empirically evaluating content in as objective a manner as possible. At another important level, it was about working on ways to determine how—and why—different people could look at the same message, the same “content,” and find in it very different things as a basis for behavior. At still another level, it was about how to probe deeply enough to understand what lay behind verbal content: attitudes, values, intuitions, and much more.

I say all this to indicate how much I appreciate the Academy’s gradual but now quite visible shift from an emphasis on the preacher and her/his “craft” to the “listener,” the “hearer,” the “subject” of the preacher’s work. It is certainly time that such a shift take place. In this paper, though, I want to reflect, if somewhat critically, on what I take to be the two distinct forms in which one can see this shift happening in the intellectual circles of homiletical work.

2.

The matter of studying hearers or listeners to sermons, though, has two very large dimensions, both of which are now represented to some extent within the Academy. Both are being advocated in various ways by our most important scholars—and both deserve comment, even if the words written here do, in fact, represent no more than a minority perspective.

The first concerns the matter of “how communication works,” of how “listening” works. In short, what happens particularly within the listener when one person talks and someone else hears? The focus is on the “hearer” and the dynamics of listening rather than on what the “speaker” does or is going. The second dimension of “listening to listeners” does not have to do with the *nature* of hearing and responding *itself*, but with inducing hearers to *explain* and *describe* what they have heard and participated in. This second kind of research, “listening to listeners,” focuses almost exclusively on *interviewing* subjects and then *analyzing* the interview results.

The first half of my 1998 book, Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism, published by Chalice Press, was concerned explicitly with the question of why and how we hear the things we do when we listen to someone else, even a preacher. More specifically, why do we all *hear* such different things when we listen to the same words by the same person talking? Beyond that, it was about why we all *behave* so differently as a result of our hearing different things in the same words and phrases from others. The discussion there drew on a long and varied tradition of sociologically-oriented communication theory to indicate that there is no such thing as a “passive hearer,” whether in one-on-one conversation or when listening as part of a crowd to a single speaker. While hearers say nothing and smile often, their heads are bustling, and even bristling, with what George Herbert Mead first described as an “internal conversation.” People talk to, and within, themselves. Constantly, as well as “loudly” and emotionally.

When they—we—are listening to someone else speak, the internal conversation for virtually every hearer is a three-way conversation. It all takes place internally, however, so every one appears still, passive. In our heads, though, we take in everything around us—reacting to it emotionally and even talking with ourselves about it. I try to recreate some of the nature of that internal “dialogue” in my pluralism book. Then, of course, we carry on a complex internal “dialogue” with the *one* who is speaking—sometimes becoming angry (despite our half-smile), sometimes expressing to ourselves our bewilderment and confusion, sometimes just so darn happy at what we are hearing that we actively discuss with ourselves who we should hurry to tell about what we have found here.

It sounds like one person is talking, but that just isn’t true. When we are children alone in a room, we can play by the hour, voicing the diverse dialogue of a half dozen characters at war or at a party or whatever; and we do it all aloud. The only thing that changes in their remarkably human activity when we become adults is that the talking characters are not dolls, and we learn to “internalize” the conversation we carry on with ourselves and others. Among the questions about *how* this process of “hearing” actually works is this: Where do we all get the materials—the symbols, emotions, and even values—from which our “internal conversations” are constructed? It is truly a question worth asking and answering, since it is the key to why people “hear” and “act” as they do toward how and what we preach.

It is no wonder, though, that “conversation” and “conversational style” public speech form the dominant modes of small and large group interaction with which we are most comfortable.

3.

A couple of years ago I stumbled across what I thought was a break-through idea in academy literature: a discussion of “preaching as conversation.” I thought, “Aha, we are making progress in our understanding of the dynamics of public address.” I subsequently learned, however, that in a sense I was quite wrong. The word “conversation” was being used not in its communicative sense at all, but as a metaphor. It meant only a process of trying to take account of the myriad of perspectives that bombard us on any subject, including religious ones, in our world today. It was a metaphor, in short, for pluralism. It was a metaphor for “listening to some members of the conversation who might have ideas for the sermon.”

Even Wes Allen’s new book, The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach, treats “conversation” as only metaphor. Aside from talking to a few people before the sermon and after or dividing congregations into “discussion groups,” there is virtually nothing in these studies that comes close to taking the *communicative* nature of human “conversation” seriously. There is even an understandable desire to push the idea of “conversation” to the level of a “theology of preaching,” connecting it to various postmodern theologies.

The problem from my point of view—and I continue to be amazed at how different our perspectives are within the Academy of Homiletics—is that by both background and training I do not take the word “conversation” when it is used in relation to preaching as either metaphor or

theology. It can be those, I understand, if one chooses to extend the concept in such directions. But both uses are, in my judgment, derivative notions of it—not primary ones. I take the word “conversation” when used to talk about preaching as a “praxis” concept—one arising from and related to the “practice” of preaching. In intellectual discussions praxis usually gets short shrift, to be sure; and that is to my mind the case here. Still, for communication scholars, conversation is conversation. The art of conversation is practiced one-on-one, which we are all used to; it is also practiced in small groups, say in our classes, even if we practice (as we often do) the improvisational art of stand up or sit on the desk lecturing; it can also be practiced, as it should always be, as the *public speaking* form of choice. Preaching as great conversation—lively, dynamic, robust conversation: it is not a theoretical or theological concept, but first and foremost a profoundly praxis-oriented art centered in the very act of public communication. We hear and digest nothing better in the speech of others than natural, conversational language.

4.

The second of the two orientations to “listening to listeners” is the one in which listeners—hearers—are urged (invited?) to talk about what they have seen and heard, about what they like and do not like, about the preaching experiences they know. Over the years we have had very little of this kind of basic research. This even though sometime ago it had become more and more apparent that the sharp decline in mainline denominational membership and church attendance over the past decades meant that something was badly needed to help understand what was going on. Now we have some new materials with which to work.

For this, we owe Ron Allen a debt of gratitude for his remarkable success in luring funds from the Lilly Endowment for a multi-year study of “hearers” of sermons. The gratitude must also be extended to that intrepid band of scholars who have set some of their own projects aside to work on the “hearers” study. We are promised at least four books and a satchel full of articles, though I suspect the number will grow beyond that.

Even though more than one book has now appeared in the Allen series, I will stick only with the first one in the brief notes that follow. In that book, Listening to Listeners, we get two kinds of material—the rather extensive, though edited, *transcripts* of the interviews with a significant number of people. We also get the *analyses* of the interviews by a half dozen or so of our scholar-friends. I need to say up front that the time, energy, and creativity that went into the selection of subjects, the interviewing and transcribing make this material one of the most valuable bodies of work ever available to the homiletical community. The questioning was rigorous and thoughtful, the subjects were well engaged, and their resulting statements are stunningly candid and enlightening.

The analysts of the material—among our best and best-known scholars—on the other hand, found themselves in a tight spot. So before I get to the content of the interviews, it is necessary (again as a kind of minority report) to make some notes about the need to separate the interviews from the analysis. I will only pick only the one central problem I have with the analytical materials in Listening to Listeners.

It is that the consistent and rigid use of Aristotle's three-part rhetorical "model" of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* as a basis for analyzing the "content" of the interviews was, in my judgment, a mistake, plain and simple. While there is certainly heuristic value in these conceptualizations as they have come down to communication and rhetorical scholars, they were designed to generally delineate the three large dimensions of the public speaking process—the intellect, the emotions or passions, and the actual context/situation of public address itself. The categories were never meant to serve as delicate tools for analyzing words and sentences. It is like trying to study a strand of hair through a telescope. It doesn't work. The instrument is wrong. Everything is blurry.

It becomes a situation in which the instrument becomes an enormous barrier between the observer and the complex object that is being examined. There are countless finer-scaled tools, almost all of them well-known and even refined among communications researchers—even speech/rhetorical researchers; but this is not one of them. The result is a series of distorted notes about very important raw material. Even beyond that, though, the result in the analytical notes of this book—both those in the interview margins as well as those end-chapter notes—is that the analysis plays down, misconstrues, and even mocks, without meaning to, the countless insightful things that are said by these thoughtful, vigorously-involved interviewees.

We are told that during his negotiations for Lilly Funding Ron Allen was told that he had to devise or select a "research model" of the analysis of the interviews that he and his team proposed to do. For reasons that undoubtedly have more to do with familiarity than with research needs, Aristotle's venerable rhetorical categories were chosen, and were deemed acceptable by the Lilly research folk. That meant, apparently, that from then on the analysis of the interviews could *only* be done using those concepts. What we end up with is a group of our very best homiletical minds unable to bring their own best insights, sensitivities, and understandings to bear on a remarkable body of new preaching-oriented information.

The analytical outcome is, at best, an awkward and in some places confusing running commentary along the right hand column of the book's interview transcripts. It seems clear that the authors of the chapters found themselves in the position of *having* to use the words "*logos*," "*pathos*," and "*ethos*" in all or at least most of the short notes they were to write about specific things the interview subject's said. Undoubtedly, the "make notes in the margin" format had something to do with the lack of clarity—but the problem was usually the struggle with those ham-fisted categories.

5.

For example, Jim is asked to comment on his associate pastor, and his reply is striking in its richness and subtlety. In part he says:

When he came, I was in college. I was in my freshman year in college. In the summer, we had the college class. The college class was of decent size, but not very big...I got to know him real well. When Tom is...I don't want to say when he's unprepared, he's better than when he prepared. That's not the truth, but when he's off the cuff, he's just unbelievable. He comes up with things, just 'How does he come up with that stuff off the cuff?' He's just an entertaining, fun guy to be around.

The analyst comments on this statement like this:

One aspect of the logos of preaching is rhetorical 'invention,' or, in Jim's words, 'coming up with stuff' to say. Jim links this positive logos-quality of inventiveness with the preacher's character—he's just an entertaining, 'fun guy' (ethos). Notice, however, that Jim carefully distinguishes between being 'unprepared,' a negative logos-quality and 'off the cuff,' a positive ethos-quality. This raises an important question for consideration. How can preachers appear spontaneous and at the same time deliver well-prepared sermons?

I am not trying to fault or criticize here; what I do call attention to is that this statement is like trying to untie the string around a package with both hands tied behind one's back. And the couple of paragraphs that each analyst is allowed at the end of the interview continues this language, which means it only tends to make matters worse. Jim's statement, along with his entire interview, is a remarkable and valuable statement from one who loves charismatic preaching, and tries to describe what it is and does. Just as remarkable, in our context, is that the analyst in this case is the redoubtable John McClure.

One more example, briefly, before we try to be constructive about this "exercise." The interviewer asks Anthony to "think of a sermon that you've heard that has caused you to act differently in some way or to do something in particular." At first he seems stumped, but then he replies like this:

No more than just stand up and no more than just say, backing the preaching on what he says, knowing that those things are right. To me, saying...Not saying I say the right things, but what comes from my heart, saying 'Hallelujah,' 'Praise the Lord.' Those things to me make me feel good. Those things entirely. I can stand up and say it. I'm never been that...person to feel that I'm going to dance out in the aisle, but I seem like I'm dancing right there without dancing.

The analyst's note on this response says this:

Anthony attempts to describe the pathos and logos reactions as integrated, and does so in the bodily language of reaching out, as if a hand is extended. This is particularly interesting given his earlier attempts to distinguish between the two.

That last phrase was interesting enough to become the "title" of the chapter for Anthony's interview. But what did he say? What did he mean? What is necessary, as they say, to "unpack" it, to put it into the context of Anthony's often tangled but ultimately very important observations? What does Anthony feel, what does he experience, how does he "take part" in worship? He is talking about "reacting to sermons," to a sermon—but how do we move from his very unusual words to what is "inside him?" How do we go about trying to hear him?

The writers of brief marginal notes like this one concerning Anthony will talk about their "limitations," largely of space and scope; such limitations are often a part of how scholars and writers have to work. Here, though, the *categorical* limitations are the most constricting—having to work in and through the logos, pathos, and ethos language throws up the biggest barrier to such complex and nuanced statements by these interviewees. Even the chapter near the end of the book titled, "Insights, Discoveries, and Things to Watch" also strains to make important interviewee comments fit into the old tripartite rhetorical chestnuts. Ironically, there are a few places, only a few actually, marginal notes where the analysts have "just written" their

observations—and a couple of those clearly demonstrate what the commentary on the interviews *could* have been.

6.

All that aside, these interviews, even in their edited version of this first volume, are pure gold. Last year this time after I read Listening to Listeners I was distressed by it, particularly by its methodologies, both before and after the work; I believed then, as I think I still do, that the advisory group did not get the best outside advice that it could have. It was only after getting around that initial reaction to what I had read, though, that I began to meditate carefully and methodically on the *interviews* themselves. Even edited for space, they are truly rich. The “listeners” by and large took their questioners seriously; they were smart and canny in trying to grasp what their questioners wanted to know—and they answered as openly, seriously and in as detailed a fashion as anyone could possibly expect.

It is my hope that academicians in homiletics (as well as a lot of thinking preachers) will carefully study these interviews, reading them with empathy and open-hearted naivete. After spending time with them last year, I began my own book on these interviews, with a chapter devoted to each one, both the individual and the group ones, all eight of them. There are numerous contemporary ways to study, probe, evaluate, and assess “content,” the kind of very personal, even intimate content embodied in these interviews. Some of the ways are quantitative, or empirical; some of them are qualitative in nature; the best are a combination of both types of research orientation. However one goes about it, the study must be guided by careful, thoughtful, insight—a trained, sensitive mind that is empathetically conditioned not just to read lines, but to read between and behind lines, even into minds and hearts.

During my early years of communicative study, this kind of “interviewing” research that appealed profoundly to a great many of us was being done by a young, tape-recorder wielding child psychologist named Robert Coles. A trained psychotherapist, he believed in nothing more than in listening—really listening—to people; mostly children for him, but countless others as well. His books, particularly his landmark three-volume series, *Children of Crisis*, was, in large part, the tape recordings of his interviews, interspersed with his notes, his questions and comments, and above all his attempts to digest and articulate what he found in, under, behind, and around the words from his recorder. He was looking not just for meanings and perceptions, but for feelings and emotions, for beliefs, judgments, fears, angers, hopes, and anxieties.

Coles was no stranger to interviews with both children and adults about church either, about God, about things religious. What is striking is how similar his interviews from more than 35 years ago still seem today, particularly in reading the interviews in Listening to Listeners. From Coles’ chapter called “Rural Religion” the final chapter of Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers, comes this remarkable tape-recorded piece of an interview with one of the mountaineer miners:

I’ll admit there are times I wonder about things. I ask myself why don’t all the ministers go and call on the mine owners and people like that and tell them they’re sinners. A lot of good it does us to know that! Maybe some ministers do that, but I’ve never heard of it. You can tell that the minister in the church near our mine is all cozy with the owners. He’ll never say anything out of line. The ones that come

through here, the ones that go on the circuit from one church to the other, some of them are better than others. But I don't believe we're supposed to believe everything the ministers say. Only the Bible. They'll read the Bible, and sometimes I can go along real good, and sometimes I'm not clear on what it call means. I ask myself questions a lot of Sundays. I'll be there in church, sitting and praying, and I'll get ideas in my mind. I'll say to myself, why are we here, and what's it all mean? If God knows in advance how it's all going to turn out, then why does He bother putting us through all this?

Later, the mountaineer says:

The way I see it, on Sunday you get a chance to get together, the whole family, and collect yourself, that's how I'd put it, collect yourself—and you're doing it right before God. If the minister says something foolish, which he'll do from time to time, then he's going to have to square himself before God, too—and I'll bet a lot of those reverends, they've got some explaining to do before Him God. You could say I learned that from my father, and I've never forgotten it, how it's not the minister who is God, but God who is God. And down in that mine, when we thought we'd all be killed pretty soon, I believe that's what we all knew. We all said if we were going to be called by God right there and then—well, that's all right, but we didn't want to hear that because we're poor and the next guy is rich, that's fine and God wants it to be like that or else He'd come and change things. No minister could tell me that and have me believe him.

How does one listen, *truly listen*, to this miner's talk about church and about the preachers, the ministers, he's known? How does one hear into and behind the lines? How does one interpret the thousand and one profound and subtle nuances of meaning and emotion? One reads again and again. One empathizes, slowing massaging words on paper into real, honest, and multilayered feelings. Listen for a moment to Coles turning over these words; Coles has much to teach us about this process of “listening to” interviewees, real people from whom we wish to learn:

He wants and needs an explanation not only for his acknowledged misery but for a million injustices he knows exist all over the world: up and down the mountains and in cities—indeed, wherever there are people. He is not willing to accept what he is told by a particular minister, and he even senses but doesn't talk about some of the tensions and contradictions that preoccupy more theological minds than his. Implicitly, though, he makes his point: there is God and there is church and there is man. The minister is a mediator between man and God—through an institution, which is the church. As for the Bible, it is God's Word—but heard and written down by men. Does that mean he really dares question God's Word as revealed in the Bible? If so, can he not be considered a free-thinker, a corrupted modern man, like so many of us? He seems not to worry about such things. He reads the Bible, and in doing so becomes stronger, speaker louder, feels more certain about things. Something happens to him that is physical: I have seen it happen as grace is said over a meal the vast majority of American citizens would find hard to eat, let alone say grace over....

*I am reminded of Kierkegaard's formulations (in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*) because like him, this mountaineer in essence demands a particular relationship with God, one that in the clutch will glad dispose of all intermediaries, be they ministers, politicians, secular propagandists, wise neighbors and friends—and yes, overbearing would-be advocates and helpers. What is more, signs of resignation appear again and again in his words and sentiments—and I say resignation, not depression or despair... Yet, again in the company of Kierkegaard, the mountaineer understands that he is human, that he is bound to demand and expect the impossible (from himself, from others, and from God) but that ultimately whatever goes on between him and Him, as it were, is mysterious and beyond rational calculation or analysis....*

These few lines do little justice to either the mountaineer's long monologue or to Coles' extraordinary probings into what the man has said. I share these pieces, however, to say that the interview transcripts that have come to all of us from the Lilly study in which ordinary people

talk about sermons are as profound in their own way as Coles' interviews from the past. What we now need more than anything else, in my judgment, are a number of homiletics scholars to spend time with them, massaging them as Coles always did, helping us to understand through empathic listening and interaction with these congregants are trying to tell us in such subtle ways about what we are doing to them week in and week out. But we have to *learn* to listen. I am going to try to do that in my book—and I am encouraging various colleagues to do the same.

7.

For example, to conclude, here are a few brief edited (by me) sections from one moving interview in *Listening to Listeners*, one that is left unanalyzed in the book. The interviewer first asked Albert what would be missing from worship if there were no sermon:

It would be a major piece of the service. It's almost like when you're pastor's out of town and they send in a substitute pastor who just doesn't hold your interest. You say, 'I'm getting nothing out of this service.' He may have been a very monotone person. He may be a great guy and a wonderful Christian, but something about the delivery just didn't catch on. You're here, and you spend more time looking at the kids or talking over here and you miss the whole sermon. Without it being there, you wouldn't have church....

One of the things when we were trying to get our certification for teaching, the one thing they stress is movement. Don't stand in one place when you're giving your lessons...Move around the room; touch people, so people so they can get a better feel...The movement keeps the people involved. Hand movements. Talk with movement and hand gestures. It's actually what keeps the eyes focused, along with your voice, but your movements keep people focused on you....

You can tell a Bible story to where a person really, really feels it. That's when I'm being touched. That's touching you when the pastor is telling you almost as if he was there. That moves people. That's what keeps people coming to church. Most pastors in this church are nice, quiet guys. They tell the stories with less emotion. I think that's just the [name of the denomination] way. Sometimes I think [with this church's way] and with these pastors, that's the reason a lot of churches are dying. People want to feel. People want to hear music that's up-tempo, upbeat. The hymns were beautiful, but people want more. It's almost being entertained as far as in the sermon, an with the music I guess that helps....

You can see the times and tell when someone has passion. You can tell the anger. Sometimes you can feel it. He gets to a point that maybe he feels that you're not listening. He needs to shake it up. He gets to the point where maybe someone is look at him in a way that prompts him to say, 'Maybe you're not understanding what I'm saying.' He'll say, 'I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I don't mean to. Sometimes he'll set up before he throws the fire, He might say, 'I don't mean to hurt anyone's feelings,' or, 'I'm not talking about anyone personally, but I want to say this.' You can read him. You can tell if it's from the heart....

The preacher has to make me [participate]. He can't just stand at the podium and flip papers and just read. I want to know personal stories. I want to know stories from the Bible. Tell me what happened to your friend, Joe. Just normal folks. That's what I mean about being touched. You can't just read to me and send me home. I want to feel it. Folks want to do that. I'm just speaking for myself, but I speak for the young folks of my age group, and they're saying the same thing. That's why their brothers and sisters don't come because they don't get nothing out of it. Everything is too monotone. You've got everybody sleeping.

How do we “study” these words in order to learn something about preaching from them? We read and think and meditate and listen. Above all, we listen with our minds and hearts. In

one of his chapters on “method” for learning to “listen” to his mountaineers and children, Coles wrote these words:

Once upon a time (a long time ago, it now seems) I desperately wanted to make sure that I was doing the respectable and approved thing, the most ‘scientific’ thing possible; and now I have learned, chiefly I believe from these people in this book, that it is enough of a challenge to spend some years with them and come out of it all with some observations and considerations that keep coming up, over and over again—until, I swear, they seem to have the ring of truth to them. I do not know how that ring will sound to others, but its sound after a while gets to be distinct and unforgettable to me.

The aim of all these trips and visits can be put like this: to approach certain lives, not to pin them down, not to confine them with labels, not to limit them with heavy intellectualized speculations but again to approach, to describe, to transmit as directly and sensibly as possible what has been seen, heard, grasped, felt...