

## Listening Cosmically: Bridging Cultural Worlds

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It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen. Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809 - 1894)

### **Why listen cosmically? What do we mean by cosmic?**

Wisdom is the desire of our global world. Ours is a global society, with many cultures, each with its own perspectives, and each a unique world view. It was Nietzsche who said that if we are attentive (receptive/listening), we will realize that we are able to experience and understand something more encompassing than any single culture, perspective or worldview. Our practical, everyday lives limit our experience but also allow us to know that there is more to our experience than our own individual worldview. If we are able to differentiate or become aware of a cultural perspective or a identify a worldview we must already have a more encompassing understanding; we can “see” this particular perspective and differentiate it from other perspectives. We know (hear) this larger “view” by the fact that we are actually part of a much larger more encompassing (global) field within which these more limited views are included. The cosmic is more than any single cultural perspective or group of lived worlds or views—although, we could also argue that there is only one world with many “lived-worlds” depending on the culture you inhabit and experience every day.

One intimate way we know the world is through listening, being receptive. This has been the accepted wisdom across most of the cultures and civilizations of the world since the earliest of times. Here we sketch out the common theme of listening across cultures, listening cosmically, and suggest why and how we can share our common humanity through listening to each other. We know this wisdom from our histories and our stories, and now we must adapt it to the demands of the late modern world. Finally adapting to the late modern world requires the essential human behaviors that have made us successful over human development and are still relevant today. And in addition, our current times call for listening as central to realizing our global and cosmic connections as humans.

Listening can be understood at many levels; however, the importance of listening resonates across all civilizations, all cultural worlds. Listening is essential, everyday practice in every culture and is spoken of in the classical sayings of just about every culture. Listening has been celebrated as an important behavior by sages from all walks of life. Zen masters, Hindu and Sikh gurus, tribal leaders, and Western saints, popes and intellectuals, have all given

credence to the critical importance of listening and receptivity—as part of the larger importance of awareness.

Here are some classic quotes across several civilizations. (In the modern era there are also a wealth of quotes that emphasize the importance of listening.)

- As for the fool who will not hear, there is not one who can do anything for him. Ptahhotep, *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*.
- The beginning of wisdom is silence. The second stage is listening. Hebrew saying
- Eyes and ears are bad witness to men who have not an understanding heart. Heraclitus in Blackwell *Sourcebook in Ancient Philosophy* p. 34
- He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. Mark IV
- To be heard, there are times you must be silent. Chinese Proverb
- O, Child of Buddha Nature, listen! Pure Inner radiance, reality itself, is now arising before you. Recognize it! *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.
- Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. The Buddha.
- Give up haste and activity. Close your mouth. Only then will you comprehend the spirit of Tao. Lao-tzu
- Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly.
- Plutarch (46 AD - 120 AD)
- Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. James 1:19, *The Bible* (Christian New Testament edition).
- Listen or thy tongue will keep thee deaf. Native American Proverb
- The fool speaks, the wise man listens. ~ Ethiopian proverb

### **Listening for nuance and complexity**

"In Texas, we don't do nuance." (Former president, USA)

There is a serious need in the late modern, globalized world for listening that attends to nuance and complexity, for ours is such a world. Nuance and the recognition of complexity both require careful listening. Careful listening is *not* like any other serious listening practice. This is more than mindful listening whose Hindu origins suggest memory and awareness of the present. Good, careful listening practice also requires being aware, rational, compassionate and attentive to our own biases and the filters that prevent us from patiently listening to the communication of those from other communities. No community is simple; each is full of nuance and has its own biases of perception and ways of speaking. The biases we hold filter our perception and require self-awareness, and monitoring to self-correct, if we are to listen carefully.

Our awareness needs to allow empathy and compassion in all of our interactions. These virtues allow us to drop filters and biases. We often half listen as well; we do not take the time nor are we patient enough to fully hear another person. We need to be patient and reasonable as we carefully consider the details and emotions of our friends—and enemies—our neighbors and strangers. This requires a (global)field approach that encompasses and surpasses any individual view or cultural perspective. It is a listening attitude that appreciates all of the nuance, complexity and passions of the different points of view people live in our modern world. No

single point of view will tell us all we need to know; we must listen across the global spectrum and integrate all of the views into a better understanding of our cosmic global culture.

This global awareness is not really a burden; it guarantees that in our modern era every corner of the globe is a rich and diverse culture worth our attention. If we listen, and are receptive and observant to that wonderful variety we will be constantly amazed and enriched.

Still, fear seems to rule for many. Often this fear is about an indeterminate future or what has happened in the past—our modern world is a complex and uncertain place—but the future is not yet and the past is no more. Listening is in the moment; we should, as much as possible, live in the present, listening to what is happening now; and most of all appreciate, be thankful and grateful for what we have, especially our relationships (around the globe). This sense of gratitude and appreciation insures that we will be a better communicator and curious to learn about the lived-world of other peoples.

Gratitude overcomes fear. But in this modern world of complexity and diversity many are fearful that they are not being heard. People cry out for a voice; to be listened to. Listening validates people, it lets them know they are important and accepted. We need to listen to people's needs, listening lets people know they are heard and acknowledged.

An article by the Dalai Lama and Arthur Brooks, stated that “we all need to be needed.”

Being “needed” does not entail selfish pride or unhealthy attachment to the worldly esteem of others. Rather, it consists of a natural human hunger to serve our fellow men and women. As the 13th-century Buddhist sages taught, “If one lights a fire for others, it will also brighten one's own way.”

Spending more time listening to others face-to-face would make us all feel more connected and needed. In the USA and other countries there is a resurgence of salons or dialogue groups—similar to those that existed before the rise of mass media. These salons were (are) a place for people to listen and learn, to connect and feel needed. There was (is) a sense of community, and participants learn to listen and become aware of the basic behaviors that make us a community.

### **Listening as central to success in the modern world**

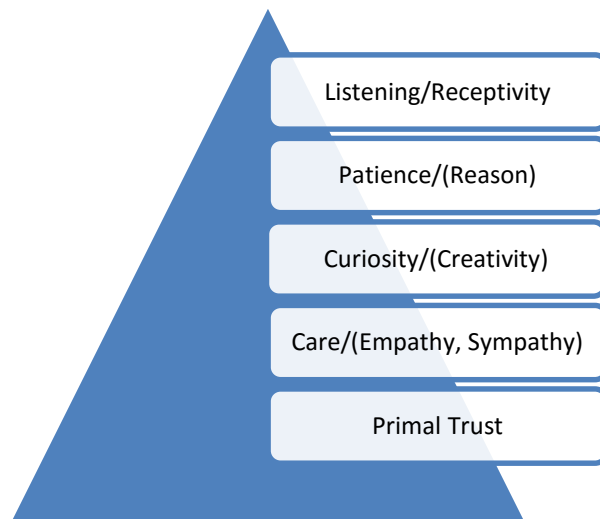
The behaviors I have been exploring in my research over the last few decades speak to the basics of human behavior that support community and that cut across all civilizations and human eras. In a paper presented for the International Listening Association on listening and human consciousness, and later published in the *International Journal of Listening* (Purdy 2000), I mapped out the five human eras and the listening behaviors correlate with each era. All of these listening styles are still present in every society, although they are not always identified intentionally—that is they may be latent or not *obviously* recognized. The forms of listening (archaic to conscious) for the five structures of consciousness (archaic, magic, mythic, mental, integral) that play out over the development of human civilization (from that paper) are presented, with brief description (figure 1):

<p><b>Archaic: Hunter gatherer Society</b> Rooted/grounded in the natural world</p>	<p><b>Sympathetic: Magical-Tribal/Community</b> Listening in harmony with community as well as nature</p>	<p><b>Empathetic: Mythic/Story Telling</b> About human connection, a heart-felt relation from listening</p>	<p><b>Rational Mental: Reasoning</b> Humans figuring out, efficient, goal-oriented listening</p>	<p><b>ConsciousIntegral Listening:</b> Listening in dialogue—all modes engaged constructively &amp; effectively</p>
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**Modes of Listening for eras of Consciousness (fig. 1)**

In a recent paper at the International Listening Association, *Listening for Humanity: A New Field “Paradigm”*<sup>1</sup> I expanded upon this model, but shifted the emphasis from the *forms* of listening in each era, to the *modes of behavior* that are needed as primary efficient behavior in each era, with listening as the most needed behavior in the “late modern era”—the period that roughly begins with the late 1800’s. That model suggests that listening is required for modern, global civilization to sustain itself and thrive. (This goes beyond movements to be “sustainable,” we would hope to do more than sustain in our human relations.) Listening is critical for sustaining and thriving in the global community, but if we are really listening we can have truly vibrant global development, and better cross-civilizational understanding.

We can, at least as a first move, see this constellation as a pyramid, or hierarchy of behaviors with primal trust as most basic and universal.



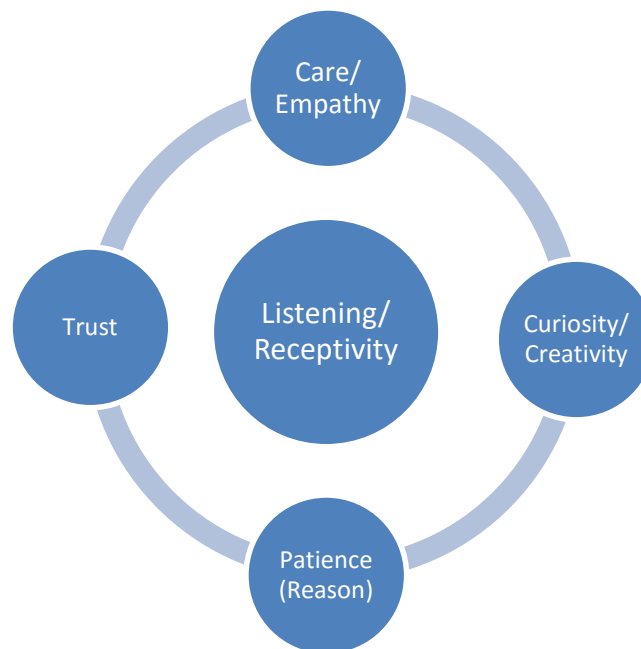
**The human “evolution” that supports modern listening (Fig. 2).**

<sup>1</sup>See [academia.edu/Michael Purdy](http://academia.edu/Michael_Purdy) for this paper, presented at the ILA conference in Tucson, AZ, March 2016.

More realistically these five “levels” are not really hierarchical—all are ever-present—so we could see them as a simple ladder where each behavior builds on its civilizational precedent, with the late modern world being considered as integral: integral in the sense that we realize our experience the world as more whole or complete than our culture or customary linguistic concepts would dictate. The integral life world is a gathering of all pervious modes of awareness—from archaic to conscious.

This is a new model, or better a new paradigm—a new showing—in the sense that it points to something beyond the usual. Because this paradigm presents human abilities built up over eons, this paradigm presents something interesting about the importance of listening in the modern, integral world: Listening is the key. In the end, I am working toward a presentation of listening for the modern, mediated era, a world that needs and requires a fuller human listening/receptivity before giving a response—to be responsible we need to first listen. If we have not listened we don’t understand what we are responding to and cannot, therefore, be responsible.

Here is a paradigm with its attendant “behaviors” as critical elements in a supporting field; all are present and variously active in our late modern world. In this model, we have listening as the focus and integrating center, supported by the collective wisdom of human experience (fig. 4). As we will see in this final section, research at Google has borne out the validity of this model.



**Listening as central to awareness in the modern world (Fig. 4)**

**A team study supports this paradigm: The Aristotle Project at Google**

Julia Rozovsky, a scholar who has researched more than 100 years of group effectiveness studies (Duhigg, 2016), was hired by Google and was trying to figure out what made a successful team. The research indicated that a variety of groups were

successful but there didn't seem to be any common strategy that worked across groups. Studying the history and research of successful teams and including experiments at Google with 100s of groups finally led to the conclusion that it was group norms that made the difference, not the intelligence or creativity, or cleverness of group members—although team members at Google were certainly hired for their curiosity and creativity.

The broad norms that mattered, and are fairly comparable to this article, were psychological safety, or where we began in this study with *trust* among group members, or freedom from fear. As team norms are refined the next critical norm is *empathy* or sensitivity—*care*. The third norm that really matters in effective teams/groups is turn-taking; the norm that expects group members to be *patient* and support the other members to have a fairly equal say—to get equal time speaking in the group's process. And finally, the Google study ended by stating:

The paradox, of course, is that Google's intense data collection and number crunching have led it to the same conclusions that good managers have always known. In the best teams, members listen to one another and show sensitivity to feelings and needs (Duhigg, 2016).

This is a case study that begins with trust, realizes the importance of care as empathy and sensitivity, the importance of patience and listening to everyone equally, and finally concludes with the importance of listening as most critical to an effective team.

### **A Team Study: The Aristotle Project at Google**

#### **Successful Team Norms**

- **Trust**—Safe psychological environment
- **Care**—Importance of sensitivity/empathy
- **Curiosity**—A given, but needed for effective listening
- **Patience**—Importance of turn-taking, = time
- **Listening**—The key to effective groups, respect for team members

**Conclusion :**

Ours is a complex world. The truth in this global era is nuanced and listening to the everyday experience of our neighbor or someone in another part of the world requires an awareness of the diversity of views and cultures. In the end, we must realize that even with the most perfect listening there will never be perfect understanding or transparency across culture, civilizations or world views. That is the beauty of listening, we are always in process as a trusting, caring, curious, patient, reasonable communicator. The joy is not in reaching a perfect communication, that would only be possible in a perfect and ideal world. The world is never perfect or ideal and that is also why we need listening. The diversity of cultures and world views is to be appreciated and celebrated. The best way to do this is to listen and make listening a part of an effective dialogue among peoples.

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