

Listening Ecology: Tuning into the Environment, Saving the Planet

When we listen, solutions follow.
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*The one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade,
has at least understood the meaning of life.*

~ Rabindranath Tagore

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The Earth does not belong to us. We belong to the Earth.

~ Chief Seattle

The whole lineage of my mineral, vegetable, animal, quantum, particle and wave, thermodynamic and chemical ancestors collaborate with me, participate in what I do

—Thích Nhất Hạnh

Overview

This article recognizes our global climate crisis, and the urgent need for action. The UN’s latest “Doomsday” report¹ is a call to listen and respond. We begin this article with a philosophy that supports listening to the whole environment, a receptivity that grounds listening with an encompassing ecological awareness. This philosophy is necessarily grounded in a living community, but a community that is not just sustainable, but one that must thrive and flourish². This philosophy section will be short, as we want to focus on communication and community, and how they must be listening in such a way as to include ecology³/environment as part of our extended community. It is also important to know where to listen. This philosophy must include expansion of our feelings, senses, perceptions, and apperceptions, and describes necessary behaviors and actions that encompass the fullness of nature and ecology (Greek: the study of our dwelling, home). Social media can bring information and connect communities superficially, but the deep relationships that support successful action must be realized through rich face-to-face community building. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of what this listening style would include, and some suggestions for expanding listening awareness.

The Issue Needing Listening: The Environment

There is now (and has been for many decades) overwhelming evidence of a global climate crisis—with all its complex effects. The lack of receptivity and attention to the crisis sends development experts into a tailspin, as they search for answers and struggle with ignorance and a lack of solutions for action. These solutions require imagination and incredible commitment, plus a focus on listening awareness leading to action. We must start by attuning ourselves to the environment, by listening ecologically—a sense of listening to the whole field of our perceptions in a free and open sense, but also an ecological sense, as the wholeness of an expanded sense of listening. In this vein, there are several aspirations we can cultivate for listening to our environs. One approach comes from listening to—and with—tribal peoples, and learning from their deep

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-climate-report-2040.html>

² Some aspects relating to listening and community are adapted from Purdy (1991), *Listening and Community*.

³ Ecology is the scientific analysis and study of interactions among organisms and their environments. It is an interdisciplinary field that includes biology, geography, and Earth science. Ecology includes the study of the interactions organisms have with each other, other organisms, and with a biotic components in their environment. en.wikipedia.org

knowledge of communities, natural resources, and “history.” Appreciation of their connection with the environment lies at the heart of smart planning and development. It is the first step in empowering people to make the systemic changes that will allow them to build an enhanced resilience, and ensure a better future for themselves and their families.

Environmental Leaders Who Were Attuned/Listening

Historically, approaches to ecological listening hail from Western environmentalists like Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and Juan Estevan Arellano, to say nothing of the recent diversity of voices for ecology—including the likes of Rachel Carson and Al Gore. Most important is the awareness of a crisis, and a call for action in response to the major shifts in the global climate. For example, Sir David Attenborough, narrator of *The Blue Planet*, and of *Our Planet* on Netflix, warns about the threat of climate change: “We are now so numerous, so powerful, so all pervasive, the mechanisms we have for destruction are so wholesale and so frightening that we can exterminate whole ecosystems without even noticing it” (<https://www.bbc.com/news>).

There are many environmental role models. John Muir was noted for being an ecological thinker, political spokesman, and religious prophet. His writings became a personal guide into nature for countless individuals, making his name “almost ubiquitous” in the modern environmental consciousness. According to author William Anderson (1990), Muir exemplified “the archetype of our oneness with the Earth,” while his biographer Donald Worster says he believed his mission was “saving the American soul from total surrender to materialism” (2008). Muir saw nature as a teacher, as a source of the spiritual:

You cannot begin to preserve any species of animal unless you preserve the habitat in which it dwells. Disturb or destroy that habitat and you will exterminate the species as surely as if you had shot it. So, conservation means that you have to preserve forest and grassland, river and lake, even the sea itself. This is not only vital for the preservation of animal life generally, but for the future existence of man himself -- a point that seems to escape many people. (Gerald Durrell, 1925-1995)⁴.

Sustainable Listening: Overview and Challenge

While sustainability is required for any serious approach to ecology, it is not adequate when it comes to listening to community—or economics as integral with community—rather, we would hope for human listening that is rich, changing, creative, and improvisational. In the realm of community, we should *want more, we need more*, than sustainability. An expansive listening style is critical for sustaining our ecology and community. Tracing the meaning and uses of the concept of sustainability (and related concepts such as resilience) leads us to realize what that *more* entails for the communities that must nurture, maintain, and manage our environment.

In the following discussion, I will explore the meanings of sustainability, communication, and community, as well as explain why we *need* a robust style of listening. However, we also *want* a listening that is more than sustenance. Listening is relational, generally suggesting disciplined awareness and self-control (self-monitoring), to say nothing of empathy. It requires “*more*” than simply “putting up with.” For example (as developed below), it can imply *conviviendo* (*Spanish* from *Latin*), meaning “living together,” thriving/flourishing, fostering community, and

⁴British naturalist, zoo keeper, conservationist, television presenter, and author (7 Jan.) founded what is now called the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust.

fulfillment. Listening, as a human social/political experience, is never just about sustaining; listening always already assumes a fundamental and pervasive communal connection.

This paper will expand on this “more,” including the economic and ecological roots of the sustainability⁵ movement, as background, and develop a sense of the ecological listening that can hone our respect for the greater community of life and the natural environment. To support and ground the integrity of our listening, we need a philosophy that includes all dimensions of our environment, but especially the natural world we inhabit. As Rudolf Steiner (1914, p. 59) reports regarding the experience of the truth: “Now I feel that what I am experiencing does not connect me with the realm of nature that surrounds me on Earth, but with all that lives and weaves in the cosmos; not only can I experience all this, but I am able to sing it, to set it to music.” Music could be the sounds of nature experienced, and for sure when nature sings, we can listen.

A Philosophy of All

We Indians do not teach that there is only one god. We know that everything has power, including the most inanimate, inconsequential things. Stones have power. A blade of grass has power. Trees and clouds and all our relatives in the insect and animal world have power. We believe we must respect that power by acknowledging its presence. By honoring the power of the spirits in that way, it becomes our power as well. It protects us. *Russell Means*

The old world, the pre-modern one, was in direct touch with the natural world; people then were immersed and embedded in and with the world. The modern world, which in some ways began with the Greeks, but did not really take hold until the Renaissance, emphasizes human control over the natural world, along with the abstract thinking that contributes to this dominance. By the mid-19th century, there were thinkers critically aware of the course of Western civilization. Nietzsche, Bergson, Marx, and others revealed the materialism and rule of abstract-conceptual goals over lived experience. This included a creative energy connecting all aspects of the world of humans and nature. With the 20th century came phenomenology, a “neutral,” descriptive awareness of human perception, that gives expression to all that is happening, with an opening to honor the interdependency of all aspects of the world. By the middle of the 20th century, Merleau-Ponty explored the concept of flesh, the awareness that our bodies are flesh of the flesh of the world, our experience is primarily anonymous and not some subjectivity facing an objectivity. That is, we are all integrally connected with the world, and with all that shapes the natural world. What shapes the natural world is integral to our human flesh, integral to our culture, and, in the long term, our civilization.

We may also look to Whitehead’s process philosophy. The 10th Whitehead International Conference (June 2015, in Claremont, CA) was entitled “Seizing an Alternative: Toward an Ecological Civilization,” and claimed an organic, relational, integrated, nondual, and processive conceptuality is needed to ground a meaningful ecology, and also that Alfred North Whitehead provides this in a remarkably comprehensive and rigorous way (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whitehead/>). We proposed that he could be “the philosopher of ecological civilization.”

⁵ In reference to the roots of sustainability, Dr. Gregory Cajete’s indigenous metaphor for sustainability in *A People’s Ecology* of “healthy environment, healthy culture, healthy people,” continues to provide basic guidance for evaluating and better understanding the heritage along the northern Río Grande.

What we seek is a sustainable (plus) listening: the potential to listen actively with endurance and perseverance, despite the challenges of a situation or environment; also, however, to support and provide a foundation of respect and trust through listening. This is to say that we can support constructive values for social change and community through listening—a mature, responsible listening/receptivity—being fully present to the richness of the field, living together ecologically, connected to all and thriving with a fulfilling synergy for all life, indeed for all existence.

Sustainability (Plus More): Listening to Other Life Worlds

Sustainability is defined as maintaining, enduring, weathering, putting up with, and defending⁶. To situate listening as sustainable—suggesting endurance, implying maintenance, or other defensive/holding actions—is not really adequate. Sustain, the root word, has a fairly obvious derivation leading to the current definitions of “maintenance” and “endurance.”

The general meaning is not only of endurance and perseverance—despite the challenges of an imminent crisis—but also of supporting and providing a foundation. We need to listen to understand what is needed to build a natural foundation of responsibility for our community, and ultimately for our world.

The more modern derivation of sustainable began about 400 years ago, and suggests that one can “hold up,” “bear up,” and “go on” under conditions which require “defense.” From 1965 on, the word sustainability takes on the meaning of economic development or growth, with a sense of directedness toward future outcomes and the impacts on the ecology.

“Sustainability” furthers this etymological history, and builds upon it in the 1980s and 90s debates over development in postcolonial countries (Cf. <http://www.organizzazione.unina.it/streams/16.pdf>). In the third world, colonial nations’ economies were raped of their resources by foreign countries and corporations with no regard for what would be left for the future of the indigenous peoples—few in the developed world were listening or attuned. As a result of these debates, the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations (1987) defined sustainability as: “development [that] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” That definition is derived from the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Federation, that requires decision making to take into consideration “the impact seven generations into the future” (*Green Fire Times*, Oct. 2010). This report had addressed economic and social justice concerns that protected the humane treatment of all peoples. Planning for future generations is not limited to tribal peoples, however. In early modern times, the Roman writer Caecilius Statius penned in his book *Young Comrades*⁷: “He plants trees for the use of another age.”

More recently, the word sustainability has drifted into popular use to denote development that is “green,” environmentally friendly, and continuing without exhausting the resource that is being developed. This meaning of sustainability has also been expanded and widely generalized

⁶ Sustain’s early Latin and Romance language etymology is:

Sustain: late 13c., from O.Fr. *sustenir* “hold up, endure,” from L. *sustinere* “hold up, support, endure,” from sub “up from below” + *tenerē* “to hold” (see *tenet*) (Online Etymology Dictionary, etymonline.com); in addition (from several online dictionaries): withstand, bear, tolerate, endure, weather, brook, stand, put up with, and maintain.

⁷ Second century BC.

to apply to sustainable culture, agricultural production, organizations, communities, etc. (see www.sustainable.org) and is pervasive in media, speeches, and public policy.

The term “sustainability,” which emerged from the debates over sustainable development in the late eighties and early nineties, can be found everywhere these days – in corporate annual reports, in government policies, in community organizations’ and corporate mission statements⁸, in speeches of national and world leaders, in the business press, and in the media. Another feature needing consideration is the fact that the discourse of “sustainability” remains firmly rooted in the tradition of Western thought, which de-historicizes and marginalizes the cosmovisions of non-Western cultures, particularly tribal and mythic ones⁹. Postcolonial scholarship from Africa, Asia, and Latin America has critiqued the prevalence of Western thought that expresses forms of cultural and economic differences by disaggregating histories, transforming differences into hierarchies, and, by naturalizing these representations, reproducing asymmetrical relations of power.

Postcolonial theory and criticism explore alternative epistemologies, subjectivities, and modes of representation that can enable critiques of neocolonial modes of “sustainability” while promoting dialogues between diverse epistemic, ethical, and political projects, and also valuing alternative voices and peoples. Around the globe, alternative voices and organizations are confronting the myth of development and refusing the dominant version of it under the rubric of “sustainability.” Communities facing the brunt of development are resisting development, and proposing alternatives. Almost everywhere, these movements have been triggered by socio-environmental conflicts and popular struggles for environmental justice, mainly in contexts where large-scale projects generate risk and damage for the most vulnerable groups. So we must ask: who is listening?

A related word in less popular use is “resilience.” Resilience derives from the Latin *resili(ēns)*, and has the modern sense of the ability of a strained body to recover, or to adjust to misfortune or change (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>). Resilience is the ability to cope, to bounce back from stress and return to normality; however, nothing returns completely to an original state, since there is always some degree of “freshness” in any process. The aspect of resilience that denotes the ability to adjust to change is helpful if we think how it concerns not just returning to normalcy, but actually adapting in a new and creative way that makes the whole better. The adjustments required to make things better must be based on listening, a receptivity cultivated to appreciate the environment and its ecology, and to understand the conditions required for effective change. With issues like climate change at hand, the environment is in motion, and only a flexible awareness will allow us to adapt.

Sustainable Communities

There are many definitions and ways for communities to attain more sustainable futures. The sustainability of a community depends on creating and maintaining its economic and environmental health, promoting social equity in it, and fostering broad-based citizen participation in planning and implementation (this naturally extends to eco communities). Communities that engage citizens and institutions in developing sustainability principles and a collective vision for the future, and that apply an integrative approach to environmental, economic, and social goals, are generally likely to be more successful.

⁸Corporations now often set three goals: social, economic, and environmental.

⁹ See Jean Gebser’s *The Ever-present Origin* for details on these modes of consciousness.

Job creation, energy use, housing, transportation, education, and health are considered complementary aspects of the whole community. Many issues connect a community and its ecology; they are integrally interrelated, and must be addressed as a system¹⁰. Sustainability is a process of continuous improvement, so communities constantly evolve and make changes to accomplish their goals. These processes include (see: www.Sustainable.org) issues of community building and planning for effective outcomes, but most importantly open and transparent communication, and especially listening.

Sustainable (Ecological) Economics

A major project for economics is connecting the practice of ecological listening with sustainability (plus), resilience (or *con-vivendo*); that is, a listening that attends to all the dimensions of community, nature, world, and the environmental cosmos.

There is also an argument for an alternate view of sustainability or resilience based in economics. As economist Hazel Henderson has said: “The paradigm of sustainability with its notions of limitations and carrying capacities confronts dominant paradigms of progress, which do not recognize limits to unchecked growth” (<http://word.world-citizenship.org/wp-archive/999>). Growth, and development in general, need to be biased in favor of sustainability, or resilience. Traditional economists often do not challenge the limitations of world resources, or the costs that are unaccounted for in traditional economic models—for example, continued burning of fossil fuels, or ravaging the tropical forests of the globe—although new models certainly do. Ecological economists seriously consider the unsustainability of modern civilization, because of the limited regulation of carbon emissions, the development of suburban communities on some of the world’s richest farm land, and the (ill-advised) destruction of the environment for the good of progress and economic development (e.g., mining or logging that are not resilient). The latest studies are alarming, and most citizens and nations realize the accelerating seriousness of the problem, but actions do not match what we hear as the actual facts of this ecological catastrophe.

Ecological economics opens alternative meanings for the general sense of sustainability, and hence for the role of sustainable listening and listening ecology—an awareness that must ultimately be responsible. This new set of meanings is also old, but invariably includes the role of community as a more nourishing and resourcefully lived *interpretation* (or some would say *performance*) of sustainability. A community, of necessity, requires listening as a core practice. Community cannot exist with speakers alone, or with everyone wanting a voice. Listeners are required to integrate community interests, to act as the receptive organ of civic space. However, there is a lack of follow-through with regards what might be sustainable listening. For instance, Susan Guyette (2010, pp. 9-10.) says that the “networks of community cooperation provide the most effective form of marketing—word of mouth.” Should we better say “tracking,” with her requirement of listening, word of ear, or mouth to ear, (or something similar) that acknowledges the importance, the profound connection of listening in community? To speak of word of mouth without considering the more fundamental act of listening is to miss the essence of being human.

¹⁰The sense or meaning of system does not imply some tight network but a field of relationships which are more or less structured.

Guyette also emphasizes, in her article “Everyday Green: Culture and Economies,” the role of listening in eco-cultural sustainability¹¹: “Eco-cultural sustainability requires listening to indigenous methodologies and describing the framework for ‘economies’ that work from within those cultures, rather than instituting an outsider point of view” (2010, p. 20).

She indicates that this is a re-integration of what existed 70 years ago—but that is expecting more than is possible. Something like this may have existed 70 years ago, or more, but the notion that you can go back home, or recreate something in the past, is wishing and hoping without taking into account the same factors of eco-culture. Eco-culture is never the same again, even for fundamentalists. To maintain something as the same one must constantly change to adjust to “modern” times, and then the adjustments made alter the fundamental culture. Eco-systems are more stable but still they change, especially at the hands of humanity/civilization.

I think a focus on community is very important, but so is a sense of listening sustainably. Our concern must incorporate, or embody, the pervasiveness of all that is part and parcel of our lived world and its ecology—not just the human community, but also the animal, plant, and material worlds as well.

There is also the original notion of accountability, the connection between responsibility and the listener as auditor. A Minnesota roundtable on sustainable development¹² states as its fifth principle *shared responsibility*, which includes, “each being accountable for his or her decisions Full cost accounting is essential for assuring shared responsibility.” Accounting also requires auditing,¹³ and auditing comes from hearing the accounts as they are read. Auditing was the official examination of accounts, which originally was an oral procedure—hence, the essential nature of hearing and implicitly listening.

Some would argue that left to its own resources, life creates conditions conducive to life, with humans as part and parcel of nature; yet how does one know what life’s conditions are unless one has one’s ear to the ground, so to say? The implication is that the living planet has its own path, so we need only allow it its natural course. Of course, in the late modern world this is not necessarily true (what some refer to as the Anthropocene—the era of human impact on the planet). Some in the sustainability movement see reversion to a previous era as our salvation; for example, the sensitivity of Native American communities—they are seen as the first Americans, who were in harmony with the ecosystem. They were/are connected and listening with nature, and are wise about nature. They know from lived experience that nature includes humanity; humans are part and parcel of nature—not lords over it. That is still true today, but we cannot recapture that cosmic-tribal world any more than we can recreate a Greek world where the gods managed the ecosystem from Mount Olympus. We can learn from the past, and we can work to create a world that honors and lives that reverence in new ways that operate integrally with the natural world.

We do have sources like Abrams’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997), which tells of the attunement of tribal communities with their ecosystems:

¹¹Center for Excellence: Communication for Sustainable Social Change (CSSC) <http://www.csschange.org/>. The Center was created in response to an urgent need for close study of society and culture in formulating communication and media strategies to ensure target audiences are reached in an appropriate manner that most effectively enhances knowledge transfer and brings about sustainable social change.

¹² <https://www.eqb.state.mn.us/content/round-table-sustainable-development>

¹³ Audit: early 15c., from L. *auditus* "a hearing," pp. of *audire* "hear" (see also *audience*).

The scale of a harvest or the size of a hunt are always negotiated between the tribal community and the natural world that it inhabits. To some extent every adult in the community is engaged in this process of listening and attuning to the other presences that surround and influence daily life.

But the shaman or sorcerer is the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and the more-than-human worlds, the primary strategist and negotiator in any dealings with the Others."

<http://tiny.cc/spellsensuous>

The shaman is in the field of world change, and seeks to rebalance and restore the eco system.

An alternate set of arguments approaches ecological economics via “rational effects” derived from an unfettered progressivism—a world with no limits, and nothing to check or inhibit growth—that is, complete freedom of (unnatural) development. In the progressivism of the modern world, there is the belief that humans can do anything, or can make anything happen, and whatever we do is good. This is magic (*macht*, making), that is, human agency of a strong variety, but also a very “narcissistic” one. It is magical thinking, and deficient in rationality, to think of a world without limits—at least in terms of resources and impacts. This imagined world is one without boundaries, but limits are given by the “baggage” of the history we inherit, and the natural world we must listen with and acknowledge. Logic does not listen very well; it is about expressing the form of a relationship where the conclusion follows from the premises. If one is *receptive* to the assumptions that precede, and in the context of the premises there are many possibilities, but once the premises are locked into place, listening stops, and certainty enters. Certainty is not sustainable, for only by listening do we learn to improvise and adapt to the needs of our world.

First and foremost, we need to revive our common language(s). We have to *conspire* to do this, a word that simply means breathing together with the planet. “Sustainable,” like so many other words, has been degraded; it has been hijacked into the service of non-sustainable interests. John Ehrenfeld (a proclaimed steward of our planet) defines sustainability as “the ability of all life, human and non-human, to flourish on Earth forever,” a beautiful, succinct definition that is one example of the level to which we must restore all language—and all human action (2013). Abraham Maslow, the respected American psychologist, would call this metamotivation, defined as: “behavior inspired by growth needs and values.” He continues: “Self-actualizing individuals (more matured, more fully human), by definition, already suitably gratified in their basic needs, are now motivated in other higher ways, to be called ‘metamotivations’” (1971, 289). Certainly, the survival of humanity is a higher motivation.

To accomplish all of the above and more, we have to transition to a deeply democratic political system. Not a system of elected officials split off from the people, but one in which citizen’s councils are empowered to create and guide the various aspects of sustainability (plus more) in a convergent manner with government; Democracy with a capital D, in other words. As our constitution declares, all power is vested in and derived from the people: all government originates with the people, and is for their benefit. That is an extremely clear statement of citizen-based democracy and empowerment laid out by our founding fathers. And it is the opposite of partisan movements, being one of deep responsibility, accountability, inclusion, and respect.

Our founding fathers were innovators, after all. Now we will also be able to benefit from founding mothers, youth, elders, and multiple cultures and multiple stories, all with a common goal—the restoration of a sustainable, resilient, democratic culture and ecology rooted in honesty and deep respect for all of nature, human and otherwise. However, this requires listening first, and the awareness that democracy itself must be founded on listening as a first principle. Sound like a pipe dream? When the original people passed the pipe, it was indeed to

facilitate dreaming, a common dream of peace and harmony with one another and all life. In our troubled times, we need to envision a plan for the common good of the whole planet.

Listening Community: Fostering Conviviality

Community is what we have in common with others of our group, and having it in common makes us related. The deepest community is that which encompasses all of humanity—the *more* that is the potential of an open and evolving global community. In speaking, we impart and make common; in listening, we interpret, share, and give personal meaning to that commonality. By listening, moreover, we share in the insight, the vision, the knowledge, compassion, growth, and understanding that is common in the community. We also help create and shape the essence of the community in the “interpretive” process of listening (Purdy, 1991; Purdy 1997).

The etymological roots of the word communicate¹⁴ (to impart, to share, literally to make common) partake of the same French and Latin roots as community¹⁵ (*communitas*, community, fellowship). As one scholar has pointed out, “John Dewey, for example, suggested that community, communication, and common, are inherently interdependent terms” (Sutter, 5). This paper will build upon this interrelationship and the truth of its perspective in investigating the role of listening in community formation.

There are many definitions of community, but one common element is the component of interaction, or communication, as the source and sustenance of community. Sutter, for example, considers social interaction a primary aspect of community identity (8). Additionally, Peck writes that “the rules for community-making are the rules for effective communication,” and that the work of community building begins on the interpersonal level (1987, 258-9).

William Howell, in *The Empathic Communicator*, speaks of communication as a project that, “becomes a joint venture with both participants adjusting continually to what happens from moment to moment” (25)—the notion that listening is improvisational, requiring constant awareness. Hence, there is some support for developing a receptive view of how communication helps form community and helps community to thrive.

Indeed, the notion of a community field (of action) is quite apt, for as Juan Estevan Arellano wrote in an article on Sustainable Philosophy (*Green Fire Times*):

Conviviendo, helping each other as community, instead of simply “sustaining” to save and then invest somewhere else, is what has blessed us with “una vida buena y sana y alegre¹⁶” because we have followed the simple philosophy of sharing the water, food and work and that has made our lives festive.

Here Arellano is speaking about “local” community (in the Southwestern USA, and Native American origin). Like Arellano, I think community focus is very important, and that a genuine sense of listening must be more than sustainable, it must also incorporate or embody the pervasiveness of all that is integral to our lived world: the ecology, not just the human/animal community, but all that is part of our ecosystem.

Subsequently, we must explore the kind and quality of listening that contributes to community formation, and see the implications of a listener-oriented communication theory and its relationship to community. We will have to explore whether there is a style of listening, and

¹⁴L. communicatus, pp. of communicare, to impart, to share, lit. to make common <communis, common.

¹⁵ME & OFr communitate < L. communitas, community, fellowship < communis, common.

¹⁶“A good life that is healthy and happy”

hence communication, which moves us away from dependence relationships, and toward something healthier and more of an integrative process.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that we are a speaker-oriented culture, and a culture dedicated to the Anthropocene (an epoch defined by substantial human impact on the planet). You and I are usually aware when we do not speak well, since the consequences can be immediate. If one fails in a public presentation, the fact is known publicly. What then happens if we fail as listeners? How would we know, and what would be the consequences? Part of the problem lies, I think, in the fact that listening is a less conscious activity than speaking. We typically listen in an automatic, almost unconscious, manner. It is difficult to be attentive to the listening process, and probably more difficult to maintain that attention so as to change our listening behavior. The consequence of not listening—of not listening consciously (Purdy, 2000)—is the disruption in relationships and communities from lack of shared understanding.

What Is This Listening Which Is Required?

Finally, what does this mean for listening, for communication, for preserving the community of humanity? What does it tell us about the kind of listening needed? And, how does this need for listening expand the definition, description, and possibilities of listening? The field of listening must be expanded to include a listening ecology. We must recognize the critical importance of listening, especially listening to understand the positions of those we would change; realizing that listening may help and encourage others to be more receptive themselves—people will listen if really listened to first—listening to understand our audiences and eco-contexts (subtle and multiple/“complex”) in the field of community relations. We are better able to connect by listening, and better able to respond to others. Because we are better connected, our relationships are stronger, and we understand each other better—knowing how to share—and communicate in various contexts.

It is obvious, then, that listening is very important to community. As one writer puts it, "When we do not listen, we deny our membership in a shared world with others. We shirk the responsibility of responding genuinely when spoken to—as if we could extend into a way of living the perpetual refusal to respond when being greeted" (Forester 221). We can go further by acknowledging that to authentically respond, we must listen to know what we are responding to, and hence to be responsible. If we are not listening and responding truly—and that includes, first and foremost, appreciation¹⁷ and respect—then we deny that our listening matters to those speaking. Without listeners, speakers would be speechless. Often in contemporary life, we do not listen, and then the role of the speaker does indeed become meaningless.

To begin, we must prefix our definition of listening with a distinction made prior to most definitions of listening: listening is hearing plus more. Hearing is the physiological process of receiving sounds (and other related sense input), while listening is the awareness and processing of perceptual "inputs." Listening, I am suggesting, is more than an individual process, it is a community activity. To paraphrase John Forester in his article "Listening: The Social Policy of Everyday Life," listening creates a "we"; hearing is just an information flow.

¹⁷See Purdy and Mercadal, Listening: The "lost" communication skill (https://www.academia.edu/5612011/Listening_The_lost_communication_skill).

A working definition of listening in community formation must, in addition, include the impact of the language, social group, and culture of which one is a member. Listening may be defined¹⁸ generally as this: attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to other human beings. This definition is also not a linear event, but a field process that happens in the fullness of the present. We must also then consider listening in a socio-cultural-linguistic environment that thoroughly permeates and influences this receptive meaning-creation process.

Usually, in speaker-oriented terminology (the human as vocal creator, or prime mover in the world), we think of the speaker as the one who can make a difference and reach out to the other to strengthen community bonds. From a receptive perspective, the listener has an equally strong role to play in a shared understanding. The initiative is with the listener to give new meaning to a relationship through the way she interprets--that is, the listener has an active role in community formation and perseverance.

Indeed, modern cultures still revere the speaker, and give little praise to the listener. The work that has been done on listening over the last few decades is primarily from an individual, subjective-psychological perspective. Until we shift the emphasis from a speaker-oriented focus to more of a balance between listener and speaker, I believe we will be stuck with a dependent (or co-dependent), degraded sense of community. To do justice to the role of listening in community formation and the ecological field, we need to expand our understanding of listening to include its integral role in the socio-cultural-linguistic aspects of community formation.

What do we propose? Most listening today is transactional or utilitarian. I believe business and industry are training employees so that they will listen to management. Perhaps by training them to listen, they will listen better, understand, and go along with management more easily. I say this because typically it is the employee who is perceived (by management) to need listening training, and not managers, although many CEOs advanced to their positions by listening¹⁹.

We are told that a certain brokerage firm listens. Of course they listen, they need to, out of utilitarian necessity--they make more money that way. In the much more encompassing world beyond corporations and commerce, there is a world we must listen with, and to: the ecological world, the all-inclusive environment.

Community Includes People, Animals—And the Whole Environment

There are listening styles that sustain the health of people/cultures, plants, animals (such as wolves; see next section), and the viability of the environment (global warming). Our ultimate strategy is to expand our repertoire of listening behaviors to include awareness of, and proficiency in, sympathetic, critical/rational, empathic, integral (or holistic) listening, and perhaps kinesthetic listening as well. A “body” can attune itself to a wealth of “energy” fields, as it does when listening to appreciate music, or the sounds of nature.

This suggests a need for both a critical/rational modern mode of listening, and a tribal/sympathetic listening. The critical listening is needed because of misleading arguments to discredit sources/authorities who present data and arguments for global climate change (see

¹⁸This is close to what was at one time the “official” definition of the International Listening Association. See also the Global Listening Centre’s definition at <http://www.globallisteningcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DEFINITION-OF-LISTENING-2016.pdf>

¹⁹See Adam Bryant’s interviews in the *New York Times*. Bryant had a column entitled “Corner Office,” though sadly it ceased a couple of years ago. Many CEOs reported the critical function of listening in their organizations, and their responsibility to model good listening.

sustainable/*conviviendo* (www.sustainable.org). We must be able to listen to evidence and arguments, and hear conclusions, in an unbiased manner. We must also listen as tribal peoples do, in a way feels the environment sympathetically, a listening from a “position” of ecological immersion.

In general, a Western, or modern, mode of understanding represents a clash between belonging and controlling as perspectives—yet not a true duality. Rather, controlling is a directed, intentional activity, but belonging is a cosmic field presence that encompasses the whole of the living community—if only we would listen receptively, and attend to what is all around us, to be perceived, aware, attuned.

Listening to the Wolves: An Ecological Example

One flash point between those who listen ecologically and those who have different interests is the issue of reintroducing wolves into America’s western states (similar clashes are ensuing in Asia and Africa with other species, such as tigers or bears). Modern science has revealed wolves’ profound influence on ecosystems, says Michael Robinson (2011). In Yellowstone National Park, where elk avoid wolves in low-visibility valleys, previously browsed cottonwood saplings have rebounded and grown tall, stabilizing stream banks and providing habitat for songbirds and food for beavers. Fish flourish in the beaver ponds. In Grand Teton National Park, wolves have reduced coyote numbers, and thereby increased pronghorn ones. The coyotes hunt newborn pronghorns (a herd mammal), but these fawns are too small for wolves to seek out as a primary prey.

Reintroduction of the Mexican wolf, therefore, allows us a rare second chance to live in a more natural balance, to allow wolves to be wolves, and to set limits on the insatiable demands we make on natural ecosystems, which their recovery requires. Whether we will seize this opportunity for the lobo (wolf) and for ourselves remains to be seen.

Listening for the (Aboriginal) Spirit of Nature

In Adelaide, Australia, Arnold (Arny) Mindell was walking with Uncle Lewis O'Brien, an Aboriginal elder, when he “gently put his hand on my shoulder and quietly said, ‘Arny, look over there, in the direction of the center of the city. What do you see?’ I told him that I saw Victoria Square, the noisy bustling business center of the city . . . “Looks like a busy city,” I said.

Uncle Lewis suggested that I take another look. When I looked again, all I saw was the same noisy city. “Well, your sight is good, but you don’t see the Dreaming. White fellas don’t see the Dreaming. But they sense it anyhow. White fellas built the center of the city there. We Aboriginal people used to camp where the center is now; that’s where the Dreaming is strongest (Uncle Lewis explained that Adelaide is built on the site of the Red Kangaroo Dreaming, and the outline of the city streets portrays the outline of that mythic being). (Mindell, 2000).

We hear the modern world, the cities, the traffic, the skyscrapers, but we fail to see, hear, and generally perceive that the “dreaming world,” with all its various energies, is still there; that the facticity and spirit of nature its ecology is present, even in the midst of all that hustle and bustle. Of course, the dreaming includes the Aboriginal song lines, and the “sounds” of the earth—listening to the animals and plants that are integral to the “energy” fields which sustain and enrich the earth.

From Listening Awareness to Action

The trick now is how to expand and intensify our awareness to share community with all of the ecological world. We could begin with Castaneda's *A separate reality: Conversations with Don Juan*. Castaneda suggests we first soften our gaze, and expand it to perceive a 180 degree-plus

field of vision. With a softened gaze, we notice what escaped us when we were focused ahead. Another strategy is to notice the feel and variety of experience: shifting fields of awareness from visual to aural, hearing usually unnoticed sounds, and listening for what is happening in general. How are we sensual, experiencing haptically; what about smell and taste? There are a great many strategies for expanding awareness so as to be receptive to the pain and needs of our Earth. Meditation and certain disciplines like yoga can help, but just being aware in nature is revelatory.

Ultimately, we need to move from awareness/receptivity and experience to action. This is a difficult move to put into practice on a community level, to say nothing of getting action on a global scale—yet both are required. There are many methods for expanding awareness, but then comes the hard work of action to save the planet.

So, take a break from screens, remove the earbuds, then take a walk and listen to the cries of the world we inhabit. Now consider how listening can engage with the health of the planet. Finally, see how each of us can play a role to help improve and heal the planet. How can each of us contribute to the fight against climate change?

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