



What Motivates You To Listen? (Part I)

Listen Intently, Part 5 of 6

Why don't we learn from history, listen to our parents, or alter our behavior based on experience relayed to us by others, even when we – individually or collectively – would benefit greatly by doing so? What is it that prevents us from listening and what would help us listen better?

Assuming, if presented the opportunity, we wouldn't consciously choose to stay stagnant or regress, what is it that holds us back from growth? What prevents us from listening and causes us to be so fearful of information that we choose to ignore what is in plain view? In other words, what causes us to refuse to listen intently for our own growth, fulfillment, and flourishing? The answer may surprise you.

One of the most prevalent - and damaging - themes in our culture is the need to be right. It's one of those essential memes that we overlook; it is so deeply embedded in our belief system and in our collective psyche that we never even pause to consider it. Let's reflect on how it impacts our lives.

Why is it so vital to be right? Well, to begin with, if you're not right then you are indeed wrong - with all the accompanying sense of humiliation and failure. From the more personal and mundane battle over who said what in the midst of an argument, to larger societal or global issues, the need to be right is the basis for most acts of hatred, violence and warfare as well as the primary justification for inaction even when action is urgently and obviously required.

If being right at all costs isn't healthy, what started it? At least in the US we have, for generations, been conditioned by an educational system that is rooted in the construct of right

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and wrong. We are rewarded for what are deemed to be correct answers and then good grades reinforce our 'correct' performance. Getting the right answer thus becomes the primary purpose of our education and being right affirms and inflates our sense of self-worth. As students we learn to avoid as best we can the embarrassment of being wrong – remember my series on failure? Regrettably this deeply entrenched system is inconsistent with true learning and growth, both of which require flexibility and adaptation to changing economic, environmental, and societal conditions and both of which permit us to evolve.

We delude ourselves by thinking we're reasoning when we're actually rationalizing - or trying to be right. Our "reasoning" is a means to a predetermined end—winning our "case"—and is shot through with biases. These include "confirmation bias" in which we give greater heed to evidence and arguments that bolster our beliefs (confirming our 'rightness') and "disconfirmation bias" in which we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find threatening, ones that would make us wrong. We actually expend more energy digging in our heels than would be required of us to listen to and accept new information.

For example, if I don't want to believe that my spouse is being unfaithful or that my child is a bully I can go to great lengths to explain away behavior that is clear to everybody else—everybody who isn't emotionally invested as I am. We become attached to a certain worldview because in our anxiety and fear we desire stability, structure and clear answers - even to complicated questions. My world is a much safer place requiring far fewer responses from me when my spouse and my child behave acceptably, or at least when I perceive they do – regardless of what they actually do.

Neuroscience also sheds light on why we have so much vested in being right and it's not just the fault of our educational system and culture: reasoning is actually suffused with emotion, or what researchers call "affect". Our positive or negative feelings about people, things, and ideas arise much more rapidly than our conscious thoughts. Feelings arise in a matter of milliseconds—fast enough to detect with an EEG device but long before we're aware of them – because evolution required us to react very quickly to stimuli in our environment. It's a basic human survival skill to run away from threatening information. Apparently fight-or-flight reflexes kick in in response not only to predators but also to data itself. Our emotion-infused reasoning results in thinking that's highly biased, especially when we're vested in the subject - whether that subject is religion, politics, or the right next step for our business.

Tuning into fear does help to protect people against some of the natural difficulties of living because the fact is we don't live in a completely safe world. Things can and do go wrong. But fear is uncomfortable so in order to keep anxiety to a manageable level there is a tendency to maintain an overly simplistic or narrow worldview in order to preserve our sense of order. In other words, when our desire to be right is threatened and when our biases - which support our

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illusion of control - are threatened, we react fearfully and are highly resistant to changing our beliefs, even when the facts say we should. The ingrained fixation on being right derails our mindfulness and erodes our natural instinct to learn, to listen to history, and alter our behavior, even for our own benefit.

So if we know that the need to be right, driven by fear and the desire to impose order, prevents us from listening to facts, what motivates us to listen? Stay tuned next week for the conclusion! And don't forget that the Beaufort Bookstore at 2127 Boundary Street, carries my book Start Over, Start Now, Ten Keys to Success in Business and Life!

Beaufort resident Jamie Wolf is the author of 'Start Over! Start Now! Ten Keys to SUCCESS in Business and Life' and ten accompanying guidebooks. ☐ If you're ready to be Master of your Fate and Captain of your Soul, she invites you to come on board! Jamie offers online courses and coaching for entrepreneurs and people interested in starting over or in starting their own business. Visit her at <http://www.thestartover.com>

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