The Art of Listening

Our culture is one that speaks rather than listens. From reality TV to political rallies, there is a clamour to be heard, to narrate, and to receive attention. It reduces ‘reality’ to revelation and voyeurism.

The Art of Listening argues that this way of life is having severe and damaging consequences in a world that is increasingly globalized and interconnected. It addresses the question: how can we listen more carefully? Social and cultural theory is combined with real stories from the experiences of the desperate stowaways who hide in the undercarriages of jet planes in order to seek asylum, to the young working-class people who use tattooing to commemorate a lost love.

The Art of Listening shows how sociology is in a unique position to record ‘life passed in living’ and to listen to complex experiences with humility and ethical care, providing a resource to understand the contemporary world while pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future.

‘This is a wise and human piece of writing, concerned to break out of sociology's academic straitjacket and speak to a wider audience...If anything can recover the somewhat tarnished reputation of sociology amongst the general public, then it is a book like this.’ New Humanist

‘The Art of Listening is a rare book in its commitment to vitalize an ethical, global sociology for the twenty-first century. Students are encouraging their parents to read it. Everyone needs this book -- especially jaded academics.’ Sanjay Sharma, British Journal of Sociology

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More than fifty years later, I erred in exactly the same way when I took The Art of Listening out of the local public library and read it front to back. The Art of Listening is not—as I’d inferred from the title—a guide on how to listen more effectively. Nor is it a treatise on the lost (or, at least, fast-diminishing) art of listening midway through the first quarter of this new millennium. Rather, it’s a technical treatise intended—if my reading of it can be called ‘informed’—for Fromm’s fellow psychotherapists and psychoanalysts. Shame on me, once again, for a false inference.