

Art of Listening

Interview with Michael Rossoff

For The Listening Spheres

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My interest in listening stems from growing up in a home where there was a lot of conflict. I'm the youngest in my family. I was baffled at the uproar that took place at the dinner table. My sister would start shouting. Doors were being slammed... And I tried to discern what was happening by paying more attention. What was being said that triggered this uproar?

I was very shy as a child. In this shyness I didn't have a strong ego or want to be the centre of attention. I was and am an observer – visually and sound-wise. As I grew up I got interested in photography and at 13 I was given my first camera. Photography has resonated with me ever since. I thought it would be my career.

My interest is in the art of observation. **Listening is a form of observing.**

I was still shy in my teens. It was easier for me to listen to others than to be the focus of attention. It became natural for me to be what I'll call an active listener. Not out of kindness or generosity, but out of curiosity. Who is this person? What are they trying to communicate? That's when I got more curious about people.

While photography is about who a person could be, listening is about who they are.

Listening is about curiosity, empathy, compassion, discernment.
Empathy means caring about them as a person.

People want to be understood. When they're heard and they know they're being understood – that is great compassion. People want to be acknowledged.

My listening skills have transformed over the years, because of my years of personal counselling which is a more subtle form of listening.

Why do people seek help for their problems, pains, troubles? To get relief, it might *appear*. But to me it is the profound need they have to communicate their pain. First, though, they need to *acknowledge* their pain or problem. They have to be in touch with it enough to know it's there. But there's so much repression or denial that I must "listen" for their unexpressed pain. They are saying it, but it's hidden between their words. **Active listening is asking the right questions, to help guide them in the mystery of self-discovery.**

I want to help my clients to grow and transform. That is my primary purpose in listening. But in a Taoist way, so that they think they are doing it themselves. The Tao Te Ching says that the highest form of leadership is to help the people without their realising it. True leadership is invisible. This is true for healing also. I'm not looking for them to say: "Michael you healed me." I want them to know they've changed. I was present in that process, as a guide, a facilitator.

I want to help them find the source of their pain, or whatever's holding back their energy. Then I can get practical with things like food and lifestyle.

In Oriental Medicine there are four types of diagnosis: seeing, feeling, listening and smelling. In modern Chinese medicinal books the diagnosis by listening is reduced to hearing for the five sounds and asking questions. The **five different tones in people's voices are shouting, laughing, singing, weeping and groaning** (corresponding to the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, water). Everyone's voice has a combination of these. What you're looking for is the one that is dominant. Someone may be talking about shopping but you may hear a weeping tone. It never matters what they're talking about, but *how*.

Many Chinese medicine practitioners pay nearly zero attention to voice. I can say this as a former dean of an Oriental medicine school.

Then there's the next level. And at this level, very few people are doing it. But it's there to be done. It goes beyond the five tones. We know that the body is energy – we are vibrating beings. All energy comes through the vocal chords. **It is definitely possible to know the condition of every organ in the body from the voice, because that is where the voice is coming from.** Of course everything's always changing as a result of things like digestion. But **if something's really disturbed in the body, e.g. there's a tumour, then it is possible to hear it in the voice.** It's the ability to diagnose problems that are brewing before they're caught on a scan. Something like a cyst on the ovaries will disturb the smooth harmonics of the body. It's just a matter of listening for it in the vibration of the voice. It takes a lot of practice, and a willingness to want to know it.

Since we are naturally very visual, it's easier to do voice diagnosis when we're not seeing the person. It's nothing to do with that they're saying. Their voice reflects their condition.

The art of listening hinges on one thing: non-ego. I can't do true listening if I'm thinking "what time's dinner" or "my back's hurting". Then you're not 100% present. Non-ego means it is easy to know people.

People sometimes ask me how I can keep listening to people's problems. It's because I'm curious and I want to help. Why does a problem disturb one person but not another? Why does one person manifest anxiety by biting their nails and another by pulling their hair?

I want to help people. The only way I can is to hear them talk about their truth, no matter how unhealthy it is. For instance someone may

blame all of their problems on a parent. I can listen to their truth – without necessarily accepting it. I want to know where they are now, to go into their truth. This is a place to start.

More broadly, people want to be known, to be cared about, to be loved. True compassion is accepting and loving. I go further and say I can hear their longing. Because we're not 100% fulfilled. **I listen for their longing, which is more their truth.**

I've chosen the path of diet and lifestyle, to help people. I'll sometimes pound on the table and shout at them to stop them getting lost, to bring them back to their truth.

[T: how do you know what is their truth?]. I can only tell because I hear their longing. It's spoken somewhere in or between their words.

Accents don't enter into it. I was in Israel in January. A Russian woman came to see me. She didn't speak a word of English. I needed a translator. It meant I could listen even better to her *voice*.

It's very similar to other forms of diagnosis. It's a matter of choice whether we look just at the surface level e.g. lines on the hand, or beyond e.g. auras. We can train ourselves to look at auras.

It begins with knowing that there's something more to discover. To our modern senses it's magic. We think it's extraordinary. In olden times it was ordinary. It's been lost. We call it ESP. But everyone has it. We have to train ourselves. I've been able to do it.

I had an email exchange with someone and I started to have an idea about what kind of voice she had. When I spoke to her on the phone I was very surprised. It was not the voice I was expecting. So I was curious – which was the real person? Actually I trust voice more than words.

I'm not out to change people. A lot of people don't want to know other people too closely because they'd lose a certain acceptance. I don't reject people. **One reason we don't want to listen is because we don't want to see certain things.** We accept our own problems – we accept our own quirks and phobias as zany. People think it's their zaniness that makes them who they are. But it's not. It's just what they've become. I'm more interested in who they *are*, their spiritual essence.

There's a book called the Nine Nations of North America, which I read ages ago. It got me thinking how there are different lives in our lives. We were children. Then teenagers. Then in our twenties. Then thirties. They're all aspects of our maturity. Maybe siblings are only there for that childhood need. Many people have difficult times with their siblings, but it's usually childhood stuff, from the past.

Physical and sexual abuses have a huge impact on people. Childhood pains are the hardest. Psychologists love it because it means long-term therapy, which I disagree with.

Your work in conflict resolution is interesting. It's all about different ways of behaving, which began long before any particular conflict emerged.

There is some talk therapy that can be very good, like bio-energetics. It's about shouting out your anger. Verbalising. Not only do people need to be acknowledged. They need to vent. To release. Children cannot verbalise their problems. When dealing with childhood pain, words don't come easily. Sometimes I can intuit those words and people can then recognise it.

A force that isn't released can become disease. Disease is blockage of energy. It can become physicalised as tumour, pain etc.

But how to help people release the deeper energy behind their pain? It's not going to happen in one moment. It's been charging up for years.

If you tell me the physical symptoms, I can predict what is going on in the mental and emotional arena.

I'm a translator. I translate the language of the body into its emotional, spiritual and mental components. I'm seeking to discover where it originated.

A headache doesn't exist on its own. It depends on which person, where on the head, right or left etc.

I put a framework or filter in front of me which might be Chinese medicine, macrobiotics, voice diagnosis... Each is potentially speaking about everything. Some of these filters help me come to a clarity.

How can we tell something about a person just from their voice?
Or, for that matter, from their palms for example? **The answer lies in one phrase: the part reflects the whole. The voice is a part which reflects the whole. Why? Because we began as a single cell.**

[T: How can I train on this?].

I'm very lucky. People come to me and tell me things, they open up. There has to be a foundation of trust. That's number one. I'm not answering your question how you can train on listening, but what people have to do to reveal themselves to me. They have to trust me. They have to trust that I'll keep everything they say confidential.

So to come back to your question – there's no simple answer, except, as I said at the beginning: curiosity, compassion and the willingness to sense beyond the obvious.

**Interviewed by Tania Coke
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