

The Art of Not Listening

Edited by Tim Cosby

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Not listening is a crime against humanity. Not listening is an act of war. I ran across an article from Time Magazine, Jan 24, 1969 about listening, from the late Abraham Kaplan (1918-1993), professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan from 1962-1972. Here are some excerpts from the Time Magazine article about Abraham Kaplan.

"Everybody knows that somebody listening to a joke is not really listening; he is impatiently awaiting his turn to tell a joke of his own. Everybody knows that husbands give half an ear to the discourse of their wives—and vice versa. Why do these highly disciplined attempts at human dialogue fail? The reason, says Abraham Kaplan, a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan from 1962-1972, is that they are not really dialogues at all.

Before a conference on human and animal communication at Minnesota's Gustavus Adolphus College, Kaplan introduced his own word for all those human occasions when everybody talks and nobody listens. He calls them "duologues."

Kaplan applies his coinage widely.

"Duologue," he says, "takes place in schools, churches, cocktail parties, the U.S. Congress and almost everywhere we don't feel free to be wholly human." In his view, a duologue is little more than a monologue mounted before a glazed and exquisitely indifferent audience, as in the classroom: "First the professor talks and the students don't listen; then the students talk or write and the professor doesn't listen or read."

The duologue has its unforgiving rules: "You have to give the other his turn, and you give signals during his turn, like saying 'uh huh' or laughing at what he says, to show that he is having his turn. You must also refrain from saying anything that really matters to you as a human being, as it would be regarded as an embarrassing intimacy."

A near-perfect example of duologue is the televiewer, transfixed by that mesmeric eye. A truly perfect duologue would be two TV sets tuned in and facing each other.

Open to You.

The prevalence of the duologue saddens Philosopher Kaplan, a devoted student of the late Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, whose I-thou philosophy was based on the conviction that each man defines himself by genuinely engaging others; humanity is a meeting. Kaplan applied this notion to the laryngeal noise that fills humanity's crowded corners and rooms.

An honest dialogue, says Kaplan, is never rehearsed. "I don't know beforehand what it will be. I don't know beforehand who I will be, because I am open to you just as you are open to me." Dialogue involves serious listening—listening not just to the other, but listening to oneself. This rare and wondrous event Kaplan calls "communion" instead of communication. "It seems to me impossible," he says, "to teach unless you are learning. You cannot really talk unless you are listening." The student is also the professor; the joke teller should also be part of the audience. To Kaplan, there is nothing lonelier than two humans involved in a duologue—and nothing more marvelous than two genuinely engaged listeners. "If we didn't search so hard for our own identities but occupied ourselves with the other, we might find precisely what we were not seeking. If we listen, it may be that we will find it at last possible to respond: 'Here I am.' "