

The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction

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"If it were possible to combine the voices of Dallas Willard, N. D. Wilson and Jim Gaffigan, then what you would get is Adam S. McHugh. His writing is profound, lyrical and self-deprecating in all the right ways.

There are few books I want to start again once I've finished. The Listening Life is now one of them."

— Emily P. Freeman, author of *Simply Tuesday*

Life is Better When You Listen

Somewhere along the way we start to violate the natural order of things. Speaking our minds and asserting ourselves take priority over listening. We interrupt someone else because we are convinced we already know what he or she is going to say. We begin to take up more space than we allow for others. We consider ourselves experts on topics without anything more to learn. We tell God what to give rather than asking what God wants to give. We participate by speaking and sharing, and we assert our identities by taking verbal stands. We consider our great Christian task to be preaching, rather than assuming the listening posture of a servant. We speak volumes, but we listen in snippets.

When this reversal of the pattern persists, we find ourselves building lives that shelter us from having to truly listen. We may move into churches and neighborhoods full of people whose views parallel our own, avoiding the dissonance created by contrasting voices by constructing theological and social echo chambers. We crystallize our beliefs and cease to ask questions. The great hope of the Internet has been that dialogue will prevail, that people with different theologies, worldviews and politics will log in to learn, grow and communicate with those who disagree with them. Yet it would seem that social media has helped people connect with like-minded people, and the unfortunate consequence has been the intensifying and radicalizing of beliefs and the deeper entrenchment of the people's beliefs. We settle into our own little truth corners.

Psychology professor David Benner says that a major obstacle to growth in our listening abilities is that most of us already think that we're good listeners. This book is predicated on the assumption that most of us are *not* good listeners. Therapists I know say that many of their clients meet with them simply because they are not being listened to in their most important relationships. Without diminishing the value of professional therapy, I would argue that the fact that we pay millions of dollars annually for people to listen to us indicates our poverty in this arena. Everyone is talking, but so few people are truly being heard.

We need to learn how to listen because all the talking in the world will not make our relationships what we want them to be, and it will not make us into the sort of people we want to be. Our longings for intimacy will not be satisfied through one-way conversations and interactions that feel like competitions. Our desire to be transformed will not be met through giving voice to all the noise in our souls. Our identities will not be discovered in finding our own voice independent of others but in helping others find their voices.

We learn how to listen because we want to learn how to love. We want to learn how to practice hospitality, how to truly welcome people into our lives. We want to be story-hearers and not just storytellers. We want to find the internal quiet and stillness that will open us to being changed. We want to learn how to listen because we want to become more human.

— Adapted from the Introduction



Adam S. McHugh (ThM, Princeton Theological Seminary) is an ordained Presbyterian minister and spiritual director. He has served at two Presbyterian churches, as a hospice chaplain and as campus staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. He is the author of *Introverts in the Church* and lives in Santa Barbara, California.

adamsmchugh.com

“Adam McHugh has been a significant contributor to the conversation about how introverts experience the world.

*His new book *The Listening Life* has the power to reshape how both introverts and extroverts make space for deep listening in a world that swims in the shallows. Highly recommended.”*

—Susan Cain, author of *Quiet*

The Society of Reverse Listening

Your first book was titled *Introverts in the Church*, and now you’ve written *The Listening Life*. Any connection between the two?

Adam McHugh: Yes and no. I don’t discuss introversion and extroversion in *The Listening Life*, because I don’t want to give the impression that listening is for introverts and talking is for extroverts. Listening is not a discipline restricted to people of particular temperaments. At the same time, my introverted bent has played an instrumental role in my development as a listener. As someone who is inclined to observe before I participate, and to process information silently before I interject my thoughts, I find that listening is a natural practice. As I say in the book, listening is not synonymous with not speaking, but not speaking is a good start.

Why are most of us not very good at listening?

Adam: Listening is a discipline of focused attention, in which we take the attention off of ourselves and place it on another. This is incredibly difficult for two reasons. First, we struggle to pay attention in our fast-moving, screen-driven, multitasking society. That is why the subtitle of the book is “Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction.” Second, we are self-absorbed. To even place our focus on another person for five minutes, without interrupting, disagreeing or getting lost in our own thoughts about what the other person is saying can be a challenge.

Why is it important for us to live a listening life?

Adam: We are missing things. People are sharing deep things with us and we aren’t hearing them or we don’t know how to attune to them. God is moving among us but we aren’t paying enough attention. The natural world is speaking to us and proclaiming the glory of God, but we can’t always hear it. We are detached. Starting to truly listen is a way that we can attach to God, to others and to ourselves. It is a fundamental way that we grow into loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

One of your chapters is called “The Society of Reverse Listening.” What does that mean?

Adam: That chapter is my dream for the church. The natural pattern of listening in our culture is hierarchical. Followers listen to leaders, children listen to adults, students listen to teachers, the poor listen to the rich, minorities listen to the majority, women listen to men. What if the church was a place where that pattern was reversed? What if we were marked by pastors listening to churchgoers, adults listening to children, the rich listening to the poor, men listening to women? We talk frequently about Jesus’ “Upside Down Kingdom,” where the greatest are the servants. What if the church were a place of upside down listening?

You write about listening to God, to scripture, to others, to those in pain, to your own life.

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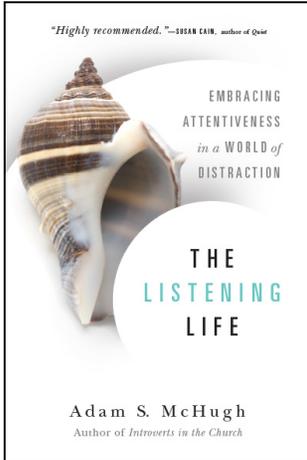


FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com

Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

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Which of those do you think is the most difficult and why?

Adam: Listening to people in pain. The reason for that is anxiety. People who are hurting or struggling raise our anxiety levels, especially if they are close to us, because their pain upsets our sense of well-being. They remind us of our own vulnerability. Consequently, we want to fix them as quickly as possible so that we can feel better too. Fixing, rescuing and correcting are all enemies of listening. To sit with someone in pain, letting them have their feelings and doubts and letting them ask their hard questions, is an exquisite gift. And all too rare. That's why I devote an entire chapter to listening to people in pain.

What do you hope for your readers?

Adam: It has been said often that listening is an act of love, and I would add that listening is also the act of a disciple, the act of a worshiper and the act of a contemplative. Listening is central to our lives as followers of Jesus, and I hope that my book will help readers learn to be more attentive and to grow in love for God and for others.