

listen!

knowing the world and fighting to change it

scott neigh



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introduction

listening, social movements, and this book

This book begins from an inadequate epiphany. I had just finished listening to a recording of an interview I had done with a participant in a movement for social justice. Unfortunately, I no longer remember who it was or what we talked about, though I clearly remember the feel of it, the room I was in, and the vista of snow blanketing an inelegant northern Ontario mishmash of laneway, scrubby trees, and asphalt stretching beneath my window. It was a slow listening, a careful listening — a listening in which the words swirled around me, bubbled, stewed, carried me through events, projected implications about the larger world that had moulded the circumstances they described. It was a moment of listening that was unique, shaped by the words that one person had shared about their life and about their work with others to make change. But it also evoked my experience of hundreds of other such encounters, each conveying unique selves, struggles, and insights into the world.

It was this juxtaposition of singularity with so many echoes that sparked my epiphany. I caught a breathtaking view of the breadth and power of the words of our neighbours, of the people across town, of people around the world. If we listened — truly listened — to their words, to the shape of their everyday lives, to the realities of and knowledge generated in their struggles both individual and collective, we could transform the world. If we listened, truly listened, how could we not hear the urgency

of radically re-making a world that organizes harm, violence, and death into so many lives? And if we listened, truly listened, these many disparate glimpses into the *what* of the world, and the *how*, could give us the seeds of the knowledge we need to begin making that change.

Soon enough, the feeling of certainty and completeness that comes with epiphany had faded, and the murk and complexity of reality intruded once more. I knew that things were just not that simple, that my moment of insight was inadequate. I had been involved enough in social movements, and I'd heard enough from others who had done far more than me, to know that change of any substance would not be brought about solely by listening more or better or differently.

There are certainly liberal fantasies in which listening is enough. In these fantasies, injustice is caused by ignorance and can be undone by education, or it is the result of individual badness and can be rectified by moral suasion, exhortation, and example. Certainly, knowledge is bound up in complex and important ways with social injustice and struggles for collective liberation, some of which are touched on in this book. It can also be important to point out the immorality of allowing injustice to thrive. However, injustice is not fundamentally about what is in individual minds or hearts but rather about power and benefit. It is, moreover, about how the world is socially organized, an idea I talk about more in later chapters.

However, as I continued to reflect on it, I could not let go of my sense that listening was central. I decided that while my epiphany might be inadequate, there was still something to it. There *is* something powerful to such listening, to the bringing together of our respective fragments of the social world to better understand the whole, and to acting based on that. There is something vitally important about listening when it comes to how our world works, to how we know the world, and to the collective movements we need to build in order to change it. I just wasn't quite sure what.

listening matters

Almost all of us are listening, almost all the time. Maybe not well, maybe not with any particular understanding, maybe not to what others think we are supposed to or in ways that they expect, but we are listening. Before I say more about that, though, I should probably make clear what I mean by "listening." In colloquial speech, it is common to treat

“listening” and “hearing” as closely related in an essential and definitional way, or even to use them interchangeably. However, subtle distinctions exist between them, even in everyday conversation. “Hearing” more often connotes encountering and sensing sound, whereas “listening” at least sometimes implies a certain receptivity to and engagement with what has been heard, an active uptake and attentiveness. For example, I asked my kid to take the recycling out and he heard me, but he didn’t listen. Moreover, using “listening” to capture uptake and responsiveness even in the absence of sound is also an entirely unremarkable part of our everyday language. If a friend sends me advice about a difficult situation via text message, it would be perfectly normal, despite its visual form, for my partner to ask, “So are you going to listen to her?”

In this book, I understand “listening” in an expansive way that builds on the non-sense-specific responsiveness that exists within its conventional usage but goes beyond it. Not all of us can hear. Not all of us can see. But most of us take in and respond to the world around us in some way. Sometimes, it is important to name the sensory specifics of how that happens, particularly given how powerfully disabling our world can be to those whose ways of moving through it run counter to dominant expectations and norms. But for a lot of what I talk about here, I think it is often accurate and useful to generalize. So, I use “listening” to encompass all our pathways for taking in, taking up, processing, and actively making sense of the world. If you are Deaf or hearing impaired, if you are neurodivergent — that is, if your brain works differently than what is typical for most people — in a way related to sensory processing, or if your capacities for sensing and making meaning from stimuli differ from dominant norms in any way, you are almost certainly still responsive to and making meaning from the world. I want my language in this book to capture all of that. This is a book not about the auditory but about our overall capacity to be reached by the world, to perceive and respond, to make sense and take action.

In using the word “listening” like this, I am not suggesting that we should start using it in ways that feel weird in how we talk with one another. If you opened your fridge, took out a container of leftover rice, and through how it smelled and looked decided it had gone off and it would be unwise to eat it, you would be unlikely to say that you had listened to the rice. When Dan Aykroyd’s character in *Ghostbusters* says, “Listen! You smell something?” it is funny precisely because it is, for

most of us,¹ incongruous, silly, nonsensical. But while I am not asking you to change your use of the term, in this book, I mean the word “listening” to capture the experience of taking in and taking up a wide range of sensory inputs rather than just sound. Sometimes, I augment or even replace it with other words explicitly invoking senses other than hearing, but a lot of the time I just say “listening” and trust that you recognize my intention to bring them along. It is the active uptake and attention, the responsiveness, the engagement beyond passive input that I am trying to convey, irrespective of the sensory pathway.

Of course, I could try to find another word to do this, a word without so much sense-specific baggage. Instead of “listening,” I could use the more general word “sensing.” To me, however, that feels similar to the passive encounter with sensory input implied by “hearing,” rather than the uptake and engagement of “listening.” I could perhaps find ways to use the language of “paying attention,” but as I discuss later, that captures only one element of the many practices we bring together in our listening to the world. I could use a composite phrase, like “sensing and engaging” or “sensing and responding,” but that would quickly become cumbersome and off-putting. Plus, it feels further from everyday use than just saying “listening.” Beyond that, as I explore in Chapter 1, I think that at least some of the baggage the word “listening” carries with it does some work that I want it to do.

With that expansive understanding in mind, I think it is reasonably safe to claim that for most of us, to be sentient and awake is to be listening. On a certain level at least, we just can’t help ourselves. So, when I say that I spend a lot of time listening, it is a pretty trite statement, because who doesn’t? I don’t spend any more of my time doing it than anybody else, nor do I claim to be any better at it — it is a common point in conventional sources about listening, some of which I touch on in Chapter 2, that most of us think we are much better listeners than we actually are, and I don’t want to fall into that trap. When I say that I know listening has been tremendously important in shaping my life, in shaping *me*, it is similarly trite, because it is true of all of us. I just know that because of quirks of personality and accidents of circumstance — particularly the trajectory of my work — I have ended up spending quite a bit of time being deliberate about listening. Because of that, I have had lots of opportunity to think about why it is important, both in our lives as a whole and specifically in the context of struggles for collective liberation.

And when I say that listening matters, I know that is the case because my own life has told me so. I could get all philosophical about it. I could talk about the social flows of doing in and through me² and their dependence on our respective responsive capacities. I could talk about language itself and how I would not have the words I have if they had not already been filled with meaning in the mouths of others³ and then taken in and up by me. There is certainly value to approaching the topic in those ways. But I don't need to do that to feel, deep in my bones, listening's significance. I know just from what I have lived that what I have taken in by ears and eyes and all the rest has shaped who I am today. I don't need psychologists, sociologists, or literary theorists to tell me that what I see and hear, and the meaning I make from it, matter tremendously to my experience of the world and to the *me* that has thus formed. I don't need to wax poetic about the social character of knowledge to be very much aware, every time I sit down to understand the painful events that saturate the news and every time I bring out notebook and pen to jot down some thoughts, how much I owe to my encounters with the experiences and ideas of other people.

Think about the many ways that listening is part of the *how* of life: I don't remember hearing "Don't touch it, it's hot" or "Look both ways" from my mother as a child, but I'm sure I did, and I took in both their obvious lessons and their deeper message of care. I do remember listening to words that did not themselves cause but that nonetheless conveyed irrevocable changes in the course of life — news of a death or pregnancy, "no" to a pitched publication, "yes" to burning hopes of a kiss. I can think of instances of the words of others warmly affirming me or telling me in no uncertain terms how I had screwed up and caused harm, and my complex reactions to both echoing down through subsequent choices. I remember listening to yelling, mostly not directed at me, but shaking me to my core, and it teaching me what I never wanted to be. I remember direct didactic telling by parents and teachers, conversations between adults overheard as a child, lessons unconsciously derived from that which was being assumed and implied on pages and screens. I remember being soothed, troubled, delighted, enlightened, annoyed, and so many other things from listening to the words of co-workers over pints, friends over dinner tables, lovers over pillows. I remember self-medicating downness through blockbusters, fanfiction, and novels I'd read a hundred times already. I remember revelling in

listening to the intimate details of other people's lives and relationships. What moment in my life, in your life, in any life has not had its form and flavour touched by listening?

MOVEMENTS

There is more to it than that, though. Yes, listening is something that *I* do and that matters in my life. No doubt the same is true of you. But while we often treat listening solely as something done by individuals, it is in fact much more than that. Listening happens *between* us. It is how we know each other, how we exist in relation with each other, how we can shift from being me, and you, and them to being *we* and acting together. When we listen and come to know things about the world, at least some of the time it is not just a matter of acquiring knowledge like an object to be stored away but of drawing the world into us and being changed by it. When we act in the world, listening both guides us as we do so and is a crucial way in which our actions ripple out as effect — not just others listening to our words, but others observing and responding to our actions.

Because listening is so central to the workings of both our lives and the world writ large, it is also crucial in acting together to make change. When we resist in our everyday lives and when we come together with others to do so in more deliberately collective and self-consciously political ways, listening plays a key role. The ways that our movements form and grow, and the ways that they act and make change, have as much to do with listening as everything else we do. None of the many disparate activities that comprise social movements could happen without us listening to each other and listening to the world. Beyond its role in the *how* of collective struggle, I remember countless actions that, whatever language we used in that moment, boiled down to us telling those with power, “Hey, you aren’t listening and that is unjust, so we will make you listen.” I remember, also, being told graciously or angrily — or only realizing later via dissecting why something went so wrong — that we were failing to listen in some important way ourselves. I remember countless instances when listening to movements that I am not a part of and the people who comprise them has helped me understand the world better. For all these reasons, I think it is important to think and write about listening and movements not just on their own but together.

Much like my use of “listening,” when I talk about “movements,” I mean the term broadly. My concern is people working together to make change, however that is happening. This can take many social forms, and the people involved can understand and name what they are doing in a lot of different ways, certainly encompassing social movements as they are conventionally understood but going beyond that. I also use the term “communities-in-struggle” to capture groupings of people who face intense, pervasive oppression and must deal with that together in ongoing ways and who have a collective existence that goes beyond the more fleeting and episodic character of most movements. I leave open my understanding of the forms that collective struggle can take, to be honest about the limits of my knowledge and to allow for surprise and learning.

I am clear, however, that I only mean movements that aim their work towards social justice and collective liberation. As I typed the first draft of this introduction, a movement that was to a certain extent politically eclectic but that had been driven and led by the far right was disrupting the streets of Ottawa, and I most certainly do not mean them.⁴ I do not mean any collective effort that appropriates the language of justice but actually seeks to strengthen the social hierarchies at the roots of injustice, unfreedom, and systemic violence — white nationalists, those who support the bosses, those who claim to be pursuing liberation but who actively espouse settler colonialism or hostility to trans people or any other such thing. Those groups are not who I am talking about, or to, in this book.⁵

The movements and other efforts to transform the world that are my focus here are our only hope for a better future. The only way we are ever going to make the change we need is by working collectively to do so. I do not claim to know in detail how that will work, which social forms will be effective, or how the resulting transformed social world will be organized. I am, in fact, deeply suspicious of anyone who claims to have a blueprint, a singular line they insist is true and correct, an analysis that demands our listening but offers none in return. But I do know that the only way we can get there is together.

the path to this book

Within this broader context, it was, as I said, my work over the last two and a half decades that pushed me to really think about listening and why it matters and ultimately to write about it. Since I graduated from

university in the late 1990s (with a completely unrelated degree), my work has involved several kinds of writing, research, and media-making. An important early step in this journey was the suggestion from a friend back in 1998 that I do some grassroots journalism for a local independent weekly.⁶ Since then, while it has never been my full-time focus and I have gone for long periods without doing any at all, I have repeatedly returned to grassroots journalism, as a writer and as an editor. This kind of work depends, of course, on listening — you listen to what people are saying, you perhaps consult with (listen to) documents, and then you write something that you hope accurately and compellingly synthesizes what you have heard. Over the years, much of what I have done in this area has been about struggles for justice, liberation, and change.

In the early 2000s, in a project that I would come to think of as *Talking Radical*,⁷ I did fifty oral history interviews with long-time activists and organizers from a wide range of movements in cities across Canada. The long subsequent process of working with those generously shared stories was what pushed me to take the step from doing work that made use of listening to thinking critically about what that meant. I constantly returned to questions of what it looked and felt like to listen to, work with, and share material grounded in those stories in a respectful way, a politically appropriate way, an accurate way. I eventually published two books based on fifteen of those interviews.⁸

Not long after the books came out, I started a weekly radio show and podcast called *Talking Radical Radio*, which ran from February 2013 to February 2023.⁹ Each of the more than five hundred episodes of the show was organized around an in-depth interview with one or more people involved in some kind of activism or organizing, somewhere in so-called Canada.¹⁰ As the intro to the show put it each week, “We give you the chance to hear many different people who are involved in many different struggles talk about what they’re doing, how they’re doing it, and why they’re doing it, in the belief that such listening can strengthen all of our efforts to change the world.” It was broadcast on community radio stations across the country — usually about a dozen at any given point, though how many and which would fluctuate — and was available online in lots of different ways. Again, I spent a lot of time listening at every stage of that work and a lot of time thinking about listening.

Since pretty much the beginning of the show, I was also doing my best to write another book. A project that I had initially imagined as

about something very different became, through a series of incremental changes and strategic reboots, this book. The critical moment came when I decided that my latest attempt, which was drawing on material from interviews done for the show, just wasn't working. I realized that I was more interested in writing a book grounded not so much in the content of my interviews but in thinking through the implications of the listening I was doing and the listening being done at every stage of struggle by those I had interviewed.

this book's approach

Though this book is about both listening and movements, it is not primarily about helping the reader become a better listener or a better organizer. Yes, in some places it talks about the doing of such things from the perspective of the individual do-er, but it is not a self-help book or a how-to. I get the appeal of such books, certainly. After all, even granting that none of us has absolute dominion over our own actions, which our culture teaches us to expect and venerate, our actions still often feel like the one piece of our chaotic world over which we can sometimes, partially, imperfectly exert some control. So, it makes sense to want to develop better practices for doing so. But for all that I have been known to read such books myself from time to time, I think that having an entire genre, really an entire industry, devoted to improving *you* with little or no mention of the social world reinforces the exact same neoliberal tendency it flows from — to see everything about the world in terms of individuals.

I think books in this vein that have progressive political intent, that perhaps use language of systemic this or that but that talk mostly about individual actions — a certain subset of books about racism or sexism come to mind, and some books about environmental issues, among others — can be particularly troubling in this regard. Again, they have a range of orientations and can be useful in certain respects, and I have read and benefited from some of them. But at least some take problems that are social, that are fundamentally political, that are about how relations among us are socially organized, and that can only be substantively addressed in collective ways, and teach us to see them as something to be remedied primarily through changes in individual conduct.¹¹ This kind of framing encourages us to relate to the problems in moral terms, as about individual choices and the goodness or badness of those making

them, even if we cloak that in political language. Some of us — I'm thinking particularly about many white people, but it can go along with other socially produced/imposed aspects of self as well — desperately want to be innocent,¹² and ostensibly political books that focus on individual practices for addressing socially produced indignities and harms can peddle the lie that this is in fact possible and downplay the desperate need for collective action.

As I wrote this book, I came to appreciate that it would be easy to treat listening in the same way, as primarily of interest as an individual practice with political relevance. It would be easy to conclude that the appropriate intervention is therefore to improve individual enactment of that practice. This would, in turn, allow readers — meaning privileged readers in particular — to check off boxes related to listening practices, to say, “Yes I do that, therefore I am doing what I can. Therefore I remain a good person.” Meanwhile, socially produced indignity and harm in the world would hum along more or less unchanged.

Obviously, this is not saying that we should not strive to figure out how best to move through the world as individuals. Nor is it saying that we shouldn't try to figure out what kinds of listening practices are best suited to our respective contexts. But helping you do that is not what this book is about. This book, rather, is an effort to think through some ideas about the social world, about listening, about knowing, and about change that are inspired and informed by collective struggles for justice and liberation. I also hope that it contributes to such struggles in some small way, though I know that if it does, it will only be indirectly.

I am a firm believer in the value of grappling with ideas of all sorts in ways that are grounded in and relevant to social movements.¹³ Some activists and organizers are skeptical of putting time into that kind of work, and I get that. The problems our communities and movements face are immediate and urgent and therefore demand our every effort, leaving few resources for anything else. There is lots of theory out there (and lots of ways of engaging with it) that either are, or at least seem to be, completely irrelevant to ordinary people and our struggles. But ultimately, I do think that it is useful to make collectively re-thinking and re-imagining the world an integral part of our efforts to re-make it. Moreover, while this can and must include writing about ideas that are of direct relevance to tactical and strategic choices, I also think that such re-thinking has value for reaching the futures we want to reach even

when it is at an additional remove from the frontlines, so long as it is informed by the frontlines.

So, this book is not going to give you ten easy steps to better listening. It is not going to give you seven amazing social movement hacks. It does not promise you a clear path to personal political purity or even to better movements through listening. What I hope it does offer are ways to think a bit differently about both listening and social movements, and the two of those things together. I hope it pushes you to think about them more complexly and more socially. I hope some of it is a bit uncomfortable, or at least makes you say, “Well what am I supposed to do with *that*?” And if, down the road, after these shifted ways of thinking about listening and movements have simmered and fermented for a good long while, they result in you doing things a little bit differently in some way in your own situation — well, I certainly would not object to that.

This book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is called “What Listening Is,” and across its three chapters I explore what we do at the individual level when we listen, then move on to thinking about listening as something that inherently happens between people, and finally to describing a vital, practical role for listening in how our social world as a whole is constituted. Part 2 is called “Listening’s Reach and Limits.” The first of its two chapters brings together many of the ideas presented in the book to that point and, through examples drawn from my own experience, talks about what listening can tell us about the world. The second is about the down sides of listening — how it fails, how it harms, how it can be bound up with oppressive power, and how there really aren’t any easy answers on the individual level to do much about any of that. Part 3 is called “Listening and Change.” The first two chapters in this section look at how we resist in everyday ways and at more deliberately collective and self-consciously political modes of struggle, respectively, and talk about what all of that has to do with listening. The final chapter thinks some more about the role that listening plays in how we know the world, and about how we can be more effective in doing that if we listen both to insights about the world derived from collective struggles and to collective struggles and their participants themselves. As important as that can be, though, it still doesn’t allow us to escape the limitations described in Part 2, so in the book’s Conclusion, I argue that not only is listening central to movements, but movements are the only way we will ultimately be able to create a world that allows listening that is more effective and more just.

I continue to believe that the act of listening to our neighbours, to people across town, and to people around the world is a powerful one. Certainly, listening is not some kind of magical answer, not some kind of universal solvent for the sticky oppressive web that binds us. My epiphany about the power that listening holds was, most definitely, inadequate. But it was not completely wrong, either. As I have already said, some of us listen to some mixture of the circumstances of our own lives and the words of others, and it sparks a deep-down, gut-level urgency that propels us to work for radical change. Listening can bring us the seeds of the knowledge we need to begin working towards that change. Listening is, moreover, the starting point for building the kinds of relationships that are necessary to meaningfully act on that urgency and that knowledge. It would not solve everything on its own, but if more of us listened genuinely and deeply to the everyday experiences of other people and worked hard to match that with relevant theory and action, we would live in a much different world. The time I have spent listening — listening to the people I interviewed for my projects, listening in the context of my own involvement in social movements, and listening in the course of everyday life — has convinced me that this is the case

I hope you will join me as I explore in a bit more detail what listening is, what role it plays in the social world, and, most importantly, how it is at work as we try to understand the world and as we collectively struggle to change it. Thank-you for listening.