THE PAINFUL ART OF LISTENING

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In 1849 a young Hungarian physician, Inaz Phillip Semmelweis, noticed a striking difference in the death rates of two wards at the Vienna Maternity Hospital. One ward employed mid-wives who kept the ward spotlessly clean and the mortality rate in that ward was consistently low. In the other ward, there were no mid-wives to keep the area clean and young mothers died at an alarming rate. Dr. Semmelweis acted on his own initiative. He began to insist on cleanliness in the ward with the high death rate. Interns were made to scrape their feet at the door and wash their hands in chlorine-water . Linens were changed regularly and the floor was swept daily. In a single month the mortality rate dropped dramatically. But Dr. Semmelweis was in serious trouble. Other doctors in the hospital commplained about what they called Dr. Semmelweis's "foolish experiment." The medical director of the hosptial refused to accept the theory of a young, upstart physician who suggested that there might be a relationship between cleanliness and the reduced death rate. Dr. Semmelweis's colleagues and superiors had adopted the popular view of the day regarding the prevention of disease. And the new method was met with indifference and outright hostility because it struck at the basis of popular theory. Today Dr. Semmelweis is regared as a pioneer in the use of antiseptic methods. In his own day he was forced to resign. The hostility which he faced was typical of bitterness to new ideas and new methods. This resistance was not an innovation in his day and it is not unknown in ours. Historically, people have actively resisted and ridiculed those whose ideas challenged existing thought. Socrates was condemned to death by poisoning because he had infused the youths of Ancient Greece with a new spirit of radicalism, a radicalism which challenged the Greeks to review fundamental questions and to look for new knowledge. Gallileo was criticized and threatened with excommunication following the publication of his Letters on Sunspots. His ideas about the makeup of the universe threatened the vested interests of Aristotelian professors who taught their students that the earth was the center of the universe. Henry I of England defined wrong doing in his Coronation Charter as "going against acdepted custom." Anyone accused of such an act was subject to punishment. History is filled with examples of persistent resistance to change. In times past people who have suggested some form of change have been labeled as traitors, heretics, atheists, witches, and anarchists. They have been ridiculed, threatened, humiliated, and burned. The result of this resistance to new ideas and new methods, of course, vary with the circumstances. Sometimes they're humorous. The bathtub, for example was once denounced in this country as "an epicurean English corruption of our democratic simplicity." In this country laws were passed which required motorists to stop and disassemble their cars when they met a horse on a public road. Such stubborness to consider new ideas is more laughable than it is harmful. At other times, however, our refusal to listen to new ideas is anything but funny. In the early 1920's Colonel Billy Mitchell aroused angry opposition from his superiors by campaigning for greater efforts to develop the air force of this country. He predicted the rise of Japan as a major air power and told a court-martial board, which by the way included a young colonel named Douglas MacArthur, that Japan would one day attack and destroy Pearl Harbor from the air. Americans laughed at Billy Mitchell and he was stripped of his rank and privileges as an officer. Five years after his death in 1936, the man whom most people thought was wrong was proven right. Unfortunately, the resistance to change, the refusal to listen which has caused trouble in the past exists today. And it still causes. Shortly after World War II, Hyman G. Rickover suggested that Navy warships could be powered by nuclear energy and wage war from beneath the seas. High ranking Navy officers, who had just fought and won a war with steam-driven ships and aircraft carriers, scoffed at his proposals. Rickover's plans were constantly delayed and ignored because the Navy could not envision a warship capable of circling the globe without refueling. Because the Secretary of the Navy laughed, it took an actoof Congress to make Hyman Rickover an Admiral and free him to pursue his imaginative ideas. In this state the Attorney General has made himself the target of derision by a large metropolitan newspaper because he has suggested that Missouri's criminal code could do without the death penalty. Recently, nationwide attention was drawn to the controversy arising from the conclusion which Dr. Edgar Gordon of the University of Wisconsin hospital has drawn regarding weight reduction. Dr. Gordon and his associates have suggested that there might not be a relationship between calories and weight in all cases. Despite the fact that this theory was based on careful observation of a number of actual case histories, Dr. Gordon has been denounced by some of his colleagues, satirized in syndicated cartoons, and ridiculed by a public which insists on slow starvation as the only effective way to lose weight. Everyday, people exhibit stubborn opposition to new ideas ideas which are not in tune with accepted theories and time-worn routine. James Harvey Robinson in his book The Mind in the Making has written, "Man tends to go on from generation, living as nearly as may be the life of his forbears. Changes have to be forced upon him

by hard experience, and he is ever prone to find excuses for slipping back into older habits, for these are likely to be simpler, less critical and more spontaneous. Mankind is conservative by nature and readily generates restraints on himself and obstacles to change." Michael Novack, writing in "Nation" magazine referred to this primitive resistance to change as "The Brain Curtain" because it is invariably characterized by an uncritical defense of existing thought and a refusal to consider the validity or the value of new knowledge. It's easy to be uncritical, to refuse to listen and consider. It's easier to laugh at new ideas than it is to evaluate them. It's easier, but it is also dangerous and wasteful. The early Greeks poisoned SSocrates because they were unwilling to evaluate what he had to say to them. For centuries the observations of Galileo were clouded by suspicion and distrust because too many people were unwilling to study his findings. During World War II, thousands of lives were lost becausennot enough people cared to listen to what Billy Mitchell had to say. IF HISTORY HAS TAUGHT US ANYTHING, IT HAS TAUGHT US THAT WE CAN ALWAYS AFFORD TO LISTEN, AND TO CONSIDER. WE NEED NOT ALWAYS AGREE WITH NEW IDEAS BUT WE CAN'T AFFORD TO IGNORE THEM. Modern science has proven that Galileo was only partially right. But even in being partially right he is now considered to have done more to advance science than any other single man. Dr. Edgar Gordon might be wrong about the relationship of calories to weight but who is to laugh at what he has to say. We may not agree with the economic philosophies of John Kenneth Galbraith on the one hand or Freidrich Hiack at the other extreme, but we can ill afford to ridicule either of them. We are not obliged to accept the political ideas of either Adlai Stevenson or William F. Buckley but we cannot pretend to judge the value of their contributions to the enrichment of our lives by a perfunctory laugh. Dr. Dexter Perkins, Professor of American Civilization at Cornell University has written, "The prevailing tendency in United States politics has almost always been that of moderation. But continuance of healthy, active moderation depends on the presence of ideas from all political groups--conservatives, liberals, radicals, and socialists since the integration role each plays is important to the achievement of a balanced result. We can be excused for not accepting the views of Walter Reuther on labor but we cannot be pardoned for ridiculing them. We have the right to disagree with Bertrand Russell but we have no right to laugh at him. We need to listen to people like Barry Goldwater, Arthur Schlesinger, Vance Packard, and Chester Bowles because history has taught us that we can profit from their conflicting and controversial ideas. Walter Lippman has called such divergent ideas "The Indispensable Opposition." Such ideas are indispensable, as he points out, because they force us to re-evaluate the validity of our own ideas and constantly look for better knowledge, better ways of doing things. At the turn of the century a young marketing advisor was asked by a group of California orange growers to find a new way to increase the sale of oranges. Because the orange-growers were familiar with the advertising methods of the time, they fully expected the marketing advisor to suggest some catchy new slogan, a symbol people would remember. But when he appeared before them, the young man didn't have a catchy slogan or a symbol; he had an idea. He said, "Do you know what I'd like to do? I like to teach the American people to drink oranges." The orange-growers were appaled. They laughed. And they sent the young marketing advisor away to find someone else who would listen to the "silly idea" which revolutionized the citrus fruit industry.

We need to cultivate the painful art of listening. We need to teach ourselves and our children to relish new ideas, ideas which challenge us to question, to examine, and to change. We need to learn to value critical thinking of all kinds and to remember that only stupidity is persistently uncritical, hesitant, militantly defensive and dangerous!