

Listenership Chapter (excerpt for the Opportunity Collaboration)

From The Unfinished Social Entrepreneur, a forthcoming book by Opportunity Collaboration founder Jonathan C. Lewis.

I have the bad habit – most of us do – of conflating *what* is being said with *how* it is being said and *who* is saying it. As social activist-listeners, what you and I need to hear, and know, doesn't always come wrapped in a familiar, easy-to-open package.

At every meeting, assumptions and presumptions sit in every chair. We are representations, symbols, totems of what others think they know about us before they know us better. We humans are, after all, hardwired to subconsciously process visual impressions before consciously coping with cognitive messages. We see before we hear; the speed of light is faster than the speed of sound.

Back in the day, when I was student activist, dressed in faded blue jeans and a pair of sandals, long hair and peace buttons, I'm sure I turned off any number of potential allies. My message of peace on earth was certainly less welcomed, less accepted, because of my militant style and sartorial signaling. Today, it's still true that an urgent message of injustice shouted at a street demonstration and a public policy paper making the precise same point are heard by different audiences in different ways with different levels of urgency.

I've learned not to make it easy for decision-makers or potential supporters to preemptively diss me. Instead, I attempt to fit in, chameleon-like. I want the spotlight on my social justice facts and figures – not on my fashion statement, figure or physique.

On the other side of the desk, if I'm the decision-maker, the listener, the voter, the audience member, the impact investor or the donor, I think my responsibility is to laser focus on the meaning of the message while endeavoring (as best I can) to set aside whatever biases are triggered by the messenger, the messenger's appearance or the messenger's delivery system. Triaging ideas and ideologies, plans and protest signs, even the people themselves, before they are fully heard and understood is, for the changemaker, a dereliction of duty.

These ear-opening notes-to-self work for me (usually):

- If a speaker's advocacy is rude, bumptious, strident or politically incorrect, I keep in mind that what is genuinely inappropriate is injustice. Famed American community organizer Saul Alinsky in Rules for Radicals said, "I do not propose to be trapped by tact at the expense of truth." Every boycott, every protest, every class action lawsuit and every acrimoniously presented argument may cause inconvenience, offend or totally backfire. The bigger risk is that we – and the rest of society – don't pay any attention at all.
- For the person denied the right to vote, or helplessly watching a child die, or destitute without a job or forced to shit in an alleyway, it's ridiculous to counsel patience. More than ridiculous, it's cruel. It's an evasive luxury of privilege to turn a deaf ear with a deflecting pronouncement about yesterday's progress or tomorrow's promise. As the 17th Century French politician and author François de La Rochefoucauld chided in Maxims, "We all have strength enough to endure the misfortunes of others."
- An urgent injustice is not made less urgent by a prolonged argument over the process for addressing it. Important issues deserve our passion more than any allegiance to orderly process. "Whenever we think about social change, the question of means and ends arises," writes Alinsky. "They [of the status quo]...can be recognized by one of two verbal brands: 'We agree with the ends, but not the means,' or 'This is not the time.'"
- There is no communications equivalency between actual oppression and hurt feelings. In the rough-and-tumble of social change, when issues are identified, when bad behavior is called out, things are said and sometimes our feelings – my feelings – get hurt. For example, I don't particularly enjoy being reminded that some fraction of my success is based, not on merit, but on my privileged upbringing, Caucasian-ness or Y Chromosome. Tough for me. As a social entrepreneur, my responsibility is to stay focused on the injustice at hand, not walk away because of a few bent feelings.

For every rainbow, for every act of generosity, for every uplifting song and act of kindness, life is also tragic, ugly and unfair. Thus, the principal point of listenership, as explained in The Doors of Perception by the philosopher Aldous Huxley, is “to see ourselves as others see us [and], hardly less important,...to see others as they see themselves.” As a bonus, with any luck, I might hear about an injustice that moves my heart to action.