

Letters to a young Catholic: How to listen

Dear Friend,

We are surrounded by so much noise that it is impossible to listen. That sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? We would think that since there is so much to hear that we would be listening all the time. But most of the time, we are listening in the same way that someone who is drowning is drinking: We are taking in so much that rather than refreshing us, the noise is swallowing us up.

Your attention is a limited resource. Like every limited resource, your attention is precious and valuable. It is so precious that, at every moment of every day, people and companies that you do not know are bidding against each other, with actual money, to occupy your attention. Look at this, listen to this, think about this – now quick over here, now over there.

Do you know what I am talking about? It is like standing in a room with sudden voices and sounds coming so quickly from every direction that you spin around to face one sound only to hear another right away and spin again. Or it is like lights flashing all around you that you try to see all at once but become dizzy trying to see it all. Your attention is limited, but the competition for it is so fierce that you probably often feel overwhelmed by all the things vying for your attention.

Here is the problem: We are constantly trying to pay attention to so many things that we rarely if ever actually pay attention to anything. Think about that phrase: “pay attention.” We “pay” because attention costs us. But since we are surrounded by so much noise, we usually find ourselves

nearly broke. There is little if anything in the bank, and our credit is maxed out. We don't have any attention to "pay" because it has all been spent – or, rather, it has been taken from us. That means that whatever or whoever happens to be right in front of us right now receives very little attention. We just don't have any to give: Our attention is spread so widely that there is little left to spend in the here and now.

I cannot describe for you exactly what this is like in your own life, but I suspect you sense what I am talking about. You know the feeling of being stretched and pulled, inundated and overwhelmed by oh-so-many things. You know what it is like to glance and glance again at one thing after another as sounds and images scroll by or surround you. You know the strange sensation of being somewhere but not really being there because your attention is scattered across so many other places. I suspect you, like me, know what it is like to hear so much but listen to so little.

After my introductory letter, I have chosen to write to you about how to listen, because nothing else will matter if we do not learn how to listen. You and I both need this lesson. We could talk about prayer and studying, being mentored and being uncomfortable, or even reading Scripture and becoming Eucharistic, but if we do not work together on learning how to listen, none of that is likely to go anywhere. Because here is the rock-bottom truth: When we are submerged in noise, we are not free. We cannot be fully human if we are not free, and the mature Catholic life is all about freedom – true freedom.

[Learning how to listen](#) is about becoming free to give and invest your attention. You are not free to "pay attention" when your attention is being taken from you by people and groups you barely know who are competing to steal your attention. This might sound dramatic, but I am not being dramatic enough. What takes up your attention inevitably influences and shapes you. This is an unalterable fact about us as human beings. What we can decide is who and what has the

privilege of influencing and shaping us. That requires developing the discipline and power to guard your attention against the innumerable forces competing for it. Only then are you free to spend your attention on whom (or what) is worthy of it.

As I said in my first letter, having the right intentions matter, but intention alone is not enough. What we need are small, specific, definite practices that allow our intentions to become “incarnate.” Practices shape who we are.. So, my friend, I offer you three specific practices to allow the intention of learning how to listen to slowly take hold in your life:

First, take time every single day to remove yourself from the noise. Rather than an abstract goal, this must be a firm and definite commitment. Choose 15 minutes at the same time every day to dedicate to just being alone, in silence. Write this time in dark, permanent ink on your daily schedule. Make this nonnegotiable. Prepare for this time every day by removing the things that would distract you. Lock away your phone. Turn off notifications. Go to a private place. Set a timer so you are not tempted to look at the clock. Then just allow yourself to be present in this time, attentive but not distracted. What matters is that you do this every day. Later, we will talk about how to unite this particular practice to prayer and to attend to God, but before that, we have to work on reclaiming our power of attention from all the many things that steal it away.

Second, set aside one day a week to refrain from being “plugged in” and working. Because we have the means for always being connected, every day ends up being the same in terms of thinking and worrying about the same things. For one day a week, break the cycle. Ideally, this day will be [Sunday, the Christian Sabbath](#). Plan to spend this day differently. Spend time with the people around you without checking on what’s going on with other people elsewhere. Read. Rest. Cultivate

your hobbies. Serve someone who needs help. I am under no illusion here: This is a difficult and costly commitment. In order to dedicate this one day, you will need to be more focused and disciplined the other six days of the week because you will need to accomplish your work during those six days in order to free up this one day. Plan accordingly.

Third and finally, resist the urge to fill in the in-between times. What are the “in-between times”? These are times like when you are standing in line, stuck in traffic or waiting for someone to arrive. What do most of us do in times like these? We grab our phones and quickly scroll or check in or browse around. That might not seem like a big deal, but the cumulative effect of all these little in-between moments is that we become less and less capable of just waiting and being bored. We [lose sight](#) of what and who might actually be around us in times like these. We let other things and influences steal our attention in small doses, and we quickly become addicted to that habit. We soon do this without thinking about it. That’s not freedom; that is in fact an addiction. So the practice for reclaiming the freedom we lose is to willfully resist the urge to fill in the in-between times. No doubt, you will fail at this. The important thing is to keep trying. When you realize you gave in without thinking about it during an in-between time, just stop, lightly slap the back of your hand, and put the phone away. I know that sounds a little childish, but it is how we change our habits and regain the freedom we have lost.

These three practices are simple and direct, but they are demanding. It will be difficult to allow these to become habitual. There is no shortcut here: the only thing to do is make the commitments and then work on keeping them. [When you fail, try again](#). Work on these for a solid month, and at the end of the month, renew your commitment. These are precisely the kind of [practices that free us to love God](#) and [love our neighbor](#), and I will make those connections in a later letter.

For now, I hope you will take up this challenge and commit to these practices that lead to learning (and re-learning) how to listen.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lenny". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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