

The Art and Ethics of Listening with Krista Tippett

{music}

Christiane Wisehart: I'm Christiane Wisehart and this is examining ethics brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Listening is hard work and our special guest for this show has elevated that work to an art form. Krista Tippett is the host of the radio show and podcast on being she's a specialist in the craft of listening.

Krista Tippett: Listening is actually not primarily about being quiet. It is primarily about being present. And I think that the gift of giving our presence to each other is just as urgent as, as it has ever been. And listening is one of the like basic skills to do that.

Christiane: She's poured the skills she's learned as a radio host into the civil conversations project, a set of resources for having difficult discussions across difference. Today, we're featuring an interview where Krista shares with us, her listening method. We'll follow that with an essay by the philosopher Bob Fisher, about what it means to be present for one another. That's all coming up on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

{music fades}

Christiane: One of the reasons we created this show was to give our listeners tools to talk about ethics. So over the years, we've tried to introduce you to key ideas and philosophers in that world. We're trying to empower people to have meaningful discussions about morality, but something we don't often address is the other side of a conversation. And I don't just mean the other side of an argument. I'm talking about listening. Deep, meaningful conversations require active listeners. It's obvious that part of what makes a good discussion is listening, but as it turns out, being a good listener actually requires effort. In this segment, I interview Krista Tippett, the host of a public radio show and podcast called on being she's been on the radio for almost two decades. And in that time she's become one of the best interviewers on the air. And it's not because she asks hard hitting clever questions or goads people into saying something controversial it's because she is so clearly present and has so clearly cultivated a kind of listening superpower.

{interview begins}

Christiane: So when I was first trying to figure out what I wanted, the focus of our interview or our conversation today to be, I kept asking myself, what is Krista Tippett's superpower? And while you're obviously talented at a lot of things, the theme that kept coming back to me is that

you really seem to have cultivated a virtue of listening, listening well, and you start out a lot of your shows by asking a question about your guest's spiritual background. And I thought I would put my own little spin on it and ask you, can you remember the first time that you felt like someone was really listening to you?

Krista Tippett: It makes me really happy for you to say that that my superpower is listening and, and you're right. That I've, I mean, I've practiced and practiced it. So I, I do think superpowers are, you know, cultivated and not just given. Um, and sometimes people assume that I must have come from a great, a family of great listeners, but we also sometimes get good at what we do because of the absence of it. And that's more my story, but I didn't grow up with people who were listening the way I would describe that now. So it was kind of longing in me without even really know what I was longing for. I probably only really, um, had that experience when I went to college. Like I'm thinking of a professor who kind of the first time that I just had a real friendship with a professor and, you know, this amazing experience that, that someone who I respected also expected also was genuinely curious about what was coming out of my mind and my mouth and, and how, um, emboldening that is and, and how life giving.

Christiane: So one of the things that strikes me the most about your show is whatever responsive interviewer you are, um, which obviously requires, as you said, serious listening skills. So what does it mean to be a good listener? What does a good listener look like?

Krista Tippett: It's a few things. I, I think that listening that being a good listener starts before the <affirmative> start before the conversation starts that actually, you also have to create the condition where it's gonna be a trustworthy enough space for, for people, for, for you to, you know, to be asking people, to engage in a real conversation and be revealing and, you know, be thinking out loud, which is kind of vulnerable making thing. And honestly, we're not surrounded by spaces where it would actually be reasonable, um, to ask most of us to do that, Right? So I think creating a hospitable space is actually one of the, one of the fundamentals of, of being a good listener and creating the conditions where that can matter. We've had a lot of experiences where we enter into a situation where we know right away that we're going to have to explain ourselves or defend ourselves, or just intuitively that somebody does not understand us.

And that just shuts you down. But, but when you enter into a space where you instinctively like, and this, I think this translates physically, it's not a lot of words, don't have to be exchanged, but you get this feeling, oh, somebody gets me. They, they get me and, you know, your whole body relaxes your kind of imagination relaxes, and then something can really happen in the conversation. And then I, I also think of the, the preparation I do, um, as part of that hospitality, as part of creating that space. I think of the way I prepare is not just wanting to know what people know, but I, I wanna know how they think. And that's a completely interesting thing to pursue with other humans in general. So, you know, those are, those are prerequisites to good listening. I think there are basic qualities of good listening that, that are very accessible, but also need practice. Like, you know, real curiosity, the intentionality behind questions we ask is important. It's, it's not enough to just ask a curious question. You actually have to be serious.

And also I think a willingness to be surprised for me, the good, the measure of a good conversation is if, if, if I am surprised, if, because we've created a, an atmosphere because my questions are good enough, somebody says something that they haven't quite put words around before they surprise themselves. That is, is my measure of, of a successful conversation.

Christiane: I wanna talk more about crafting a good question. What's the role of a question in being a good listener and what does a good question sound like?

Krista Tippett: I would kind of repeat, but I think the intentionality behind our questions is everything. And I, I actually think that we in this culture have really been trained. We've really been trained to go in to have an important conversation, or even to have an interview with an agenda. And, and this also gets modeled for us in, in a lot of media. The, the journalist is asking the question because they need that question answered for their purposes. <laugh>. And so, to me, that's not a great question. Great question can actually sound really simple. Like I think the point of a question, uh, you know, is to invite somebody to think out loud is to elicit, um, something that is honest. You know, sometimes the best questions are really just the open-hearted simple ones that we think maybe, and I don't just mean in journalism, but in life we think they're so basic that we shouldn't ask, but they're so basic that it might be embarrassing to ask. They can in a much more powerful way open up the, the, the big beat places than some really lofty sounding question that is gonna in a way, keep everything on a kind of high surface level.

Christiane: So could you tell me about your civil conversations project?

Krista Tippett: It started as just kind of a body of work within our body of work. And it is that still, uh, but it's kind of taken on a life of its own, especially in the last year where this question of how we speak across our divides and who we are to each other. And you know, how we reweave something called common life has just become so urgent. I, I do think you could call most of what we do. You know, you call most of what we do a civil conversation, but the civil conversations project shows are just that much more focused on the question of what is wisdom and what is inner life and who do we want to be as individuals and what resonance those things have for our life together. And we're also, we've also created a guide, a better conversations guide, which was actually a wonderful exercise for us to kind of think about, um, if some of the things, questions you're asking me, like what have I learned about what it means to listen and what's that practical action and how can people just start new kinds of conversations in the communities they inhabit.

Christiane: What are some of the, the, the tips that you give people or, or that you would give to your audience, um, to be a good listener or to have a so conversation.

Krista Tippett: One of the things that people seem to find most helpful is, you know, the way we frame, you know, how to think about setting up a conversation and the, the presence you bring it's about setting the scene. It's about like creating the container so that something new can

happen, and you're not gonna have the same old dead end debate that we're also tired of. So we have something that we, we call grounding virtues. To me, this is a bit of a contrast of ground rules, which is a more familiar way we think about setting up a conversational space and, and it is about generous listening. It's about choosing her words carefully, like really taking seriously how powerful words are words, that shimmer words that matter. Um, patience is one of them, but it's not a passive patience, and it's not a like, you know, giving up on anything important happening is just understanding that what this is about, what we're aiming for is the human change that makes meaningful social change possible.

And that always takes time. And there's something actually really helpful and calming in this culture where we think everything has to happen right away, you know, and if it doesn't happen right away, we've failed. We're so tangled up in knots right now. We don't even know how to get into the room with the people we'd like to understand better, or the people we'd like to be in relationship with. So, so I think some, you know, the civil conversations guide spends a lot of time just on that. And people are saying that that is helpful. And then they can take that and, and, and apply that to the practicalities of their situation, their neighborhood, their community.

Christiane: Why is listening important?

Krista Tippett: I think that listening is a basic social art. I grew up learning that listening is about being quiet while the other person says what they have to say so that I can then say what I have to say. <laugh>. And I, I listening is actually not primarily about being quiet. It is primarily about being present. And I think that the gift of giving our presence to each other is just as urgent as, as it has ever been. And listening is one of the like basic skills to do that. It's really powerful because you know, when someone really listens to us, even if it happens in a really mundane encounter, it makes a difference. It can make your day. So I think it's just an incredibly important piece of, you know, what I'm calling the generative possibilities of this moment. If we're gonna bring those about listening is gonna be part of it.

{interview ends}

Christiane: Listening isn't passive. Giving one another, the gift of our presence. Isn't passive, it's active. It's a choice we make in our last segment, the ethicist and philosopher, Bob Fisher explores what it means to do this real work of being present for one another and for the causes we believe in. here's his essay. Why act when it doesn't make a difference narrated by the poet, Joe Heithaus.

[music]

Joe Heithaus: I've got a friend who's suffering from depression. He's been hauled up in his house for the last two years, living first on sick pay and savings. Venturing only out for fish and canned vegetables. They're healthy. I visit him from time to time, which isn't often enough. And I excuse the infrequency with a lame thought. Doesn't matter whether I go. The problem is not

that I'm wrong. He doesn't want visitors. We have the same conversation each time, and he isn't getting any closer to the man. He once was all bright and bounding. If I'm showing up to make a difference, I'm probably wasting my time. This defense of inaction is psychologically powerful. We know how the election will play out. So we don't vote. We know that having tofu won't save a cow from slaughter. So we have the burger. We know that old Navy, isn't going to notice whether we shop elsewhere. So we may as well save some money. When we can't make a difference, why bother? Sometimes because we're wrong. It only seems like we can't make a difference because so many people contribute to the effect. This tends to be the story in consumer ethics industries don't care about what any one person does, but they certainly care about what lots of people do. And lots of people don't do anything. If we don't do something.

In other cases, we really can't accomplish what we'd like too few are willing to take up the cause, but we can do something else worthwhile. Consider for example, participating in adjunct walkout day. My university isn't going to start paying adjuncts a living wage. So canceling class for their sake feels pointless by joining in, though, we stand in solidarity with those who aren't being treated fairly insisting that wrongdoers be held accountable. That's a far cry from achieving fair wages, but it still isn't trivial to encourage and criticize respectively those who deserve encouragement and criticism. All that said my friend's depression isn't a collective action problem. It isn't as though a few more supporters will tip the scales. Protest won't help either. Depression may be a thief, but it can't be shamed. And we could conclude on this basis that my excuse is a good one, but I remain unsatisfied by it. When I drive the 22 miles to his door, I'm his friend. When I pick up a book instead, I'm not, and that choice isn't trivial. It might sound like I've just made this about me. I can't make a difference in my friend's life, but I can make a difference in mine. I can choose what sort of person I'll become, the ideals that I'll embody, and although those things are true, they're beside the point, which is this:

Sometimes difference making doesn't matter. If I'm going to be a friend, I'm going to sit with him in his depression, not at the expense of everything else in my life. That's martyrdom, but at real expense, since that's what friendship involves, likewise, if I'm a citizen, I vote. If I'm compassionate, I don't want anything to do with factory farms. That's what it is to be a friend or a citizen or compassionate. And that's why we aren't bad friends or citizens if we fail, we're a little less compassionate. When we keep eating animals. Rather, we are friends and citizens and compassionate. We have different versions of these relationships and roles and virtues, the poultry, calculating ones where this is my country is an argument enough for voting. And that creature suffered needlessly is an argument enough for abstaining. Not so with the versions worth having they settle how we ought to proceed. Indeed, that's much of why they're worth having. Why act when it doesn't make a difference? In some cases, because it does, though only with some help or not how we'd hoped, but often enough, this is the wrong sort of question to ask. And the right kind is much simpler.

Are we friends?

{story song fades out, and another song begins}

Christiane: We'll have links to all of the topics we mentioned in our show notes page. For this episode@examiningethics.org, you can find Krista Tippett's show on being on public radio stations across the nation. You can also download her shows on apple podcasts, subscribe to our show anywhere you find your podcasts. For updates about the podcast, interesting links and more follow us on Twitter at examining ethics. We're also on Instagram at examining ethics podcast and Facebook. The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute for Ethics.

Eleanor Price: Examining Ethics is hosted by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Christiane Wisheart produced the show with production assistance from me, Eleanor Price. Special thanks to our narrator Joe Heithaus. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by Blue Dot Sessions, Alan Singly and Kai Engle, and can be found online@freemusicarchive.org. Examining ethics is made possible by the generous support of Depauw alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Thank you for your support.