



ARTICLE

Pay Attention: How to be More Present on Zoom

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I write, yet again, from the once uninhabited corner of my New York City living room that is now my office/classroom/yoga studio/homeschool hub. Formerly, it was known as a bookshelf. It is over two years into a pandemic that has crystallized the razor's edge upon which we exist, skirting the periphery of the random chasm of death, all the while indulging the urgent desire to be alive. As we cycle through the Greek alphabet with terrifying speed, Omicron now looms large. And normalcy seems an ever more elusive phantom.

In the meantime, we continue to exist in a strange suspension of reality, accepting, for example, virtual interactions as a viable alternative to the physical, germ-filled world. Zoom, once merely an onomatopoetic utterance I made to my children when they were in car seats and the world was different, is now a permanent part of our lexicon. Like many other law school professors, I have come to rely on it as a key mode of interaction with my students for conferencing, office hours, and, from time to time, classes.

But sitting in front of a screen for long periods of time makes unreasonable demands on our ability to focus (and, by extension, to listen). And so, it is upon my role as a yoga teacher and a mindfulness teacher that I have come to rely, to be a better law school teacher during the virtual time I spend with my

students.

1. How to Listen Through a Screen

Listening—we do it all day, every day. And we probably think we are fairly good at it. Still, we can improve how we listen by bringing consciousness and awareness to it. And I will start by addressing a question you may be asking yourself: “I am the professor, isn’t my job to speak? To lead the interaction? Don’t my students have to listen to me?” Yes. All that is true. But, as a professor, it is essential to be fully present with our students, whether in office hours, a conference, or interacting with them in class. If our minds wander away from the present moment, we will fill in the gaps with assumptions from the past or hypotheses about the future. In either case, the reality of that particular student in that particular moment is lost forever.

Consciously listening is challenging on many levels. Mathematics makes it challenging—where an average person speaks 125 words each minute, the average person can process 500 words each minute.¹ That means there is an inevitable lag, making it easy for a listener to drift away from the moment. But for a conscious listener, there is much to do in that extra space—a conscious listener can use it to summarize what the speaker has said, making note of body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions² to be able to synthesize the “whole message”³ and use it to develop a thoughtful response.⁴

Consciously listening is even more challenging on Zoom. We have all heard of “Zoom fatigue,” but what is it really? As with most things in life, it has a lot to do with psychology. Humans are naturally social creatures—we were blessed and cursed with an exquisite sensitivity to the facial expressions of other people.⁵ We develop trust by looking people in the eye.⁶ But video glitches, monitor and camera placements, blurry images, and audio that even slightly misaligns with video scramble the social cues upon which we have been conditioned to rely.⁷ We struggle to recognize emotion and develop empathy.⁸ Perhaps the

¹ REBECCA Z. SHAFIR, THE ZEN OF LISTENING: MINDFUL COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF DISTRACTION 108 (2003).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 149.

⁴ For a more complete discussion of this topic, see Susan Greene, *Mindful Practices for Law Practices*, 46 OHIO N. UNIV. L. REV. 53 (2019).

⁵ Kate Murphy, *Why Zoom Is Terrible*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 29, 2020, <https://www.ny-times.com/2020/04/29/sunday-review/zoom-video-conference.html>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

biggest challenge to mindful listening while we're on Zoom is that, unlike in the real world, we have a constant view of ourselves.⁹ That anomaly makes it monumentally challenging to consciously listen to other people, focusing on them instead of ourselves.

So how to overcome this and listen mindfully on Zoom? My first piece of advice is not to rely too heavily on Zoom in the first place! For key moments of connection with another person, try using the telephone. Some of my most successful conferences with students have been by phone, after some technological glitch or another rendered a Zoom meeting impossible. Psychologists would be unsurprised by this, as a complete lack of facial cues is superior to the faulty ones provided by Zoom; in fact, "[t]he absence of visual input might even heighten people's sensitivity" to such indicators as "slight tonal shifts, brief hesitations and the rhythm of someone's breathing."¹⁰ Put differently, a humble telephone call frees the listener from the innate inclination to unscramble the imperfect output of Zoom and allows the conscious listener to more readily synthesize the speaker's whole message.

But avoiding Zoom altogether is not the only way to develop a stronger practice of conscious listening. First, recognize that Zoom is a challenging forum for conscious listening and prepare yourself for that forum before you begin a meeting. Consider turning off any notifications that might pop up during the Zoom meeting and lure you from your connection to your students. It may also be helpful to keep the "speaker view" setting, which helps you to focus on the individual speaking, and to turn off the view you have of yourself.

Further, consider a grounding breath practice before the meeting. I love a technique called "box breathing," which recognizes the four parts of a full breath. Take a deep inhale, through your nose, to the count of four. Hold that full breath to the count of four. Release a slow exhale, through your mouth, to the count of four. Hold that empty feeling to the count of four. Breathe in, two, three, four. Hold, two, three, four. Breathe out, two, three, four. Hold, two, three, four. Repeat.¹¹ Now let go of the count and breathe normally, but consciously. Breath is a powerful tool to drop you into the present, your body, and this moment. It is, therefore, intimately related to conscious listening because it helps you to stay in that moment, with that speaker. Breathing is an ever-accessible touchpoint. It has the interesting dual properties of being completely within our control (we can decide how shallow or deep, frequent or infrequent, ragged or smooth each breath is) and entirely beyond our control (breath will continue to be automatic until one day, hopefully far into the future, when it is not; until then, you cannot

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Maybe even repeat again. And again. And again.

hold your breath for longer than your body deems safe).

Once on Zoom, focus your attention on any urge you have to interrupt a student who is speaking. It may sound obvious, but there is a natural human inclination to listen so that we can reply instead of listening so that we can understand. The next time you find yourself in conversation, see if you can focus your full attention on that person and the message. Observe how many times you feel the urge to interrupt—and an interruption can take many innocuous and magnanimous forms, from a compliment to a question and anything in between. But regardless of the nature, an interruption pulls the attention from the student speaking to yourself. So, when that urge inevitably arises, observe it, don't judge it, but don't give in to it either. When the student has finished speaking, you can summarize what the student has said and confirm that you have correctly understood the message, recognizing any misalignment between what you heard and what the speaker intended for you to hear. The more you practice listening without interrupting, resisting the urge to formulate a quick response, the easier it will become. And the more you can listen without interrupting, the more you can maintain your focus on the student speaking, consciously listening, despite the challenges introduced by Zoom.