FAMUYA WALE SO

IDEAS & PERSPECTIVES

THE DISCIPLINE OF UNDERSTANDING

Listening, Judgment, and the Responsibility to Understand Others

The Difference Between Hearing and Understanding

Human beings spend much of their lives listening to one another, yet understanding remains among the most difficult responsibilities of human existence.

We hear words without always grasping their meaning. We observe actions without fully knowing the circumstances that produced them. We encounter opinions that differ from our own and too often respond before asking what experiences, convictions, fears, or hopes may lie behind them.

Hearing is a natural human capacity. Understanding requires something more.

It requires attention. Patience.

Curiosity. Humility.

And the willingness to recognize that another person's experience of the world may differ profoundly from our own.

We do not enter conversations as empty vessels. We bring memories, expectations, beliefs, disappointments, loyalties, and assumptions. These influence not only what we say, but also what we believe we have heard.

Sometimes we listen to discover what another person means.

At other times, we listen only long enough to prepare our response.

The difference is fundamental.

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When we listen merely to respond, the other person's words become obstacles to overcome or arguments to defeat. When we listen to understand, those words become an opportunity to encounter a perspective beyond our own.

Yet attentive listening, however necessary, does not by itself guarantee understanding.

We must distinguish what another person has actually expressed from what we have interpreted that expression to mean. Between another person's words and our judgment of them lies a space often occupied by assumptions, memories, expectations, and emotions.

The discipline of understanding begins when we learn to examine that space rather than mistake our interpretation for the whole truth.

This does not mean that every perspective is equally sound or every argument equally convincing.

It means that judgment should follow understanding rather than replace it.

A person may speak awkwardly yet possess an important insight. Another may express a legitimate concern through anger or frustration. Someone may struggle to explain an experience because the words available to them seem inadequate.

If we judge only the manner of expression, we may fail to recognize the substance of what is being communicated.

Understanding therefore begins with a discipline that is simple to describe but difficult to practice:

Allow another person to become intelligible to us before deciding what we think of them.

This requires more than politeness. It requires intellectual honesty.

For we cannot claim to have understood another person merely because we have heard enough to disagree.

The Limits of Our Own Perspective

Every human being sees the world from somewhere.

Our understanding is shaped by the circumstances into which we were born, the experiences through which we have passed, the knowledge we have acquired, and the relationships that have influenced our lives.

We inherit languages, customs, assumptions, and ways of interpreting human conduct.

Some of these help us understand the world. Others limit what we are prepared to recognize.

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The difficulty is that our own perspective often appears natural to us precisely because it is our own.

We may mistake familiarity for truth.

We may confuse personal experience with universal experience.

We may assume that what seems obvious to us must be equally obvious to others.

And when another person reaches a different conclusion, we may interpret the disagreement as evidence of ignorance, dishonesty, or poor judgment.

Yet disagreement can arise for many reasons.

People may possess different information.

They may have experienced different consequences.

They may assign different importance to competing responsibilities.

They may understand the same event through different historical or cultural experiences.

They may also reason incorrectly, overlook evidence, or defend interests they are unwilling to acknowledge.

The responsibility to understand requires us to consider these possibilities without automatically assuming which one applies.

This is where humility becomes indispensable.

Humility does not require us to abandon confidence in what we know.

It requires us to recognize the difference between possessing knowledge and possessing complete knowledge.

We may be right about a particular question while remaining mistaken about why another person disagrees.

We may understand an event accurately while failing to appreciate its human consequences.

We may possess a strong argument while expressing it in a manner that prevents others from hearing it.

But understanding others also requires a willingness to understand ourselves.

We must examine the fears that shape our reactions, the loyalties that influence our judgments, and the experiences that make certain opinions difficult for us to hear.

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Sometimes what disturbs us most in another person's words is not simply what that person has said, but what those words awaken within us.

Self-knowledge does not eliminate prejudice or error, but it can reveal when our responses tell us as much about ourselves as they do about the person before us.

This recognition should not lead us to distrust every judgment we make.

Rather, it should encourage us to examine the foundations upon which our judgments rest.

The limits of our perspective do not make truth impossible.

They make the pursuit of truth more demanding.

Intellectual humility is not uncertainty about everything. It is the discipline of recognizing that even our strongest convictions must remain answerable to reason, evidence, and honest examination.

The person who understands this does not become incapable of judgment.

That person becomes more responsible in exercising it.

Understanding Without Agreement

One of the most persistent misunderstandings in human relationships is the belief that understanding another person requires agreeing with them.

It does not.

We may understand why someone holds a particular belief while rejecting that belief.

We may recognize the experiences that shaped a person's conduct without excusing the harm that conduct has caused.

We may acknowledge another person's fears without accepting the conclusions drawn from those fears.

And we may respect the dignity of an individual while firmly opposing their actions.

Understanding and agreement are different intellectual and moral acts.

Understanding asks:

What does this person believe?

What does this person mean?

What experiences or reasons support that position?

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What interests, fears, or expectations may influence it?

What consequences does the person anticipate?

Agreement asks a different question:

Is the position justified?

Is the reasoning sound?

Is the evidence sufficient?

Are the consequences acceptable?

Does the proposed action respect legitimate rights and responsibilities?

These questions should not be confused.

Empathy introduces another important distinction.

Empathy allows us to recognize how another person may experience a situation. It does not require us to accept that person's interpretation of events or approve the actions that follow.

We may acknowledge suffering without accepting every explanation offered for it.

We may recognize fear without allowing fear to justify injustice.

We may understand the circumstances that contributed to wrongdoing without treating those circumstances as sufficient justification.

To understand another person's experience is to recognize their humanity; to endorse their conclusions requires a separate exercise of judgment.

Indeed, understanding may sometimes strengthen disagreement.

When we examine another person's reasoning carefully, we may discover that our objection is more substantial than we initially believed.

But our disagreement will then rest upon a more accurate understanding of what we oppose.

This matters because people too often argue against positions that others do not actually hold.

They respond to assumptions rather than statements.

They attribute intentions without sufficient evidence.

They reduce complex convictions to convenient labels.

And they mistake the defeat of a simplified argument for the resolution of a genuine disagreement.

Such exchanges may produce the appearance of intellectual victory without producing greater understanding.

A more disciplined approach begins by representing another person's position fairly, even when we intend to challenge it.

The integrity of our convictions is not weakened when we understand those who disagree with us. It is strengthened when our judgments are informed by what they actually believe and do.

This is not an invitation to endless debate or an obligation to engage every hostile argument.

There are circumstances in which boundaries, refusal, or protective action are necessary.

Understanding does not eliminate those responsibilities.

It helps us exercise them with greater clarity.

The Responsibility to Judge Fairly

Human beings cannot live without making judgments.

We must distinguish truth from falsehood.

We must evaluate conduct.

We must decide whom to trust.

We must assess arguments, intentions, responsibilities, and consequences.

We must sometimes determine whether a relationship can continue, whether an action is acceptable, or whether a particular decision serves the common good.

The objective of understanding is therefore not to abolish judgment.

It is to make judgment more responsible.

Fair judgment requires several disciplines.

The first is attention to evidence.

What do we actually know?

What have we merely heard?

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What are we assuming?

What remains uncertain?

The second is attention to context.

What circumstances shaped the event?

What responsibilities did the individuals involved possess?

What alternatives were available?

What constraints influenced their decisions?

Context does not automatically justify conduct. But without it, judgment may become superficial.

The third is consistency.

Do we apply the same standards to people we admire and people we dislike?

Do we excuse conduct in ourselves that we condemn in others?

Do we interpret the mistakes of those close to us generously while treating the mistakes of strangers as proof of defective character?

Fairness becomes difficult when our standards change according to our loyalties.

The fourth is proportionality.

Not every mistake deserves the same response.

Not every disagreement represents a moral failure.

Not every expression of anger reveals a person's entire character.

And not every act of wrongdoing can be adequately addressed through forgiveness alone.

Responsible judgment must consider seriousness, intention, consequences, repetition, accountability, and the possibility of correction.

The fifth is the willingness to revise.

A judgment formed from incomplete information should not become immune to new evidence.

Changing one's mind in response to better understanding is not necessarily weakness or inconsistency.

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It may be an expression of intellectual integrity.

The sixth is the responsibility to seek clarification.

Fair judgment requires the willingness to ask before assuming.

A question sincerely posed can prevent an accusation unnecessarily made.

Clarification allows us to test whether we have understood another person's meaning, distinguish intention from interpretation, and correct misunderstandings before they become settled judgments.

Sometimes the most responsible question is also the simplest:

Have I understood you correctly?

But asking is only the beginning. We must also be prepared to listen to the answer, including when it challenges the interpretation we have already formed.

Yet fairness also requires courage.

There are moments when the evidence is sufficient, the wrongdoing is clear, and continued hesitation becomes a form of avoidance.

The responsibility to understand must not become an excuse for refusing to make necessary judgments.

To judge fairly is neither to condemn hastily nor to excuse endlessly. It is to bring knowledge, conscience, consistency, and courage to the difficult responsibility of distinguishing what is justified from what is not.

When Understanding Becomes Difficult

Understanding is easiest when another person's words resemble our own thoughts.

It becomes more demanding when disagreement touches our identity, convictions, memories, or experiences of suffering.

A disagreement about an abstract question may remain calm.

A disagreement concerning dignity, injustice, family, faith, belonging, or personal responsibility may awaken powerful emotions.

Under such circumstances, the desire to defend ourselves can become stronger than the desire to understand.

We may stop listening.

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We may interpret every statement as an attack.

We may assume hostile intentions.

We may respond to the person rather than the argument.

And we may begin to regard disagreement itself as evidence that understanding is impossible.

But difficulty does not necessarily make understanding less important.

Sometimes it makes understanding more necessary.

Consider two people who remember the same event differently.

One remembers the intention behind an action.

The other remembers its consequences.

One believes that no harm was intended.

The other continues to experience the harm that occurred.

Both may be describing something real, but they are not necessarily answering the same question.

Understanding requires recognizing the difference between intention and impact.

A person may act without intending injury and still cause genuine harm.

Another may experience genuine injury while misunderstanding some of the circumstances surrounding the action.

Neither possibility should be dismissed automatically.

A meaningful conversation may therefore require each person to acknowledge something that does not invalidate their own experience.

The person who caused harm may need to recognize consequences that were not intended.

The person who suffered harm may choose to examine circumstances without surrendering the legitimacy of that suffering.

Such understanding cannot be demanded or guaranteed.

Some wounds require distance.

Some relationships cannot safely be restored.

Some individuals are unwilling to accept responsibility.

And some disagreements cannot be resolved through conversation alone.

The discipline of understanding must therefore include respect for boundaries.

No person should be required to remain exposed to cruelty, manipulation, or repeated injury merely to demonstrate compassion or openness.

There are moments when understanding leads to reconciliation.

There are others when it leads to a clearer recognition that separation, accountability, or protective action is necessary.

Both outcomes can be consistent with human dignity.

Understanding is not measured by whether every relationship is preserved. It is measured by whether we have approached the truth of the relationship without abandoning fairness, conscience, or respect for ourselves and others.

The Courage to Listen and the Courage to Disagree

Listening requires courage because it exposes us to the possibility that our understanding is incomplete.

Disagreement requires courage because it sometimes obliges us to defend a conviction despite pressure to remain silent.

Both responsibilities matter.

A person who listens without ever exercising judgment may become vulnerable to manipulation or lose the ability to act according to principle.

A person who judges without listening may become imprisoned within assumptions that experience can no longer correct.

The discipline of understanding requires a balance between openness and conviction.

We must be willing to hear what challenges us.

We must also be willing to say what we believe.

We must recognize the possibility of error without pretending that all positions are equally defensible.

And we must learn to distinguish a disagreement that invites further examination from conduct that requires a firm moral response.

This balance is especially important in a world where public communication often rewards speed, certainty, outrage, and confrontation.

People are encouraged to react before examining.

To declare allegiance before understanding.

To identify opponents before considering arguments.

To reduce complex questions to competing slogans.

And to treat the acknowledgment of another perspective as a betrayal of one's own.

Yet understanding is not betrayal.

A person may listen carefully to an opposing argument and remain unconvinced.

A community may examine criticism without abandoning its identity.

An institution may acknowledge error without surrendering its legitimacy.

A society may confront painful aspects of its history without denying its achievements.

The capacity to examine ourselves is not the enemy of conviction.

It is one of the conditions under which conviction becomes responsible.

There is also courage in the manner of disagreement.

We can disagree without humiliating.

We can correct without contempt.

We can refuse without cruelty.

We can defend a principle without denying another person's humanity.

This does not mean that every exchange must remain gentle or that every injustice can be confronted through courteous language alone.

Firmness may be necessary.

Urgency may be justified.

Anger may express a legitimate response to wrongdoing.

But even when disagreement becomes forceful, we retain responsibility for the truthfulness of our claims and the consequences of our conduct.

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The courage to listen protects us from arrogance. The courage to disagree protects us from surrendering judgment. Together, they make understanding an expression of moral strength.

Understanding as a Human and Public Responsibility

The discipline of understanding begins in ordinary human encounters, but its consequences extend far beyond them.

Families depend upon it.

Communities require it.

Institutions are strengthened by it.

And societies cannot sustain meaningful cooperation without some capacity to understand differences in experience, interest, and perspective.

In public life, misunderstanding can become particularly consequential.

A leader may announce a policy without understanding the circumstances of those expected to live with it.

An institution may design procedures without examining how people actually experience them.

A government may interpret public criticism as hostility rather than evidence of unmet responsibilities.

An organization may mistake silence for agreement.

And those entrusted with authority may confuse obedience with understanding.

These failures are not always caused by malicious intentions.

They may arise from distance, institutional habits, insufficient information, or the assumption that those who exercise authority necessarily understand those affected by it.

But their consequences can be serious.

Public responsibility therefore requires more than the capacity to communicate decisions.

It requires the ability to receive information, recognize legitimate concerns, examine disagreement, and correct mistaken assumptions.

Institutional listening becomes meaningful when it influences institutional judgment.

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Public consultations, meetings, hearings, and dialogue are not sufficient merely because they have taken place.

The deeper responsibility is to demonstrate that legitimate concerns have been examined, relevant knowledge has informed decisions, and those affected by public action have been treated as participants in the search for better outcomes rather than passive recipients of authority.

This does not mean that every demand can be satisfied or every disagreement resolved.

Institutions must make decisions.

Leaders must establish priorities.

Public authorities must sometimes act despite competing interests.

But decisions become more responsible when they are informed by a serious understanding of the people, circumstances, and consequences involved.

The same principle applies to relations among societies and nations.

Diplomacy requires understanding the interests, histories, fears, and aspirations of others without abandoning one's own legitimate responsibilities.

Regional cooperation requires recognizing both shared interests and genuine differences.

International partnerships require knowledge of what each party seeks, contributes, and risks.

And peaceful coexistence requires the ability to manage disagreement without automatically transforming difference into hostility.

Understanding does not eliminate the need for institutions, law, accountability, or professional capability.

It gives those instruments a more informed human purpose.

A capable institution should not merely possess the authority to act.

It should also possess the knowledge necessary to understand the circumstances in which its actions will matter.

A responsible leader should not merely know how to persuade.

That leader should also know how to listen.

And a society committed to human dignity should not measure understanding solely by the degree of agreement among its members.

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It should also consider how people treat one another when agreement is absent.

The discipline of understanding ultimately returns us to a simple but demanding truth.

We do not honor another person's humanity by pretending that every belief is correct or every action acceptable.

We honor that humanity by refusing to replace understanding with prejudice, judgment with hostility, or conviction with contempt.

We can remain faithful to our principles while acknowledging the experiences of others.

We can defend truth without claiming infallibility.

We can recognize wrongdoing without surrendering compassion.

We can listen without agreeing.

And we can disagree without ceasing to understand.

Understanding is not the abandonment of conviction. It is the discipline that allows conviction to remain informed, judgment to remain fair, and humanity to remain present even where agreement is impossible.

An FWS Reflection by Cheick Boucadry Traore

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