

Listening to Faith: Krista Tippett of “Speaking of Faith”

By John M. Mulder



Krista Tippett is the Host and Producer of “Speaking of Faith,” a weekly hour-long program aired on public radio and supported by Lilly Endowment. Currently it is heard on 240 public radio stations by 600,000 people each week. It has a global reach through NPR Worldwide, and it routinely receives email from places as far-flung as Ethiopia, Ireland, Brazil, and Iraq. And yet, its expansion through its website makes it an evolving media space—a conversation about religion, spirituality, and large questions about the meaning of every aspect of life.

About 52,000 receive a weekly email newsletter, and the program has 1.3 million downloads per month via its website and podcast:
<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org>.

The program began as an occasional series in 1999, went monthly in 2001, and became a weekly feature of public radio broadcasting in 2003. Since then it has won many awards, including the Peabody award and two Webby awards—the only public radio program in the United States to achieve this distinction.

The creative force behind “Speaking of Faith” is Krista Tippett, and she described her own pilgrimage of faith in her book, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters and How to Talk About It* (Penguin Books, 2007). Granddaughter of a Baptist

minister, Ms. Tippett graduated from Brown University with a major in history and traveled to Bonn, West Germany, to study politics in Cold War Europe under a Fulbright scholarship. She then became a reporter and stringer in Berlin for *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The International Herald Tribune*, the BBC, and *Die Zeit*. She later served as a special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to West Germany.

She left Berlin in 1988, just before the Berlin Wall fell, and lived in Spain, England, and Scotland before returning to the U. S. and entering Yale Divinity School, where she received an M.Div. in 1994. She saw religion as one of the gaping holes in the media coverage of American society, and that became the embryo from which “Speaking of Faith” was born.

Her latest book is *Einstein’s God* (Penguin Books, 2010), a selection of edited transcripts of her conversations with various people on the relationship between science and religion.

It is difficult to describe “Speaking of Faith.” Some have called it “theology at its best” for its capacity to delve deeply into questions of meaning in all of the world’s religious traditions. On the other hand, it is not a program about ideas alone, for Krista Tippett is resolute in her determination to make the program an event in which faith is lived, not simply described.

Perhaps one of the best ways to describe its impact is to quote from a letter sent to the program by Morgan, the daughter of a listener in Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

I am writing to thank you on behalf of my father, Ken, who recently passed away after a long and difficult battle with multiple sclerosis.

. . . My dad was always a spiritual man, even if he didn’t belong to a particular church. Throughout his illness, his faith not only remained but seemed to grow stronger.

This is why you became such an important and meaningful part of his life—his world had shrunk to the confines of his hospital bed, but through you he was able to explore the world, and the many faiths that shaped his beliefs. He listened to your program every week without fail, and he was thrilled when your podcasts were available on line, so he could listen to your programs over and over. Your program also provided him a framework for concepts and ideas to discuss with visitors. Most importantly, it transported him to a place far from the lonely and painful reality he lived.

It is for all of these reasons that I am writing to you. I am sure you already know that you touch countless lives every day, enriching and enlightening your listeners. But I also wish to tell you that you have made an impact far greater and more profound than that. Through your words,

my father was able to face his terminal condition with courage, and to do it also with grace and dignity.

This conversation is edited.

Q. For several years, you have focused on interviewing people—an astonishing variety of people—and getting them to talk about how religion and faith intersect with their lives. You’ve published two books, *Speaking of Faith* and *Einstein’s God*. And so, your programs and your books involve a lot of talk about God and human life.

I’d like to ask you some questions about what it means to be a listener, for in all this talk, you have been the one who has listened, as well as initiated the talk, guided the talk, and often interpreted the talk.

What does it mean to be a listener—a professional listener? Is this a ministry for you?

A. I’m a journalist. I think I hesitate to use that word, “ministry,” as a public definition. But if it’s a ministry, it’s a ministry of listening, rather than preaching. So, I do think of it as a vocation, a vocation of listening. I suppose that’s another way of rephrasing your question about being a professional listener.

I think that listening is a great virtue, and it’s a virtue that’s been lost in our public life. You know, as much as I care about my radio program, I care about our public life. The point for me about learning to speak about these things is learning to live forward differently. Listening is a part of moving through not just in ordinary life in a meaningful way, but moving through some of the really big challenges we face collectively that we take on in the show.

All I can say is, it’s what I do. I don’t think about it that much. I know I’ve gotten better at what I do. I have a lot of practice [laughing]. I will say this. I’ve become aware, as I’ve been interviewed by people since I’ve written my books, that it takes a commitment to be a listener. It sounds ironic, but committing to be a listener in a media format can feel very risky and frightening. It’s easier to go in, and safer to go in, with the questions you know you’re going to ask. I do go into our interviews very well-prepared, obsessively prepared, but once the conversation starts (and I do think of it more as a conversation than an interview), I hope to be surprised. And I am always going to be surprised if I cannot rely on

my questions – but be present. Listening is about presence. It is about entering unknown territory.

Q. You alluded to this by saying that you don't think about it very much, but do you employ “strategies” of listening?

A. Well...I have strategies for my interviews, so I guess I think the strategies for a good conversation are also implicitly strategies for listening. I want what I am hearing to be as profound and revealing as possible. So, one of my strategies is creating a trustworthy and inviting space for important things to be spoken, for things that are very intimate. I think this is as intimate a part of our lives as anything we can talk about—our spiritual lives, what is sacred. I guess that part of creating that space also means there's a certain quiet to our media space that I guess is unusual. For me it's just essential, but people in radio have said to me, “There's a lot of silence in your show” [laughing]. I think that is a reflection that there's real listening going on, but also that we create an atmosphere—that's there from the beginning of the conversation – where that silence is appropriate, and where hearing people *think* is just as important as hearing the words they say. If I think about it, I'm trying to create an environment for deep listening.

Q. In your interviews, I've noticed that you rarely use what is sometimes called “reflective listening” which is very powerful in therapeutic circles. Your listening is often “critical listening,” as when you say something like, “That's interesting because it reminds me of” You don't say, “So, you believe in God . . . ?” Is your critical listening intentional? People might be offended by “critical listening,” but with you it obviously works. Why?

A. I've actually heard from therapists and teachers of psychology and therapy who listen to the show as a teaching tool! That is so thrilling to me. They say that I employ a lot of best practices. But you're right. I don't do reflective listening in the sense of giving back to people what they just said. I give people back what they just said and ask them to go farther.

It's funny. Some of the most effective, powerful questions are the simplest questions. When someone says something really intriguing—and I let that be spoken—then I can say, “Tell me what you mean by that,” or “Can you tell me a story to illustrate that,” or “Put some bones on that.”

The other thing I do, though, that is similar to reflective listening—but it’s not in real time—is that I will try to read everything I can about a person: what they’ve written, other interviews. I will find sentences they’ve written or spoken that are very rich and encompass what they have to say. This is true in a lot of my interviews. I’ll give people their own words back. I will say, “You wrote this...” “You’ve said this...” It is a kind of reflective listening, even though I’ll be bringing up something that they wrote ten years ago.

Recently I did that with someone—a Jesuit astronomer we interviewed—and I quoted this wonderful thing he said. His response was, “You know I remember when I wrote that, I thought this is going to come back to haunt me” [laughing]. But I don’t think anyone had actually quoted it back to him up to that point.

Q. Did he still believe it?

A. Yes, he did. But what’s interesting is that our bedrock certainties—even if they don’t go away—they change over time. When I give people something they said five years ago, it’s striking to hear how that thought has developed in the meantime. That’s a story in and of itself.

Q. Are there some kinds of listening that work well with some people but not others? When you’re doing your interviews, do you find yourself adapting how you listen to the personality, the mind and heart of the speaker?

A. Yes, absolutely. That’s what listening is about. That means that, to varying degrees, the questions I go in with or the direction I think the conversation will take turns out to be right. Sometimes the way I’ve imagined - not necessarily everything that will happen but where we will start, what we’ll move through and where we’ll end up—sometimes I’m right, and sometimes I’m moving the conversation forward and leading in that way. The situation needs me to be playing that role.

Sometimes I absolutely have to follow. This is what I mean about relinquishing control. It feels a little frightening. And it probably would be especially frightening if I had a live television program. I have this luxury to do this. We may go down a path that may be a dead end, but I know that we can walk back up that path and go in another direction. I let things happen. I let things happen even though I don’t know what will happen or whether it will be valuable.

Sometimes people really want and need to elaborate on something, and it's clear to me a little ways in that it's probably not going to make it into the show. But I have the luxury of letting them say that. There's value in that. There's value in letting them put words around something that just feels important to them, because that still might take them to someplace that we wouldn't have gotten to. They've walked down to that place in their own lives.

Q. In a world of so much talk, is there an art to listening?

A. I think it's an endangered art. The problem is not that not enough art goes into it, but that we don't have space for it. We don't have room for it. We don't expect it. Our media spaces train us – we train ourselves, our schools train us – to lead with our opinions. If you're leading with your opinion, the main thing that's happening is not listening. It's going to be defending or arguing, and those are very different from listening.

Q. And yet, so much of what the academy calls “religious discourse” is, in fact, an argument of some kind.

A. That's the format we are comfortable with, and we've organized the academy and the news and the way we deal with public issues in that way. We've organized it around that mode of engagement. We need that mode of engagement. But it's not all we need. It's really deadening for that to be the only mode we're skilled at as a culture. It's one of the big reasons why religion has become such a fraught subject. It's really antithetical to the way most people live this part of their lives. It's such a dramatic contrast to the public face of religion.

Q. I remember a passage in Speaking of Faith where you say you are not interested in the controversial aspects of religion, the extremes that attract the attention of the general media, or the points where religion touches on public policy and therefore becomes controversial. You want to deal with another side of religion, another side of faith that doesn't quite make it into the public mindset.

A. Right. I want to shine a light on more of the story. In our main media and political formats, there's a very narrow slice of the story of religious ideas and religious people in our world. It's not that that's not real. It's not that that doesn't deserve attention and need to be covered. But it's not the whole story—by far. And so, I don't cover those extreme voices. I don't cover extreme religious

people or extreme atheists. I am interested in shining a light on that vast middle between the poles that get all the attention. Even though many of us may live deeply in our traditions and our belief systems, we do have some questions we share with others. We want to live forward. We want to bring the best of our traditions to bear on our culture.

Q. So you're essentially listening to people whom other people aren't listening to. Would you describe your task as finding those people and listening to them?

A. Yes. I think that's another defining feature of our show. It's not that we don't interview the big names or the famous people. But I do very little of that. I just interviewed Desmond Tutu, and that was a dream come true. But even someone like Jean Vanier, who is a fairly loved and revered person in certain Christian circles—he's not a household name. He's not a name that is known in the culture. So introducing Jean Vanier to the public radio audience is thrilling!

Part of how we plan our shows, and which people to interview, is to decide that this is a voice worthy of being heard. You know, most people who are living deeply religious lives, unless they're thrust on to a public stage as Desmond Tutu was, have a deep humility. That's a core, a defining thread, of all the people I interview, including Desmond Tutu. Here's the thing: They're going to be the last people to throw themselves in front of a microphone or a TV camera or get a publicist to tell CNN to interview them about "X." So part of our job is to find those spiritual geniuses who are in our midst. They may be working at a national or global level or at a really local level. But they're wise, and their wisdom is worth spreading.

Q. How do you do that? How do you find these spiritual geniuses?

A. We're just always looking [laughing]. This is where our spiritual task of listening functions in our production team. We hear about people all the time. Our listeners give us suggestions. We're reading. We're digging around. Different [ones] of us on our team go to different places to get ideas and information. We pool those. We send ideas around. It may take us years to get to someone on our list. It's a pretty interesting process for me to see how someone can rise to the top.

Q. What are the interviews you haven't done that you'd die to do?

A. A month ago, I would have said Desmond Tutu. He’s been at the top of the list for a long time, and I haven’t replaced him. But honestly, the answer is: I can’t wait to find out about the next person who really is changing the world, who is bringing light into the world, and who has not crossed my radar because they have not put themselves out there as an expert.

Q. Can you describe the type of person you’d like to meet or love to interview?

A. Goodness is out there. My problem is not finding people or running out of ideas. My problem is that right now we could stop receiving ideas and we could still do this radio show for ten years and not be finished [laughing]. They’re everywhere. It’s a matter of getting to people, learning about them. That’s what makes it complicated.

Q. We all live with limitations. What are the limitations of this program that frustrate you?

A. We’re a pretty slow moving project. We’re on once a week. We create something that’s highly crafted. We’re trying to create something that’s beautiful every week, and that takes time. We’re not churning out programs. We can’t keep up with all the ideas we have. We can’t; it’s the nature of what we do. If we had a daily show or a call-in show, we could get to a lot more people more quickly, but we wouldn’t be able to give it the care and depth of attention we do now. I think I can live with that trade-off, but sometimes it’s frustrating for me to have it take so long to get to good ideas.

Q. Are there times when your strategy of listening doesn’t work? When it doesn’t work in the middle of an interview, do you know why and what do you do?

A. The strategy can shift because of the person I’m talking to. I do have interviews that don’t work and don’t go on the air. There are a lot of reasons for that. Sometimes we do an interview trying to figure out how to get into a subject. Sometimes when we talk to religious leaders or academics, they are not able to walk the line I ask them to walk – between what they know and the life they’ve lived. We don’t talk about God in the abstract. We don’t talk about theological constructs in the abstract. Many people are caught in their constructs and I can’t break through that. It’s not only that that isn’t what our show is about. It’s that

it’s not listenable for an hour. You can talk about ideas or positions for 15 minutes, but you can’t do that for an hour [laughing]. Listeners can’t stay with it.

Q. Maybe that’s why some great theologians are poor preachers.

A. Yes. Right. It’s a different mode. I’m not saying that there’s anything bad about these people or what they have to say. It’s just we’re interested in a different way of discussing things, and not everybody can do it. Actually that’s one of the things we try to determine in our preparation and research. This is why we don’t have many religious leaders on our show. They are bound—for perfectly good reasons—to represent something other than their own experience. They can’t or won’t go there with me about their own experience. I respect that.

Q. What advice would you give to religious leaders—religious professionals—about listening, especially based on the large number of your interviews? How could they be better listeners?

A. What comes to mind is that before we can become good listeners we have to become attentive to the fear in ourselves, whatever fear we have of listening. Before you can become a good listener, you have to be present. There may be some work you need to do internally to really make yourself present. It’s not just what you can get out of the other person. It’s who you’re going to be in that position of a listener.

There’s one thing about listening, one thing about a conversation: the quality of an answer is correlated with the quality of the question. If there is a true generosity of spirit and a true curiosity in the question, then you will get a bigger answer, a more real answer. If it’s an exercise, and not a spirit of being, then you’re not going to have something interesting to listen to. We don’t just respond to the question in a conversation. We respond to the presence of the person asking the question as well.

Q. Then I have to ask: Do you know who you are when you go into an interview?

A. What I also want to say is that the situation that a clergy person might face could be more charged and personal than the situation I confront as a journalist interviewing someone for my radio program. I want to honor that. That is hard

work—serious work. I am not on the line. I guess I am exposed. There are thousands of people listening [laughing]. But I may not be as much on the line or as exposed as a clergy person with a member of the congregation. I want to acknowledge that.

I think that because of all the preparation that goes into my interviews, what happens is that I respond to the material. I think about what it elicits in me. That’s what comes out in the interviews, such as when I say, “That reminds me of...” Before I meet the person, I’ve had an experience of what I resonate with, what prompts questions for me, where their ideas and experience take me in my imagination and my history. The fact that I bring that kind of awareness into the conversation does make it a more safe and revealing space.

Q. You’ve showed that you cared enough to prepare.

A. I don’t know whether it’s caring so much as doing my job. But that’s how people experience it. They say they are really honored that I took the time to read not just their last book but something they wrote ten years ago. And that’s a nice thing.

It’s about being hospitable. Hospitality is a great Christian virtue that our world really needs. It’s about being hospitable and comfortable even when we disagree. Listening is an aspect of hospitality. We all respond to hospitality. We respond to hospitality especially in places we did not expect to be treated in that way.

Q. They encountered kindness when they didn’t expect it.

A. Yes. Kindness is one of the most powerful virtues we can exercise in common, ordinary life.

Q. Some years ago the American Bible Society published a paraphrase of the New Testament in modern idiom. They said they decided to eliminate the word “grace” because it didn’t mean much to contemporary people, despite the incredible popularity of “Amazing Grace.” Instead they substituted the word “kindness.” Initially I was horrified by this, but as I thought about it, “kindness” is perhaps a powerful way of communicating the idea that where people expect

judgment, they will find kindness, or where they expect to feel guilt, they will encounter forgiveness.

A. Something that I’m deeply aware of and that I struggle with in my work is how words around this part of life get ruined. And if they don’t get ruined, they are fraught with problems. The word “faith” is fraught. The word “religion” is fraught. Words like “ecumenism” and “interfaith,” which have been powerful experiences for many people, are deathly dull as words or adjectives. Words like “peace” and “justice” are so overused that they don’t carry much water for us. Unless we’re steeped in such things, those words don’t mean much.

There are some words we need to let go of. This is always a process of discernment. But there are some words we insist on resurrecting. I think “grace” is one of those words, but what you’re describing is an interesting way of taking it out of the picture temporarily. It’s not going to go away, and putting another word in there that emphasizes an aspect of it and gives it a three-dimensional reading may be something we need to do to our most treasured words on a regular basis.

Q. Is there something about listening that is itself deeply spiritual or religious? Or, does listening to people “speak of faith” involve different dynamics or factors than talking with them about some other topic or topics?

A. You’re asking about what effect listening has on me? Right. Years ago, I interviewed Karen Armstrong, and she said, “My work is my prayer.” I really like that, and that’s how I feel about my work. It is a vocation, and it is in itself a kind of prayer...I have difficulty putting this into words just like anyone else [laughing]. It’s lived spirituality. It’s a theological exercise as well—quite directly.

Q. It must be fun to do these interviews—fun and frightening.

A. Yes, it is, but there’s something else. People do glorify my job and tell me I have the best job in the world, and that may be true. But it is a job, but the piece we’re talking about—the piece called prayer—is a percentage. I also spend a lot of time raising money, working on marketing, strategizing about the future, courting our stations, so there’s a lot to it that’s not at all spiritual. It’s work.

Q. As you’ve done all this listening, can you describe whether listening can open us up to the divine, something beyond ourselves? Is listening—not silence which has its own dynamics—something that can engage us with the divine?

A. It’s an incarnation of relationship and presence. Relationship and presence are also the context in which we know God and experience God. In Scripture and community, we experience that context of relationship and presence. I’ve had the experience as a writer of setting out to say something and writing something I didn’t even know I thought. That happens in an even more powerful way in a real conversation in real time. Because you’re being asked and being listened to, you put words around something you didn’t even know yourself. You’re able to access very deep places that are often beyond words.

Q. In the material you’ve written and in material about you, the presence of your children keeps popping up. Is there something about your listening relationship with them that informs your work?

A. My children are the love of my life. I’m a single mother as well, and I have a great big job, and so I’ve had to learn and work to be present to them the way I want to be. It’s so joyful and fulfilling. Like every mother in a similar situation, I worry whether I have the balance right. I’m not doing it perfectly, but I am getting better and better at living the fact that they are the most important thing. My life and my work have to be oriented to preserving that. They are my delight, and they need me. I’m also very aware of how they anchor me and bring me back to earth and to reality in a fantastically important way. They’re just fantastic, and they’re nice people. I like them!

Q. Why is listening so difficult? You’ve already referred to it as “an endangered practice” in American culture.

A. It’s a collusion of things we do value and things we don’t value. We don’t value silence. It’s really hard to listen if you don’t have any space to listen or time to listen. We do value opinions, and if you lead with opinions, you’re not going to be a listener. That’s not your primary role. Once opinions shape your role, it’s hard to reverse that.

We don’t ask people to listen. We ask them to take a position. And we think that’s how progress is made. That’s how we structure our organizational life,

including churches, as well as our media life. That’s kind of reflexively where we go.

We don’t do well with questions. We think of questions as problems to be solved. We don’t value the necessity of time. If we really understood how some of the questions that are before us as a culture and as churches are redefining basic things, like the structure of organizations, the nature of leadership, the definition of a family, then we might see that those issues will take generations before we reach a different place and a shared understanding.

But we don’t have any tolerance for saying that’s how we’re going to live, and we start arguing. We start to fight. We start to dig in. “This is how I think it should be, and we have to duke it out until we come to a solution.” We’ll take a vote at some point. Our democratic process hinders us in a way. When we take a vote, someone will win. But actually, some of these issues involve existential definitions of who we are as human beings and what our life together means. Eventually what we all need to know is that we’re all moving forward and that taking a vote is very much a temporary solution—and not a very satisfying one. If it’s a temporary solution, then the 60 percent who won have to continue listening to the 40 percent who didn’t. We don’t have a practice of doing that.

Q. How would the world be different if people listened more?

A. [pause] . . . I don’t know. I don’t know, but wouldn’t it be interesting to find out? It wouldn’t mean that we agree on everything, right away, and it might not be different than if we fight it out. But I think we would move differently toward resolution at an earlier place. We would be able to walk forward with the question even if we didn’t share the answers. Right now we find ourselves far, far apart, in different camps, staring at each other.

Q. Pope John XXIII once said, “The greatest challenge of the spiritual life is not giving love but receiving love.” By that, I think he meant that it is terribly difficult for most people to receive, to know love as a gift. Isn’t receiving somewhat like listening?

A. Yes, there is a sense in which you have to be more vulnerable to receive love than to give it. Just as I said, you have to be very vulnerable to listen, to really listen. You certainly have to be more vulnerable to listen, than to just pose questions, which may look like the same thing, but it’s not.

Q. I would think this sets up a tension in your life of being utterly prepared, being ready for an interview as best as you possibly can, and yet going in, knowing that unless you become vulnerable and open, you're not going to be an effective interviewer.

A. Yes, but the irony is that being vulnerable means that I wish I was more prepared. I don't feel quite ready, and I feel a little bit nervous. I had an experience early on when I went into an interview, either because the kids had kept me up all night or whatever was going on in my life, I was really worn out. I felt I'm not going to be able to perform. But in fact those were some of my best interviews—when I felt I had nothing to give. I got out of the way of myself. I was really able to give myself over to the idea that this was really about my guest. I'm going to draw energy from them—their wisdom and their energy. I actually took that as instructive. When I'm feeling too strong going into an interview, I think that's dangerous and I'll stop and remind myself: This is about them, and it's not about how good I'm going to be. I'm going to be good in direct proportion to how much I draw them out.

Q. As a personal footnote, and this is the end: Like you, I suffer from depression. It crashed in on my life, and my life crashed about eight years ago. I think that I've resonated to you and what you've written because you've known pain. The mysterious and really ironic intersection between pain and a spiritual life runs through all the religious traditions of the world. There's something that I rebel against to say that you don't really know what it means to be spiritual until you've known pain, but I think that's probably true.

A. Right! And a fallacy of Western culture is that we act like pain and suffering aren't ordinary parts of life. We try to ward them off and hide them. That's what Jean Vanier means when he says that the reason people with disabilities are so frightening to us is that they carry their flaws on the outside. All the rest of us try to hide ours and keep them in. And yet, it is absolutely a defining common denominator of the people in whose presence I have been in who are wise—not something you can define, but something you know when you see it—that they've known great suffering, and they've incorporated it into their identity. They've taken that in as part of being human. People who are great are people who have walked through suffering, and they're great not in spite of it but because of having lived it.

You know, one of the things I'm out there saying a lot when I speak is that religion gets treated in our public life and media life as this place where we're just

not rational and not realistic. But our traditions are the ones that tell us that suffering means something and that we get to make sense in the midst of suffering. The fact that it's part of us is not a problem, but it's part of what makes us whole and part of what makes us compassionate. We can learn in and through that and be bigger in and through that. We can be more real in and through that. We can be more present to the world's suffering in and through that. Our culture tells us we have to be perfect, and if we're not, we pretend we're perfect. Or we take medicine, or we do cosmetic surgery. Or take vitamins!

There is something completely paradoxical and puzzling and maybe even distressing that we have to go through suffering to become wise or to become ourselves. But maybe that's a false Western premise that we're not supposed to be flawed, that we're not supposed to have problems, that we're not supposed to suffer.

The people whom I've met who are great are people who have this paradoxical and counter-cultural ability to be at once powerful and tender. I think this combination is made possible by the way they have taken on the particular suffering of their lives into themselves and found that it need not overwhelm them.