

LISTENING: A COMMUNICATION

Erika Duncan

The other day a friend engaged in studying homeopathy asked me why she should feel so utterly exhausted merely from listening. "I kept wanting to say, would you like to stop for a cup of tea, but I was afraid to interrupt her," she confessed to me. She hadn't been seeing patients very long, and was very aware that while she knew her book of remedies backward and forward, and while she was extremely good at "hearing" the articulation of particular problems, she hadn't yet learned how to put the two together. "Do you think I'll get better at this as I go along?" she asked.

At first I suggested that perhaps she wasn't interrupting enough, perhaps she wasn't taking an active enough role in directing the session and thus was becoming exhausted by her own lack of control. But she quickly reassured me that homeopaths are trained not to interrupt. (By way of experiment, at this point I would like to ask my readers to try to monitor their reading of this story and the various tales to follow. How many times do you imagine that you interrupt, to ask why I've inserted this or that, or to try to figure out where I want you to take your thought? Perhaps you find yourself becoming distracted by the extraneous content, thinking more about homeopathy than listening; perhaps you find yourself becoming annoyed by the seeming digressions. In my own teaching, I find that I often tell stories just slightly aslant of the point I am trying to make to provide my students a kind of cooling off zone in which they will echo my process, free-associating out of my story to one of their own that will serve a similar purpose and allow them to retain with relevance what I am trying to teach.)

When we listen, even more than when we read, we must learn to internalize the art of interruption, to set agendas for ourselves, to

make instantaneous, very deliberate place markings in what we hear so that we may later return with enough remaining in our memory so that either by ourselves, or with the speaker's help, we will be able to retrieve the rest.

I asked my friend, the student homeopath, how much she thought she really heard of what I had been saying to her. Quite seriously she said: "All." (We had been visiting for several hours at this point; we had climbed a cliff path together and I had become quite frightened; she had had to help me up. At great length, she had related my "fear of heights" to symptoms she was studying in her course work.)

I asked her how much she had heard of what she herself said: "Nothing, thank God!" she said emphatically.

It did not take me very long to convince her that she was lucky if she had heard even a third of what I said, and this in a kind of condensed and speeded-up version. Her insight about not hearing herself was basically sound from a realistic point of view, for rarely do we hear ourselves while we are thinking or wondering—processes that perhaps accelerate when we are actively engaged in speech.

I spoke to my friend of Husserl's theories of the phenomenology of internal time consciousness, and his dissections of how we hear musical phrases, still retaining the opening note in our minds even as we hear—and add to our internal store—each new, successive one. I asked her whether it might be possible to deliberately train herself to hear her patients' stories in a kind of rapid rewind, instead of at their true speed, in order to "steal" time to play with on-the-spot solutions—even as she listened—solutions compelling enough to her own imagination to keep her listening attention at its peak. I pointed out to her the fact that speaking speed and listening speed need not converge, that speakers, having their own necessarily different agendas, need more time and space and detail than an active listener with another plan can possibly absorb.

It was Winnicott who expressed so beautifully that sense of the mother's providing company for the child's newly emerging, essential aloneness in his experiences and thoughts. And it was he who spoke of trying to replicate that all too often missed experience of being cherished and kept company while that awareness of an actual and rhythmic separateness is being built—so that eventually the child goes forth hearing himself, and not his mother; speaking in

his own voice and making his own motions, even while learning to tolerate an ever-widening sea of ears and eyes.

What does the mother do with her own ears and eyes, while she quietly guards her child's silence and space, so that she doesn't thrust herself too intrusively into the center, replacing the world to be entered with that ominous mirror that Winnicott warns us against? As she sings to her child, as she rocks him to sleep, or watches his eyes wander, for the first time, toward the flickering sunlight, as she watches his fingers extend toward an object, so slowly, what does she think of and what does she dream? For surely it would never occur to us to stop her from thinking or dreaming.

And yet, in our "adult" world, the notion of the lover, friend, or reader who carries her own agendas is taboo. The notion of the paid listener who doesn't listen with at least a semblance of totality so frightens us, we compensate with exaggerated intensity. The analyst leans toward the patient. Alas, a teacher of the Alexander technique told me that all of her patients in the listening professions come to her carrying their heads off their axes (leading to neck and back problems, and spinal stress of an often quite serious nature).

What would happen if we dared to keep our own axes, to dream our own dreams while we listened, and when we began to grow tired, to consciously teach ourselves to make useful silent interruptions, creating steps for ourselves back to what we have necessarily missed by our own dreaming and wandering?

One returns to the image of the mother and the preverbal child. Surely no one can fault her for thinking about her child (and other things) rather than thinking with him or her. Does this all have to change with the advent of the word? Or rather, is it our marvellously regressive wishing that makes us imagine the ideal listener as one in perfect rhythm with us, taking in each word just as we utter it—taking in only that and nothing else, joining us breath for breath? And yet, even while we enjoy this image, and I do think that we all do, that the need to be a perfect listener, if we would dare acknowledge it, is really a countertransference of sorts, based on the lingering wish to be heard without boundaries—we must acknowledge its more destructive, demonic aspects, even as we relax our vigilance over our own listening, knowing that by having more that is our own, we will have more to give.

I will never forget the time that my friend, an eccentric, quite studious and serious magician with an odd Victorian bent, talked to my eight-year-old daughter about the artifice of mind reading. There, standing in the center of our purple painted livingroom and discoursing about his art almost as one left over from another century, lidless protruding orbs roaming the room, his jaw set into an uncanny stillness, he was explaining in considerable detail the elaborate memory grids that he constructs in order to successfully perform mind reading tricks on stage. He told us that it was not enough to construct those grids just once, or to use someone else's constructions, no matter how clever. Rather, in order to achieve the rapid—for all practical purposes invisible—associations that his art requires, he must change the associative objects almost constantly, drawing them from sources only he can know—so that his five, connected perhaps through the title of an Oscar Lewis case study to the first letter of the protagonist's name, would be forever different from all other fives; his three, evoking the sing-song name of a city where a king had died three hundred years ago, would be wholly his own. But as the thoughts that first triggered these images faded into the periphery of past experience, his memory tools would have to be renewed; he would have to find new trick connections as compelling and as personal as the first.

"Can you read my mind right now? Can you tell what I am thinking?" my youngest daughter asked.

"No," he quickly reassured her, for he must have sensed the fear that lay beneath her seeming fascination.

"I only do that when I am on stage. If I were to be in other people's heads all the time, I wouldn't be able to be in my own head. And that wouldn't be very good, would it?"

My daughter continued to look at him, not really understanding, and not quite wanting to believe what he had said, yet I could see a flicker of relief mix with her disappointment, making me think about two adolescent students. The one longed for the time when her words and her thoughts would become one. Then and only then would she be able to write; for the whole notion of making choices overwhelmed her, the whole notion of finding a logical sequential form for the fullness. And the other, who leaned upon writing, though he did not write well or fluently yet, because "In talking there is no whiteout." There is no chance to take back what slips through inadvertently.

Words are such tricky things. None of us have much of an idea what to do with them, as we long, despite ourselves, for the perfect merging, for the perfect symbiosis. And yet we are destined to traffic in them, to seek and seek, and redefine and redefine the perfect communication.

We return to the experience of reading. It is safer somehow; the author is usually distant, or dead. She does not see us leaning backward, comfortably upon our pillows. (We will not get spinal trouble from this!) She does not see our eyes glaze over as we turn page upon page, thinking, merging our own tales with those of the fictional characters, nor notice how we have stopped short and are reading a single, seemingly insignificant word over and over. She does not even notice if, for a few inopportune moments, we fall asleep, only to wake up refreshed and ready, without any need for apology or embarrassment, to reassemble the missing threads. If we are asked a direct factual question, startled into responsiveness in the middle of our private act of reverie, often we find ourselves embarrassingly inarticulate. We are unable to relay even the simplest information contained in the pages we just read. (This is why "reading comprehension" as it is generally taught in the schools is so abominable.) But give us an association, an observation, or an image to become a hook to hang our own associations on and suddenly it all comes back. We have absorbed a great deal more than we realized initially. In the process of making our own new whole (for which the initial experience of wafting and "losing it" was necessity), we have retrieved a great deal more of the original than we might have acquired had we, through a forcing of our concentration, tried to cut away the richness of the full associative field. But even if we were to assume that uncrowded listening might produce a near facsimile to what was heard, what are we really left with?—only absolute aloneness, mirrors mirroring. In focusing only on what was there for the other, we must produce an end result far less dynamic and less beautiful than the original—which accounts for the homeopath's boredom, the teachers' disappointment in essays that are merely poor echoes, equations, and proofs with only a few of the "right" steps portrayed, and no explanations of the many wild leaps and the holes, no curious questions, inventions or detours to fatten the onlooker's mind.

We are still in bed with the reader, who is, let us imagine, reading Shakespeare. He is already dead, and we know without

doubt of his greatness, his worthiness of our attention in every possible aspect—to be learned from, to be revered, and to be loved. There is surely no danger in listening to *him*. So many others have heard him, in so many different ways, there is no need to be accurate, to be the one and only absolute interpreter. The light has grown dim. There is no teacher watching. School is only a memory, decades away. Even the lover on the other side of the bed is already asleep, conveniently leaning away. The reader's mind wanders, and a question crops up. She knows little of the man. Despite the few portraits, the biographical fragments, she can't really see him. She is thinking of the meaning of rising out of reverie into action: Why is it so dangerous? She is wondering why the gentle looker of the sonnets turns so bloody as he moves into the art of drama making; thinking about how, while the sonnets talk of temporal fading with such sweet compassion for beauty's impermanence, the plays, the actions almost all result in murdering—thinking as so many have thought before her—yet in her own uniqueness also—about love and death, letting the dead man's greatness touch her, at least for that moment, without judgment or shame.

The unsure living speaker gazes up at the listener, or gazes up from the couch into darkness, listening for the sound of the answering voice. She is not Shakespeare; she knows she will never be Shakespeare; she is not even safely dead and acknowledged for whatever she is. It is she who is listening hard now, but listening for what? Does she look for an echo, an answering voice? The sound of the stillness is enormous, immense. Long years, to please the others, she has practiced growing deaf to the sound of her own voice—wishing perhaps that it were more like Shakespeare's, or more like Virginia Woolf's, Toni Morrison's, Tillie Olsen's.

Yet when she speaks, when we dare to allow ourselves to dream for her as we might dream for Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf, to dream our own dreams out of her sweet or her angry speaking, a strange thing starts to happen. A new stranger starts to emerge out of the darkness, with a new fragile music, still tentative. At first only our own ears can hear it, as slowly we speak up, not in echoes but out of our own dreams—as slowly we begin to articulate how we ourselves are being stirred. We are surprised, when we let ourselves feel it, how the stirring inside us is genuine, how it does not have to be forced. Are we playing a game, are we tricking our

student or patient to let ourselves be moved as we might be by Shakespeare? Are we creating false expectations, false dreams? For we know she will never be Shakespeare. Yet how do we know who or what she will be?

Then one day, a strange thing starts to happen. New, frightened ears start to open. Our daydreams, our ears start to fade. And the speaker, dumbfounded, rises up, having heard for the first time—herself. Out of the echoes we have carefully culled, hearing them in their true resonance, their true beauty, long before they become available to the speaker—as we slowly, withdraw, we release them. We, in making new forms for ourselves from their fragments, have returned them, in their original form, to the speaker, no longer hidden and unheard.

We will go off on our own ways quite soon now—each enriched, each with a gain, carrying in our heads just a tenable part of the one who has spoken—both robbed and relieved of the longing to inhibit the head and the heart of the other. We will go our separate ways—only in the caring company that Winnicott talks about—but never again quite so enveloped. And increasingly, in the companioned quietness, we will begin to hear the sound of our own voices, modulating to reach out like those first reaching fingers; we will see the world through our own eyes, and not through the eyes of the others, as we read and we listen and speak.