

Listening Exercise Two:

Tracking the Fluctuations in Your Empathy as You Listen

Once you have developed your own method of tracking narrative structure, you will want to pursue the same exercises while observing with free-wandering attention what happens to your empathy as a listener. Allowing yourself to know when you are aroused by a moment of beauty and similarly, when you find yourself shockingly indifferent, might well be a first step.

Pursue this empathy-charting work when you are visiting with close friends as well as with strangers. Although with friends you are no longer on your Imaginary Page One, since you already have a lot of history and caring under your belt, track the moments when you come alive as a listener.

- Track when you are really moved and why.
- Track the moments when you feel your mind wander. Try to remember the last images that wafted over you, before you drifted away. Then try to reconstruct what was missing in between.

If you put your mind to it, you will generally find that you can retrieve not only what you missed, but also what happened within the narrative that jarred you.

It is critical to be completely honest with yourself as you listen and not to judge where your mind wanders when the teller no longer has your attention. This will help you to find the spots of promise and power as you move into working with imaging Page One Moments for each of your students and later as you begin to work with written text.

Beauty as it Becomes a Clue

Finally you want to hone your capacity to find beauty even in a haltingly told tale, so that when you take these overhearing techniques into consciously helping a speaker shape a story, you will be able to pinpoint the moments of promise and power where the spirit peeps through.

Once you get used to finding them (which happens with the heart, not the mind), you will find that you are able to echo them back to the speaker in a way that will help them to build upon them. This technique will be particularly important when you are struggling with stories that feel too furious or whiny or boastful.)

One Herstory facilitator in training asked: “But how can I trust myself to know a moment of beauty?” This is a case in which whatever comes to you will help guide the writer.

Ask yourself hard questions about beauty and vulnerability. Did the storyteller pass over those moments so quickly that you had to hold your breath in order to catch them? Try to imagine what would happen if the teller allowed those moments to elongate.

As you move into working with writers who will be shy about showing the more beautiful parts of themselves, this work will allow you to detect them more easily, so that you will be able to play them back.

Try not to let your preferences in terms of content distract you from looking at narrative successes and failures. Practice doing this work when you're dealing with content that isn't intrinsically interesting to you.