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Cover Page Footnote

Robbie Clifton Pinter is professor of Literature and Language at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. Her particular interests include life writings, such as the spiritual autobiography, the memoir, the mosaic, and the journal because she believes that writing is a way of discovering and claiming an identity.

The Landscape Listens— Hearing the Voice of the Soul

Robbie Clifton Pinter

*There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—*

[. . .]

*When it comes, the Landscape listens—
Shadows—hold their breath—
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death—*

—Emily Dickinson

On September 11, when the world changed, I wondered how I would ever teach again. How could I make sense of literature and life after seeing the world blown up, again and again on television and gradually realizing that the image I saw was not from a movie? In “A certain slant of light,” Emily Dickinson’s words remind me of the *other* reality, the soul-filled reality, that my students and I usually don’t acknowledge. Now, still stinging from the realization of what *can* happen, I look again to the study of literature and writing as a source for hope—this study can lead to a place where the “landscape listens,” pregnant with possibility of the light that can and does enter. The listening landscape doesn’t always make sense in a traditional way—thank goodness. To get to the place where we can hear, we must study, reflect, ask questions with difficult answers, offer insight, and take risks. In short, the listening landscape brings students and teachers to the edge of understanding our realities and then it gives us courage not to understand. We have hope that sometimes we will see “a certain Slant of light” and that’s enough.

Students and teachers have always been engaged in a search for what matters, seeking the light in an often dark world. Authentic listening, listening for the landscape, can shape both on their journey. Listening, the least acknowledged

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of the language arts, has the potential to be the one that allows students and teachers to be fully present in their learning, their lives, and that of others. This kind of listening is *radical* because it listens with mind (intellectually), heart (emotionally) and hands (physically)—it can initiate change in both the one who hears and the one speaks. Mary Rose O'Reilley in *Radical Presence* suggests that when we truly hear another, we can sometimes call the other person, or ourselves, into being (34). Attentive listening to another challenges the status quo, providing ways for other voices to be recognized and respected. Although listening seems like the most passive of the traditional language arts, authentic listening can be revolutionary, for the individual, for the classroom community, and for the larger academic community.

Currently, the American educational system, particularly higher education, is not conducive to genuine listening. It focuses instead on teaching listeners not to listen but to think ahead while someone is talking in order to question or praise what the other person is saying. Parker Palmer suggests that respect can transform academic institutions into learning spaces. In a talk entitled “The Grace of Great Things,” Palmer criticizes the normal academic culture that is based on competition instead of community, where a model of “survival of the fittest” makes it hard for anyone to learn in a different way. He says that academia does not grant respect to tentative and heartfelt ways of being in the world where the person can't quite think of the right word or can't think of any word at all. We don't grant respect to silence and wonder. We don't grant it to voices outside our tight little circle, let alone to the voiceless things of the world.

Academia typically doesn't “hear” students who do not think in long-cherished patterns of claim, support, and argument. Palmer argues that academia doesn't acknowledge another way because of fear that the community or the individual might have to change and neither knows how. This is the same fear that's at the root of not hearing, effectively silencing those who are different from the way we are. For authentic learning to take place, each person must respect one another's differences, whether they are of gender, race, intelligence, nationality, social class, or learning style. This respect demands that each member think enough of one another to ask tough questions and try to understand another's perspective—whether one agrees or not.

Radical listening, that for which even the landscape listens, can provide a way for action to grow through the fears. I am not simply talking about paying attention or hearing the words right or reading something with an open attitude, although it is those things. It is attentive openness. Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist Zen master, calls this openness “mindfulness,” or being completely present in the moment. Mindfulness is a kind of listening, a way of opening the whole learner's body-sensory response: the one who speaks is fully open to the one who listens. Radical listening changes the individual and in the classroom it changes the community.

Respect is a way to listen that is integral to individual, and to corporate or group learning of the community. It has the power to show others the essence of another person, idea, or reading. Not only does it challenge an individual's prejudices, it also challenges accepted social norms like stereotyping that categorize groups according to their differences.

Consider how radical listening works for the individual. When we are fully attentive to our own lives, when we *know* ourselves, we listen for connections and contradictions to our own beliefs. In listening to ourselves, we search for the sacred center that grounds us. Frederick Beuchner, a contemporary theologian and writer evokes a long romantic tradition that seeks the sacred in each individual. He calls us to our center in his book, *Now and Then*:

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. (92, 87)

Recognizing the divine in our own lives connects us to the lives of others. As teachers, we have to provide space in which students may listen to their lives—to be attentive to seemingly small prejudices or assumptions that have blocked us from learning more about life or a discipline.

A moving example of how one student “heard” her own life came at the end of a term in one of my classes when the students responded to a prompt asking them to connect one poem, play, or story to their own lives. This student, Jan, chose *A Doll’s House* and focused on the part where Nora leaves her husband, and therefore her family to establish an identity for herself. Jan connected the play to her family. In a paper, she reported that the play made her see another reason for her mother leaving the family when Jan was two. Jan had always thought her mother had left because her mother was bad, a deserter, or worse because Jan herself was an unworthy child. Literature, the written text can call an individual to her center and make her see it in ways she otherwise might not. My student was able to listen to her life, to witness it.

Connecting to the center within, whether through texts, other people, or other art, is a visceral experience. When it happens, people know it with their whole bodies. When Emily Dickinson noticed a shaft of light, she described it in a way that spoke to the sacred center in many of her readers. They had been there. Deep inside, they knew what she meant—they had all witnessed one slender beam of light that spoke of another way of viewing the world.

Such knowledge is not intellectual, but rather, it’s incarnational. Eugene Gendlin coined the term “felt sense” to describe this bodily response, a gut feeling, people have something in their experience, such as an image, a word, or an idea that connects them to their inner voice:

The soft underbelly of thought [. . .] a kind of bodily awareness that [. . .] can be used as a tool [. . .] a bodily awareness that. . . encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time [. . .]. It is felt in the body, yet it has meanings. It is body *and* mind before they are split apart. (qtd. in Perl 35)

Gendlin suggested that people who practiced a concentration technique he termed “focusing,” or being attuned to their inner wisdom, were able to work through significant psychological problems. He noted that just as there’s a felt sense in life, there’s a felt sense in teaching. We know in our bodies when

something's right or wrong—a gut feeling. Perl applied Gendlin's ideas to writing. She suggested that acknowledging and using felt sense would lead to better writing because it would help students hear what mattered in their lives. I'm suggesting that if we as teachers could help students listen to their lives using this mindful bodily attention, we would be creating a climate where students could more fully learn.

To allow the felt sense to emerge in students, teachers need to ask them to release the minutia of daily life. Writers and writing teachers know the value of “burning off the fluff” in order to improve writing; shedding distractions permits students to hear what's really important in their learning. Listening attentively to our lives, being fully aware of our individual “felt senses,” is a way of moving beyond the fluff that crowds our concentration and draws our attention away from an essential core. When individuals attend to their felt sense, they are making connections that matter in their lives and participating in learning in ways that can change people and institutions. Teachers encourage the development of their students' felt sense when they structure opportunities for students to relate their lives to their learning. In some ways, every time we ask students to write a narrative, or any kind of self-reflective paper, we are providing an opportunity for them to listen to themselves, to connect and focus to the present moment. But we need to make sure we keep offering those chances to listen to their lives, perhaps through journal writing, perhaps through short response papers. The personal connection is key to encouraging students to honor their own felt sense, their own radical listening.

In class some practical tools for engendering a classroom listening space include simple rephrasing that models for students how to listen mindfully. Phrases such as “from your perspective,” “the way you see it is,” “it seems to you,” “what you'd like me to know is” model a classroom dynamic that differs from the traditional one of claim, support, and argument. This cushioning gives students the opportunity to engage in a model other than the traditional academic one. Of course, they would serve only as trappings of authentic listening if they are not used with mindfulness.

Another way to model radical listening happens when teachers frame the love of their discipline in ways that students can relate to their lives. In talking about poetry in class, I speak from my own center. Often students don't connect with what I'm saying, but they do connect with how I'm saying it—they recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary. Such a simple awareness encourages students that it's okay to be vulnerable and make known their core beliefs.

Radical listening develops the individual within his or her community; it helps students not only recognize their beliefs, but also to evaluate them as the context of the beliefs of others in the community. In “Divided No More,” Parker Palmer claims that in the community, individuals can often listen to themselves for the first time because their audience, the community, gives them voice. In the “charged expectancy” of the classroom, members of the community may learn to hear the differences, such as those of race, gender, identity, and culture without trying to fix, change, or convert. The light and the dark are held together, remaining opposites, but linked in the understanding of the other. Because of the light, the dark exists. Through the contradictions, all students can come to

recognize the numinous in their own souls and in those who are different or only appear to be so.

In many classes, the individual and the community learn better from one another when they can meet in the presence of something they can share equally, such as a common text. In a first year writing course I taught recently, the class read Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson." A young teacher, Miss Moore, takes a group of Harlem children to mid-town Manhattan to visit F.A.O. Schwartz. My students' reading prompted most of them to assign blame to various characters: Miss Moore should not have exposed these poor students to such expensive toys; the children were rude and their language offended me; the parents should have told the children that they were poor. One student suggested that perhaps Sylvia, the narrator, would now be inspired to acquire the knowledge, and therefore the wealth, necessary for purchasing such baubles. The students all wanted to either fix the problem or explain it. Despite its title, I do not see the story as quite so didactic.

My students' responses help to illustrate what can happen in the process of radical listening. I asked the students to think about the problems the story suggested and the changes they wanted to effect—really, I was asking them to listen to the story and hear it in the context of their own lives.

Later, after class discussion, a student, John, came to my office to talk about the story. He was feeling that the children's despair was his own. He felt that the theme of the story was not simply about lack of money, but about lack of power. The children were powerless to change the systems that they had inherited for generations—this story became his story. He spoke: "I don't want to follow the tradition of what I am supposed to do. . . to work hard, get a job, make a lot of money, succeed according to others' rules. I want to make my own rules so I'll know why I'm doing what I'm doing." The story had seeped into his soul. He later made his rebellion known to the class in the form of a short paper. When he read it to his small group, the members didn't understand his position or how his response could be "analytical." I sent them home with one question: Why does John's response bother you? I don't know how that question worked its way into their understanding, but it would not have been possible outside the context of the class community. Students saw that it was all right to let the story be about their own lives—to see it in terms of their own lives (and John's). The students' response to the story, in contrast to John's response, established a dissonance for the class. One of their own, a class member, simply didn't spurt out another patented answer (usually composed to please the teacher) about racism and poverty. John's unique perspective showed the class how to put two issues, side-by-side—the extreme poverty and their personal response—and let the intersection speak. The intersection is the listening space.

The community of the classroom and its "charged expectancy" can give students a chance to fail. In discussing "The Lesson," my students questioned John's understanding of the story because it was remarkably different—it challenged their assumptions about how to explore literature, and it was scary. John's understanding mattered to him. Through the community, through listening to the story from several perspectives, he was able to clarify and express his own views. For students to feel free to explore the connections between their world and

others, they must feel the class is a safe place to take the risks necessary to learning. Students (and teachers) fear having to change, and radical listening leads to change. It is uncomfortable to step out into the dark.

In reading “The Lesson,” some of my students only heard that it was a story about poor African American children in New York, and they never transcended the labels until a classmate did so. Hearing it as a story that was alive and vital to their lives came from John’s ability to think outside of the box and from their ability to hear him. John also learned. By reading aloud, he clarified his perspective when he “heard” how his peers responded to his ideas. Such respectful listening is not simply a watered down version of “play nice”; it is a critical part of learning that recognizes the “other” in the midst of the larger community or culture. Students may disagree, make claims, establish other points, just as in a typical academic model. But in the radical listening model, students are expected to listen “as if their lives depended on it”—as if it mattered to them personally. In opening a listening space, the community becomes an avenue within which the individual can listen and, perhaps, change. The landscape listens.

Radical listening not only changes individuals, it potentially can change educational systems. It is similar to Krista Ratcliffe’s idea of “rhetorical listening,” another term for radical listening. Ratcliffe defines radical listening as “a trope for interpretative invention, one on equal footing with the tropes of reading, writing and speaking” (196). She suggests that rhetorical listening opens a space, a “discursive intersection” (196) where those with differing perspectives, genders, and cultures can meet in community and fully hear another’s differences. Such listening demands that members of the community try to acknowledge one another’s differences, to be fully alive to them, and thus to hear them. It assumes an active, purposeful role in the discourse of the community, whether it’s in the classroom or in the larger community. In rhetorical listening, readers can hear the text speak without thinking ahead to change it. When Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening, its connection to the felt sense of radical listening is clear:

For just as all texts can be read, so too can all texts be listened to. As a trope for interpretive invention, rhetorical listening differs from reading in that it proceeds via different body organs, different disciplinary and cultural assumptions, and different figures of speech [. . .]. For when listening within an undivided logos, we do not read simply for what we can agree with or challenge, as is the habit of academic reading (in its multiple guises). Instead, we choose to listen also for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves. (203)

Rhetorical listening can question long-held assumptions without attacking them. That very act is a challenge to the cherished ways of academic learning that rewards the learner who can quickly rebut a text or speaker’s argument. This way of hearing texts is one that calls for connections to the self, and through those connections, holds the possibility for change. Ratcliffe continues that

“[S]uch listening [. . .] may help us invent, interpret, and ultimately judge differently in that perhaps we can hear things we cannot see. In this more inclusive logos lies potential for personal and social justice” (203).

In our contemporary academic culture, the focus on getting the job done quickly and efficiently limits learning. Often, I feel that students only want to hear the requirements from me: How many pages do I write? When is it due? What's the length? In short, how can I get the good grade? Educational communities often hide in the trappings of education because we're afraid of change. Listening fully to another is almost like standing naked before that person—it's just not done in academics—we typically hide behind an accepted but thin rationale: allowing students to see their teachers as people strips us of some of our power. We're afraid. If students felt their teachers were less all-knowing and more worth knowing, they could ask us about simple things like their love for baseball or their passion for dogs. Then, they would feel more comfortable asking us about disciplinary matters like how is math part of my human experience, or did Etty Hillesum really find life in the death-dealing of the Jewish concentration camps. Students want to know it's safe to ask the personal questions as well as the critical ones because it takes both for learning to have the power to transform beliefs and the systems they create. That's a big risk. Such exchanges make learning vital, life-giving for both students and teachers. To encourage that kind of authentic learning, I feel I must continue to ask myself and others to lower our figurative veils and look for a "certain slant of light," letting it call us to their spiritual realities that are not easy to hear.

Engendering an atmosphere that allows for a class or a student's personal interaction demands that academics get rid of the factory model of education that asks students to engage in a lockstep program of learning: everyone reads the same text, everyone responds to the same prompt, everyone writes only argumentative papers. Instead, we must imagine and support a creative model, complete with a workshop model, listening facilitator, and a common assumption that learning requires open, attentive listening. The classroom becomes a space conducive to creativity, not productivity.

We must allow our students the kind of listening spaces that let them live with questions and indeterminacies. Radical listening asks for the full presence of the other as it offers that same presence. It holds the promise of individual and community transformation. What I want, and what I want for my students, is a chance to open ourselves to hear other voices and also our own. I want us to see how we differ from others and ultimately to have a chance to act on what we learn. This learning is soul-learning—it has the power to change people and systems. And when it does, the landscape listens. ☺

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