

Telling is Listening by Maria Popova

Every act of communication is an act of tremendous courage in which we give ourselves over to two parallel possibilities: the possibility of planting into another mind a seed sprouted in ours and watching it blossom into a breathtaking flower of mutual understanding; and the possibility of being wholly misunderstood, reduced to a withering weed. Candor and clarity go a long way in fertilizing the soil, but in the end there is always a degree of unpredictability in the climate of communication — even the warmest intention can be met with frost. Yet something impels us to hold these possibilities in both hands and go on surrendering to the beauty and terror of conversation, that ancient and abiding human gift. And the most magical thing, the most sacred thing, is that whichever the outcome, we end up having transformed one another in this vulnerable-making process of speaking and listening.

Why and how we do that is what Ursula K. Le Guin (October 21, 1929–January 22, 2018) explores in a magnificent piece titled “Telling Is Listening” found in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (public library), which also gave us her spectacular meditations on being a man and what beauty really means.

Ursula K. Le Guin by Benjamin Reed

In the spirit of Kurt Vonnegut’s diagrams of the shapes of stories, Le Guin argues that “our ruling concept of communication is a mechanical model,” which she illustrates thusly:

She explains:

Box A and box B are connected by a tube. Box A contains a unit of information. Box A is the transmitter, the sender. The tube is how the information is transmitted — it is the medium. And box B is the receiver. They can alternate roles. The sender, box A, codes the information in a way appropriate to the medium, in binary bits, or pixels, or words, or whatever, and transmits it via the medium to the receiver, box B, which receives and decodes it.

A and B can be thought of as machines, such as computers. They can also be thought of as minds. Or one can be a machine and the other a mind.

But the magic of human communication, Le Guin observes, is that something other than mere information is being transmitted — something more intangible yet more real:

In most cases of people actually talking to one another, human communication cannot be reduced to information. The message not only involves, it is, a relationship between speaker and hearer. The medium in which the message is embedded is immensely complex, infinitely more than a code: it is a language, a function of a society, a culture, in which the language, the speaker, and the hearer are all embedded.

Paralleling Hannah Arendt's assertion that "nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator," Le Guin points out that all speech invariably presupposes a listener:

In human conversation, in live, actual communication between or among human beings, everything "transmitted" — everything said — is shaped as it is spoken by actual or anticipated response.

Live, face-to-face human communication is intersubjective. Intersubjectivity involves a great deal more than the machine-mediated type of stimulus-response currently called "interactive." It is not stimulus-response at all, not a mechanical alternation of precoded sending and receiving. Intersubjectivity is mutual. It is a continuous interchange between two consciousnesses. Instead of an alternation of roles between box A and box B, between active subject and passive object, it is a continuous intersubjectivity that goes both ways all the time.

In a sentiment that calls to mind Nikki Giovanni's magnificent ode to what amoebas know about love that we don't, Le Guin writes:

My private model for intersubjectivity, or communication by speech, or conversation, is amoebas having sex. As you know, amoebas usually reproduce by just quietly going off in a corner and budding, dividing themselves into two amoebas; but sometimes conditions indicate that a little genetic swapping might improve the local crowd, and two of them get together, literally, and reach out to each other and meld their pseudopodia into a little tube or channel connecting them.

This, too, she illustrates with a diagram:

In an exquisite passage at the intersection of biology, anthropology, and sheer literary genius, Le Guin elaborates:

Then amoeba A and amoeba B exchange genetic "information," that is, they literally give each other inner bits of their bodies, via a channel or bridge which is made out of outer bits of their bodies. They hang out for quite a while sending bits of themselves back and forth, mutually responding each to the other.

This is very similar to how people unite themselves and give each other parts of themselves — inner parts, mental not bodily parts—when they talk and listen. (You can see why I use amoeba sex not human sex as my analogy: in human hetero sex, the bits only go one way. Human hetero sex is more like a lecture than a conversation. Amoeba sex is truly mutual because amoebas have no gender and no hierarchy. I have no opinion on whether amoeba sex or human sex is more fun. We might have the edge, because we have nerve endings, but who knows?)

Two amoebas having sex, or two people talking, form a community of two. People are also able to form communities of many, through sending and receiving bits of ourselves and others back and forth continually — through, in other words, talking and listening. Talking and listening are ultimately the same thing.

Reminding us that literacy is an incredibly nascent invention and still far from universal, Le Guin considers the singular and immutable power of spoken conversation in fostering a profound mutuality by syncing our essential vibrations:

Speech connects us so immediately and vitally because it is a physical, bodily process, to begin with. Not a mental or spiritual one, wherever it may end.

If you mount two clock pendulums side by side on the wall, they will gradually begin to swing together. They synchronise each other by picking up tiny vibrations they each transmit through the wall.

Any two things that oscillate at about the same interval, if they're physically near each other, will gradually tend to lock in and pulse at exactly the same interval. Things are lazy. It takes less energy to pulse cooperatively than to pulse in opposition. Physicists call this beautiful, economical laziness mutual phase locking, or entrainment.

All living beings are oscillators. We vibrate. Amoeba or human, we pulse, move rhythmically, change rhythmically; we keep time. You can see it in the amoeba under the microscope, vibrating in frequencies on the atomic, the molecular, the subcellular, and the cellular levels. That constant, delicate, complex throbbing is the process of life itself made visible.

We huge many-celled creatures have to coordinate millions of different oscillation frequencies, and interactions among frequencies, in our bodies and our environment. Most of the coordination is effected by synchronising the pulses, by getting the beats into a master rhythm, by entrainment.

[...]

Like the two pendulums, though through more complex processes, two people together can mutually phase-lock. Successful human relationship involves entrainment — getting in sync. If it doesn't, the relationship is either uncomfortable or disastrous.

Art by Salvador Dalí from a rare 1969 edition of *Alice in Wonderland*

This entrainment, Le Guin argues, occurs organically and constantly, often below our conscious awareness and beyond willful intention:

Consider deliberately synchronised actions like singing, chanting, rowing, marching, dancing, playing music; consider sexual rhythms (courtship and foreplay are devices for getting into sync). Consider how the infant and the mother are linked: the milk comes before the baby cries. Consider the fact that women who live together tend to get onto the same menstrual cycle. We entrain one another all the time.

[...]

Listening is not a reaction, it is a connection. Listening to a conversation or a story, we don't so much respond as join in — become part of the action.

[...]

When you can and do entrain, you are synchronising with the people you're talking with, physically getting in time and tune with them. No wonder speech is so strong a bond, so powerful in forming community.

Illustration from 'Donald and the...' by Edward Gorey. [Click image for more.](#)

In a complement to Susan Sontag's terrific treatise on the aesthetics of silence, Le Guin considers the singular nature of sound:

Sound signifies event. A noise means something is happening. Let's say there's a mountain out your window. You see the mountain. Your eyes report changes, snowy in winter, brown in summer, but mainly just report that it's there. It's scenery. But if you hear that mountain, then you know it's doing something. I see Mount St. Helens out my study window, about eighty miles north. I did not hear it explode in 1980: the sound wave was so huge that it skipped Portland entirely and touched down in Eugene, a hundred miles to the south. Those who did hear that noise knew that something had happened. That was a word worth hearing. Sound is event.

Speech, the most specifically human sound, and the most significant kind of sound, is never just scenery, it's always event.

This event of speech, Le Guin argues, is the most potent form of entrainment we humans have — and the intimate tango of speaking and listening is the stuff of great power and great magic:

When you speak a word to a listener, the speaking is an act. And it is a mutual act: the listener's listening enables the speaker's speaking. It is a shared event, intersubjective:

the listener and speaker entrain with each other. Both the amoebas are equally responsible, equally physically, immediately involved in sharing bits of themselves.

[...]

The voice creates a sphere around it, which includes all its hearers: an intimate sphere or area, limited in both space and time.

Creation is an act. Action takes energy.

Sound is dynamic. Speech is dynamic — it is action. To act is to take power, to have power, to be powerful. Mutual communication between speakers and listeners is a powerful act. The power of each speaker is amplified, augmented, by the entrainment of the listeners. The strength of a community is amplified, augmented by its mutual entrainment in speech.

[...]

This is why utterance is magic. Words do have power. Names have power. Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it.

Art by Sydney Pink from *Overcoming Creative Block*

In a sentiment that calls to mind Anna Deavere Smith on the art of listening between the lines, Le Guin argues that this entrainment and our intuitive expectations around it are at the heart of how and why great art compels us:

In the realm of art ... we can fulfill our expectations only by learning which authors disappoint and which authors offer the true nourishment for the soul. We find out who the good writers are, and then we look or wait for their next book. Such writers — living or dead, whatever genre they write in, critically fashionable or not, academically approved or not — are those who not only meet our expectations but surpass them. That is the gift the great storytellers have. They tell the same stories over and over (how many stories are there?), but when they tell them they are new, they are news, they renew us, they show us the world made new.

[...]

So people seek the irreproducible moment, the brief, fragile community of story told among people gathered together in one place. So children gather at the library to be read to: look at the little circle of faces, blazing with intensity. So the writer on a book tour, reading in the bookstore, and her group of listeners reenact the ancient ritual of the teller at the center of the circle. The living response has enabled that voice to speak. Teller and listener, each fulfills the other's expectations. The living tongue that tells the word, the living ear that hears it, bind and bond us in the communion we long for in the silence of our inner solitude.

The Wave in the Mind, which borrows its title from Virginia Woolf's timeless meditation on writing and consciousness, is one of the most intelligent, insightful, and profoundly pleasurable books you can ever hope to read — the kind guaranteed to far surpass any expectations seeded in this very sentence.