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**The Cadence of Listening: Soundings and Silences in Teaching**

by

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## **Abstract**

This hermeneutic study interprets the meaningfulness of listening in the context of teaching. It reads together different stories of listening--stories told in children's conversations with and about texts, stories told in teacher's experiences with students, and stories told in philosophical works of language and understanding.

In its interpretation of these texts it presents the difficulties of hearing, the deafness we risk in being lost in our own understandings, and it explores the presence of listening that is audible in silence and in conversation. It reads the character and texture of our listening and the character and texture of our teaching into each other.

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## Table of Contents

Approval Page .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER TWO: THE QUESTION OF METHOD .....	6
Hermeneutics .....	6
The Historicity of Understanding .....	7
The Legacy of Phenomenology .....	10
The Temporality of Understanding .....	12
The Language of Understanding .....	17
Conducting a Conversation .....	18
The Children .....	20
The Teachers .....	23
Readings .....	27
CHAPTER THREE: THE QUESTION OF LISTENING .....	29
A Question of Time .....	29
A Question of Remembering .....	38
Remembering Listening .....	39
A Question of Timing .....	43
Approaching the Question .....	44
CHAPTER FOUR: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS .....	50

CHAPTER FIVE: SILENCE: OUR LISTENING OPENNESS .....	63
Open Space .....	64
The Noise We Make .....	67
"I'm a Twinkle" .....	72
Playing in the Open .....	77
CHAPTER SIX: LISTENING IN CONVERSATION .....	83
An Exclusion of Listening .....	83
Reader Response .....	86
<u>The Baby Sister</u> .....	89
<u>Prince William</u> .....	93
<u>Corduroy</u> .....	97
Making a Difference .....	100
Talk of Listening .....	103
What They Say .....	104
Exchanging Stories .....	109
REFERENCES .....	116

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The world and our classrooms are sonorous places. They truly sing with sound. As ecologists such as David Abram (1996) are wont to remind us, we live in a languaged land. The trees and skies abound with the trills and cries of birds. The oceans resound with the chattering of shrimp, the groans of icebergs, and the haunting calls of whales. The land we call home reverberates with the melodies of a vast chorus. Its brooks babble forth, its winds howl and whisper; indeed its own soils and sands, its own halls and walls, tell tales.

We too are of this land and its sonorous depths. Our very place and our language are of its carnal, choraed ground. David Levin (1989) writes of our belonging to a sonorous field, of our *being* being entwined with our inherence in and attunement to an open field of sound, "an ocean of sonorous energies, an immeasurable dimension of soundings and silences" (p. 70). Abram (1996) too tells us we find our place and our language, our selves, within the sensuous world "as sounding, speaking bodies" (p. 86), that "we find ourselves alive in a listening, speaking world" (p. 86). Alive in a living land we speak and we are spoken to, we listen and we are heard.

Still we have known the pain our voices can cause the world. We have felt the repercussions of our shouting when we have raised our voices above the others with whom we dwell and have sent tremors of dissonance and disequilibrium throughout the

land. We have witnessed the destructive forces of our voices in the form of pollution, depletion, endangerment and extinction. We have felt the world collapse with anguish when we have long neglected to listen to it, when we have silenced the others with the volume of our own saying.

So too in our classrooms there is a sonorous matrix of language in which we may be heard, "an immeasurable dimension of soundings and silences" to which we belong and from which our being as teachers may be understood. There is a chorus of voices among whom we must live and live well or risk the pain of depletion and endangerment. There are others among whose music we wish to dwell, among whose songs we wish to sing.

There is a powerfully compelling quality to singing forth, to enacting the art of sound to create something of significance. Yet the music we wish to join, the music we wish to make, is not in the notes alone. The music arises from the whole of the notes and the rests between them, from the sounds and silences and what they are together. The singing of our language, the meaning we create, "is found not in the words themselves but in the intervals, the contrasts, the participation between the terms" (Abram, 1996, p. 83). We cannot fully hear the music until we hear its rested silences. We cannot fully hear the waves lapping upon the shore until we hear the rolling quiet between them, and we cannot fully understand the richness of our own language, our own being, until we hear the depths of our listening.

The understandings of "sound" our language holds includes not only a sounding forth, an audible utterance, but also a "sounding out," an attempt to hear, an attempt to

understand, and a "sounding of the depths," an exploration of the unseen, an exploration of what lies beneath the visible surface, an exploration of what lies beneath the seemingly self-evident surface of our taken-for-granted world.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the depths of our listening as teachers, to question what it means to listen in the context of teaching and what it means to teach in the context of listening. What character does our listening have? What is it that we ought to listen to? How is it that we may listen carefully? What difference does our listening make to our understanding of our students, ourselves, and our world? This study seeks to sound listening, to auscultate its depths for what it may tell us about our place, our language, and ourselves. It seeks its grounding in lived instances of teaching. It seeks to understand listening from its own sensual field of possibilities, from the tastes and textures and rhythms (Abram, 1996, p. x) of listening as it is lived in teaching. It wishes to make listening audible by listening to it, by listening to the tales it tells. It wishes to hear of the practices and perspectives of listening enacted in classrooms and how students and teachers are placed within them. It wishes too, to hear some of what lies beneath the surface of these instances, to understand the events to which they may belong, to understand what other songs, what other stories, these instances may be telling of.

The work of listening begins again and again. At times it begins with a sense of loss or failure, one that is "not a failure in the conventional sense of failing to achieve one's goals and objectives, but a failure which is at the same time 'a venture,' a 'wholly

new start,' a form of recovery of that which has been lost, which, in the recovery, becomes lost again and again" (Smith, 1983, p. 31). It begins with the failure of our ordinary understandings, with the realization that our understandings have failed to hear. It begins with an interruption of our understanding that is at the same time an invitation to us to enter the opening the interruption has provided.

*This* work of listening is a venture into the experiences when a certain understanding of listening and speaking failed. It is a venture into the opening in which listening and speaking were presented as uncertain and undetermined. It follows the path of listening that shows itself to be a path, to be an opening that leads somewhere, to be an event.

This study begins by trying to trace the footfall, the wandering steps that led to an opening, to hearing the questionableness of listening. It attempts to retrieve the faint tracks that became a path. It returns to some of the first tentative steps I took as a teacher and to one of my first great stumbles. It picks up the trail again when my stride became more determined, more full of intent, when I thought I knew where I was going, where I was headed, and when the course of events in my teaching interrupted the progressive momentum of my desires.

This research began as an attempt to understand responsive reading. The question of listening was an unexpected arrival in the midst of an inquiry into the phenomenon of children creating meaning through their conversations with texts and each

other, and the two events continue to inform each other. Their paths touch and cross and their boundaries blur as they run alongside each other.

The children I have taught and the others I have sought out in conversation have guided me along the paths I have traveled. At times I have tried to follow their trail, to step where they have stepped, pause where they have paused, hear something of what they have heard, and I have hoped to understand. At other times listening to these guides has sent me off the path I thought to follow and turned me to hear something new. This study itself turns in the question of listening from the question of its arrival and the hearing of deafness to the furthering of what is heard in it, to the furthering of what listening presents as questionable. It turns to the presentation of listening in silence, to its presentation in conversation, and to the questioning of ourselves in these events. It turns first though to the place in which such questioning may be cultivated, to the field of hermeneutics.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE QUESTION OF METHOD**

#### **Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics, as a means of interpretation, has an expansive and abundant history, extending back through time at least as far as Aristotle, rising in the reading of theological and legal works, traveling through the methodology of interpretation characterized by the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the continued methodology of reproduction of Romantic hermeneutical thinkers such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and onward now in the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, and the post-modern hermeneutics of Derrida and Caputo.

The understandings of hermeneutics I carry into this research are primarily informed by the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1998; Hahn, 1997; Risser, 1991, 1997; Weinsheimer, 1985) that has emerged as part of this history. It is in my understanding of Gadamer's work that I find the shape of mine. His writing, in conversation with my experiences and understandings, allows my understanding of the world, my work, and my place within them to continue. Hermeneutics gives me language with which to understand, a way to think about things in the world, and a way to think about myself as belonging to them. There is a thin and permeable line between my understanding of hermeneutics, my understanding of my topic, and my understanding of myself.

I was first drawn to hermeneutics in the context of understanding textual interpretation and conversation, in understanding reading. Hermeneutics is concerned with textual interpretation, but it is not a theory of reading. Hermeneutics is a theory of human understanding, and as such provides us with images of the conditions and conduct of interpretation that have implications for reading. Hermeneutics links reading, understanding and truth.

Hermeneutics is concerned with the way we read our world, the way in which we come to understand, but it does not seek to pre-determine the course of understanding. "Its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 295). Hermeneutics is concerned with understandings that precede and exceed method, with understandings that arise from a thoughtful reading of our lives. Hermeneutics is a practice of understanding, a way in which we interpret our world and our lives as we live them out. Hermeneutics charges us as practitioners with understanding not only our topic, but also ourselves, and with action, with the living of our lives well, within our understandings.

### **The Historicity of Understanding**

Historicity is a central feature of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer (1998) contends that "understanding, as it occurs in the human sciences, is essentially historical" (p. 309), that the interpreter and the topic are living out a history. In order to understand something we must understand the lineage and tradition being

lived out. Understanding something means understanding where it came from, how it arrived, and to whom we owe its arrival. The fact that understanding is possible at all is due to that history. "No text can be understood in itself and apart from tradition" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 143). We understand something from our position within its tradition. "Understanding is an open historical process in which the interpreter understands within an already constituted interpretation" (Risser, 1997, p. 4). We understand something from within a complex matrix of significance of which we are only partly aware. We understand because we *already* understand.

Gadamer includes what we already understand, our fore-knowledge or pre-judgments, our prejudices, as important parts of our understanding, as pre-conditions to our understanding. Our prejudices are not to be eliminated, cannot be eliminated, in the faithful application of method, but are to be understood in the process of coming to understand. We seek not to confirm our prejudices, but to understand, and understanding means understanding something new. "We understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 297). Our prejudices are put at risk as we come to understand differently.

We hold our opinions open to disconfirmation and place them at risk not because we are neutral but, quite the opposite, because we too are interested. The hermeneutic task is to understand the text in terms of its subject matter because it is something that concerns us too. (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 167)

We live in the same tradition as the thing we wish to understand. We are part of it, a party to it. Hermeneutics remembers a notion of truth that we are a party to.

Hermeneutics remembers that we stand in the middle of things long before we take a stand on them, that inquiry is underway before we discover it, before we voice a question. We are not neutral, we are involved.

Hermeneutic research understands the particularities of the researcher's situation within the tradition as necessary for understanding. "In order to understand...[the interpreter] must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 324). The researcher's familiarity with the topic is what allows the topic to appear as strange. The claim made upon the researcher is what allows the topic to show itself, to open. The researcher steps into the topic in a new way through the opening of the claim.

Hermeneutic research includes the researcher. The links between self-understanding and understanding are kept open. Hermeneutics does not try to remove the researcher as a contaminant or undue influence upon the research but understands that who the researcher is, what she undergoes and what she becomes in the conduct of the research is inevitably linked with the topic. "Any study carried on in the name of hermeneutics should provide a report of the researcher's own transformations undergone in the process of the inquiry" (Smith, 1991, p. 198). Understanding is cultivated in the process of living through something. Understanding the topic involves understanding what has been lived through as well as what has been formed through it.

### **The Legacy of Phenomenology**

Hermeneutics itself is a living out of legacies, one of which is the legacy of phenomenology. The notion of pre-reflective understanding, of being involved in something and having an understanding of it long before it reaches our conscious awareness, and the interpretive turn to particular lived experiences for what they may tell of the world, are part of its phenomenological heritage.

Hermeneutics seeks to preserve a quality of phenomenology. It values experience as an access to truth.

For philosophical hermeneutics, understanding takes place in all aspects of experiencing: "the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened" [Truth and Method, xxiv]. (Risser, 1997, p. 3)

Hermeneutics values the understandings that are opened through experience, but does not privilege experience as understanding. Hermeneutics understands truth to be in and of the world, to be possible everywhere, to be welcomed from where it speaks. Hermeneutics wishes to bring our experiences into a conversation, to open ourselves to them through conversation. It nests our experiences within understanding brought about in conversation with self and others. Being there, having the experience, may make understanding possible, but it does not ensure it. Hermeneutically, it is not enough to just have an experience. The experience must be interpreted, must be read. Interpreting experiences means understanding them not as they are, not as Husserl suggested, in their

essence, but *as* something, and in relation to something else. Interpreting experiences means reading them back into the world, back into their nest of relations.

Husserl's notion of intentionality works through philosophical hermeneutics.

Intentionality in this sense refers not to our purposes or designs, not to what we intend to do, but to *what* we tend, to *what* we are directed, to the topic of our experiences. An experience is an experience of something. Thinking is thinking about something. An interpretation is an interpretation of something.

Through his theory of intentionality Husserl showed that we never think or interpret "in general" as a rhetorical activity that bears no necessary connection to the world at large. Rather, thinking and interpreting are always and everywhere precisely about the world. (Smith, 1991, p. 191)

As much as hermeneutics is an alternative to the objectification of understanding that attempts to separate the researcher from the research process and the subject of the research, it is also an alternative to the subjectification of understanding which isolates understanding in the individual. We do not have interpretations *of our own*. We have interpretations *of something*. The understandings we create are not ours alone. We live in the world with others. We understand in conversation with others. We understand by virtue of our place, our position within a tradition, but it is a tradition we share, a language and a history and a world that we share. If we allow the view that my experiences and understandings are mine alone, and your experiences and understandings are yours alone, then we have nothing to say to one another, and we allow what the world has to say to us to collapse.

The *topica* remains important in hermeneutics. What the world says to us is of importance. It is the topic of the inquiry. The shared understanding we have of the world prevents us from considering ourselves as the subject of the work. It prevents the collapse of our stories into our selves. It places them in the topic. It gives us leave to tell our stories for what they tell about. The stories told in this research are told for what they make audible about its topic, about listening.

Listening too is placed. In this study it has emerged from its place in teaching and the teaching of young children, from the tradition of reading and reading aloud. It has emerged from a place I have sought to understand. Its place forms it and gives shape to it. Its topography shapes what images it can hold, what stories can take root in it, what understandings it can cultivate. The stories told in this research are also told for what listening makes audible about them.

### **The Temporality of Understanding**

There is a sense of unfinished business about understanding, a sense of incompleteness, a sense of its continuation. The understandings we create here and now, in this situation, are not understandings that will remain forever intact. Understanding is not complete and final. It is not absolute. Understanding is partial and ever new, ever renewed. It emerges from our situation within a tradition and it carries the tradition forward in a new way. Understanding exists in a generative relationship, in a play between case and law, instance and tradition. Reading the instance into the tradition

allows us to recognize what we have been reading, allows the instance to be understood as an instance of that tradition, and it allows the tradition to be re-read, to be rejuvenated by the instance. Understanding the case involves re-understanding the tradition. The character of the tradition is changed, is regenerated, in understanding the new event. What the tradition has been understood to be, how we have interpreted it, is altered by the arrival of the instance, full of its own particularities, full of meaning that speaks from within the tradition and speaks to what the tradition may mean.

The particularities of the instance are "fecund" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 38; Jardine 1992). They are re-generative and transformative. In the unfolding of this study, the arrival of a new group of readers in the midst of the traditions in place in my classroom created an opening in those traditions. It was an opening created in the to and fro movement between the particularities of the children's instance and the traditions into which they arrived. If reading and conversation had been understood to be so, then what was this instance? And if it was, then what had reading and conversation been understood to be? The arrival of the unfamiliar initiated an interpretation of both the familiar and the unfamiliar (Gallagher, 1992).

The arrival of the new group of readers was not just the arrival of something new, something else, to be added on as a "new, isolated element in a chain of events....[Their arrival was something that] constitutes the necessity to re-think the whole chain and each event in it" (Jardine, 1992, p. 56). Through those readers, listening didn't just become something else that is important in my understanding of reading, its importance

transforms what I understand reading to be. The importance of listening "adds to" (Jardine, 1992, p. 56) my understanding of reading. The particularities of the case are not just different, they make a difference.

The meaning of an event does not exist in its entirety. It is dependent on what has occurred and what may still occur, on situations and circumstances not yet known, on situations and circumstances in which it may participate. The meaning of an event is contingent and uncertain. "Its meaning is not given but is always to be given" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 88), is always underway. It is not decided, not positive, and not infallible. It depends.

The experiences I have had in my teaching, the experiences I have had with the traditions of teaching and with classes I have taught, take on new meaning with the arrival of the next class. My understandings of those experiences takes on new meaning. They participate in the creation of the possibility of an opening, and in the opening they became readable again.

What is understood is open to understanding again, new and differently. The incompleteness of understanding makes understanding possible. The possibility of understanding makes something understandable. The indeterminacy of something bears forward the continued determination of its meaning. To reach its terminus, a final saying of what is, would be to terminate its significance.

Just as an event is not finished, its meaning not complete, until it ceases to have consequences--and hence becomes inconsequential--so also the text is not a whole until it is no longer understood.  
(Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 14)

There is a sense of unfinished business about interpretive work as well, a sense of its incompleteness, its continuation. Hermeneutic work does not seek to stem the flow of temporality, to "fix the flux" (Caputo, 1987), to fix meaning, to say once and for all what something *is*. Hermeneutic work, as I understand it, seeks to live in the difficulties of understanding, to search for truth in its uncertainty, to understand the temporality and situatedness of truth and to allow it to carry forward. Hermeneutic work seeks to understand, to further understanding in its participation in the continued eventfulness of understanding. Hermeneutic work explores what an instance might be, to which traditions it may belong, what understandings it may carry forward. Hermeneutic work wishes to participate in a conversation in which understanding is continued. It has no notion of achieving total understanding.

The interpretive task is to open a topic and to carry on a conversation, to cultivate truth in the play of a conversation without falling prey to the temptation of deadening literalism that tries to say what something *is*, what it *really* means, and without falling prey to the "impotence of subjective particularity" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 489), the belief that there is nothing, no truth, beyond ourselves and our own situation. It is a task undertaken in a temporality which denies absolute knowledge and the fixing of a singular truth, and one undertaken in an attempt to understand how something may be true, or what it may be true of.

Hermeneutics seeks the moments of *alethia*, the moments when truth is revealed. *Alethia* is both revealment and concealment, both opening and closing, both remembering

and forgetting. Revealmment and concealment are linked in truth. They exist together. The page of a text we lift so we may read what lies beneath it, turns and falls on top of another page. When we turn our attention towards one thing, we turn it away from others. There is no position in the world from which we can see everything, hear everything, know everything, in its totality. The whole truth is impossible.

However comprehensive the work that consciousness has already completed, there always remains something for it to do. Since concealment belongs to revelation, one might say that revelation constantly increases its own task. Absolute knowledge thus becomes impossible. (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 39)

There is no way of fixing this difficulty (Caputo, 1987) in our world, no way to move beyond it. We can only move within it. The movement between revealment and concealment is the movement of hermeneutic understanding. Understanding takes place in the movement between departure and return, between losing one's way and finding it again.

The idea of an infinitely expanding body of knowledge moving in a linear path towards absolute understanding lies within the claim of the natural sciences. The hermeneutic notion of understanding is one that expands and contracts, that opens and closes, that ventures forth, returns, and ventures forth again.

The spirit consists in movement--first in its departure from its home into the strange and unfamiliar, the otherwise. If the move is complete, the spirit finds a home, makes itself at home in the other, so that its new home is no longer alien. But at this point, the elsewhere that had once seemed so foreign proves to be not only a new home but its real home; we discover that the movement which before had seemed to be an exile was in fact a homecoming, and what had seemed to be home when we set out was in fact merely a way-station. (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 70)

### **The Language of Understanding**

The hermeneutic task of interpretation is undertaken in language. As Gadamer (1998) has said, "*language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs*" (p. 389). It is the medium through which our thoughts emerge and find form, and through which we may reach shared understandings with others. Understanding is brought about in the conduct of conversation, in the art of dialogue. Understanding is a linguistic act and an interpretive one.

Listening is a linguistic act which seeks to understand. Heidegger (1996) uses the word "hearkening" to refer to a hearing that is thoughtful, to a hearing that understands, to listening that is an event of understanding. Harkening listens with *Gelassenheit* (Levin, 1989), with an openness that creates a clearing around what is to be heard, with an openness and responsiveness to the sonorous field, with an openness that is an awareness of the intertwining of subject and object, self and other.

Harkening is a listening that is attuned to the sonorous field of Being, that understands itself as belonging to that field, that understands what is heard as a gesture, as a sounding of Being. Such listening experiences truth as recollection, as the disclosure of Being, as *alethia*. Such listening is open to truth. "Before we can *hear* the truth, we must be *open* to listening" (Levin, 1989, p. 245). Listening is the language of openness. As Gadamer (1998) wrote, "Anyone who listens is fundamentally open" (p. 361). Anyone who listens makes room for understanding. Listening works to open understanding and to further it. Listening is the interpretive language of understanding

that plays between us and our world. It is the language of interpretation, the language of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutic inquiry seeks a sound understanding, an understanding that has listened. It seeks an understanding that has heard and revealed the questionableness of its topic and its own beliefs. It seeks an understanding that is open to truth as *alethia*, to the temporality of revealment and concealment. Hermeneutics seeks a meaningful account, one which is enlivening and generative, which has the capacity to imagine what may be, and which calls for further understanding.

Listening and hermeneutics bear a familial relationship. They bear the impression of essential relations. Listening as an event of understanding is a hermeneutic phenomenon. Listening embodies the soundness of hermeneutics, its concern for the furthering of understanding through language. Hermeneutics allows for the cultivation of an understanding of listening in the manner of listening. Thus listening plays a dual role in this inquiry. It is both the topic of the inquiry and its practice. It is both the content and the conduct of this research, both what and how I seek to understand.

### **Conducting a Conversation**

Conducting a conversation involves giving yourself over to it, allowing yourself to be conducted, to be led. Conversation brings forth the sense of a living language that conducts itself through us, a sense of our participation in something exceeding our own design. There is a sense that in participating in a conversation you are participating in

something beyond the scope of yourself, something that may not yet exist, but whose possibility draws you on. Conversation is conducted in the dialectic of question and answer, in a movement of give and take, to and fro, in a "play between" that is oriented to the topic of the text, to the truth it may speak, the understanding that may be created.

The conversation about listening in which I participate is a conversation that is dependent on my ability to hear and to attend to what I hear. It is a conversation that has emerged from my classroom experiences, filled with the language of the children who have learned alongside me. It is a conversation continued in the reading I have done, reading that has been suggestive and supportive, demanding and insistent. It is a conversation that has continued in the voices of the others to whom I have turned in an effort to further my understanding.

It is a conversation played out in all of these things and in between them. Each event, each participant, each author, has contributed truths that are not singular or insular. The meaningfulness of their contributions is in their plurality, their multiplicity, their ability to converse with one another and with us all, their ability to implicate us as teachers in the meaningfulness of listening. The meaningfulness of each contribution is sustained in conversation with the others. Each one finds new strength in being read with the others.

The conversation continues now in my writing. My writing serves not just as a form of representation for my understandings, but as a way of informing them. As I write I listen to the voices of others, to the language of the understandings they and I create

together. I listen to my writing for the integrity of the contributions offered to it. I listen to hear the truth formed in its language. I listen to overhear myself write something that may be true, to hear stirrings that may take form if I continue to listen to them. I listen to my language for the traces of meaning it may reveal, and I listen with caution for language I may use, for language that does not listen, that only claims to know. In writing this thesis I hope to create an opening for this conversation to continue. I hope to open the topic of listening for its readers, to reveal listening in a way that tells something of its place in teaching.

### **The Children**

The children whose voices appear in this writing are children from two of the classes I have recently taught. For the most part they are five years old, initiates still to the world of reading, but initiates who have a lot to teach me about reading. They are not children I encountered specifically for the purposes of this inquiry. My relationship with them was a pedagogical one. I was their teacher. For the most part we were a group of strangers tossed together by chance and circumstance in September and formed into a class. Our reading was part of our becoming a class.

The reading events I relay are ones that took place in the normal course of our school day, part of our daily ritual of sharing stories, of reading together. I had no particular designs on the children as research participants but their reading drew me to them and into the process of inquiry. I was drawn to one class in wonder, to the other in

confusion. The decisions to investigate the two classes were separate yet connected. The experiences I had with one class and the understandings I developed with them helped set a stage onto which the second class walked. Yet it was *they* who walked onto it, *they* who captivated my attention, and another class who did not.

Even as I made the decisions to explore the reading events each class offered me, my pedagogical responsibilities remained in the forefront. These children were not my research participants, they were my students. The conduct of our classroom life may have provided the impetus and much content for the research in which I am now engaged, but it was not conducted for it.

My interest in the events of which I tell was more immediate, was grounded in the life of the classroom. I wanted to understand the events that were unfolding in my classroom. I wanted to understand how to live well within them, how to teach well the children who were living with me. My interest was crystallized into action by my commitments to university coursework, to the completion of class assignments, but the possibility of *this* work had not yet been entertained. I underestimated the significance these reading events would come to hold. I failed to imagine what they would become. Not only did I "stumble" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 7) onto the question of this research, I stumbled onto much of its data, stumbled through the collection of it.

With each class I used a videocamera to record several of our shared storytimes over the course of about three weeks. I was a little hesitant to introduce the camera into our classroom. I was unsure of the effect it would have on the readers and the reading. I

was concerned it would make everyone self-conscious and affect the qualities that were present in the readings. Once we began to read again though, with the camera present, my fears were eased. I was not aware of any difference in the readings whether the camera was used or not, whether it was left in the classroom and not turned on, or whether someone else in the school came and took it away to use themselves. My use of the videocamera was not systematic. I used it when I could, when I remembered.

I chose to use the videocamera because I thought that somehow the film would capture the reading events, that it would preserve them so I could review them later. I had to be free to live through the readings as the children's teacher and thought at first that the camera could perform my data collection duties for me.

The videotape was deeply disappointing. It was not the embodied event of the lived through reading. It seemed flat and lifeless. What was recorded in the act of making meaning was not the meaning. The physical acts of reading were recordable but the vibrancy of it was not. What I sought to understand was not "there" on the tape, but in the air and in the breathing of the language of the reading. It was the living through the events with the children that offered me hope of understanding. I learned to take notes, to write down and write out my questions and impressions, and to hold moments in my memory when I could. I learned to savour the tellingness of fleeting moments in my memory--to breathe them in and allow their release again in the language of my writing. I learned to attend to what was in the air, the invisible currents that flowed around us and between us.

I learned that understanding was not to be collected in the recording of the videotape, that knowledge was not something I could accumulate from a dispassionate "watching." The work of understanding was not to be a matter of technology. I learned something of the value of understanding from within a situation, of understandings gathered in the authenticity of my pedagogical practice, in the living and reading with those students, those texts.

The videotape did serve a valuable purpose though. It preserved the words that were spoken, words I could not have remembered, words that now, much later, may be understood again. The meaningfulness of the reading events was generated in their language. The transcripts of the language of the reading events may, to a certain extent, evoke them again, may re-embody the events so they may be re-read.

### **The Teachers**

Understanding listening as something involved in what it means to be a teacher enlarges the scope of my research. It moves me out of my own experiences to seek understandings from others who live in and with this question as well, from others who would have something to say about listening, from other teachers.

I knew when I first considered the task of interviewing teachers that I wanted to converse with them. I wanted to invite them to participate in a substantive conversation with me. I wanted to listen to them in a way that allowed us to create and negotiate mutual understandings, in a way that would allow listening to be between us. I wanted to

conduct an interview that was true to the root of the word, *entrevue*. I wanted to conduct an interview that would allow us to understand listening by seeing and hearing each other. The prospect of participating together in a conversation about listening appealed to the other teachers as well. The alternative as imagined by at least one of the teachers, a formal interview, with a series of questions to be "answered," was something she couldn't see herself participating in, but the opportunity to share the stories from her classroom and to attend to something together was more inviting.

I asked two teachers I knew to participate in these conversations with me. I chose them because of the way they seemed to live with listening in their classroom and for their willingness and interest in considering and discussing issues that made a difference in teaching. I asked them to work with me because I thought they could invite the topic to arrive.

I considered my previous relationship with them to be an asset to the conversations I wished to conduct. I believed the climate of trust that existed between us would allow us to think deeply and speak openly about the topic.

A relationship existed between them as well, a relationship developed as school colleagues, a kinship that brought them together as teaching partners, a relationship that already requires them to examine things together that are of importance in their teaching. While I was prepared to interview them separately, I hoped to interview them together, to engage in a conversation together. As I was pondering how to broach the subject of a three-way conversation at the same time I was explaining the ethical considerations and

anonymity protections inherent in the research process my dilemma became immaterial. The idea of the three of us conversing together was suggested by the first teacher I approached.

I considered too, in this arrangement, the degree of "closeness" that existed between us. I was aware of the need for what Fiumara (1990) calls "dialogical distance" (p.100), the distance that allows the germination and growth of something new. I did not want to escape the difficulties of dialogue. I did not want our conversations to become congenial affirmation sessions. They did not.

I met with Leah and Elizabeth three times. Before our first meeting, when we gathered together to clarify the intentions and procedures of the research, I provided them with a question I thought was an opening, something that could give us a place to start, a way for us to begin the conversation.

Some time well before these events I had been given an article to read entitled "The Nursing 'How Are You?'" by Brenda Cameron (1992). It was given to me as an example of interpretive writing, but it was one whose question and concern remained in my thoughts, one I was recalled to in other readings and in other situations.

There is a quote from "The Nursing 'How Are You?' " that has remained with me. "For a moment the world falls away [van Manen, 1980, p. 22]. There is an instant where the opportunity to truly meet the other exists" (p. 173). In her article Cameron also talks about the relationship between the questions "How are you?" and "Who are you?"

Teaching, I thought, is full of such moments. "How are you?" "Who are you?" "What can I do for you?" are questions we ask everyday.

I shared the quote, and a bit about the article with Leah and Elizabeth and asked them to try to recall and relate such an experience--a time when they had a genuine encounter with a student--an encounter that made a difference to the child and to them. I asked them too to think of a time when they missed. I asked the questions of myself as well.

I hoped that such a question would keep our conversation grounded in their experiences, that the discussion would not "elevate" to an examination of listening as an object, but would move beneath the surface of our current understandings of listening, that listening would "show" in these stories, that the stories told could help explore the terrain of listening.

I taped each of our meetings and made transcripts of the conversations. Before meeting with Elizabeth and Leah again, I provided them with copies of the transcripts and sometimes with questions I had in response to them. I returned the transcripts of the conversations to Elizabeth and Leah not as the authors of a text that required clarification, but as the co-authors and co-interpreters of an on-going text. I didn't pull up something in the transcript and ask them what they meant when they said it, but sometimes I asked them to explore the meaning of something in the transcript with me further, something that was said and passed over, or something I thought I heard in what was said or left unsaid. I gave them the transcripts so they too could listen again for what

was emerging. I gave them the transcripts to continue the conversation we had begun, to let the conversation and its topic lead.

### **Readings**

My interest in the question of listening led me to and through a variety of written texts. At the time I began to read about listening, I had already been reading about reading theory and practice and about hermeneutic understanding, and I continued to do so. The phenomena of reading, understanding, and listening are closely linked in my questioning. I particularly sought out texts that addressed the meaning and meaningfulness of reading, that dealt with the question of response and children's conversations with and about texts. I read about classroom conversations and communication (Barnes, 1976; Eeds & Peterson, 1990, 1991; Gilles et al, 1994, Leal, 1997; Raphael et al, 1992; Strickland et al, 1989). I read some of the contributors to the contemporary educational discourse on listening (Brent & Anderson, 1993; Funk & Funk, 1989; Spiegel, 1992; Winn, 1988; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988) and to the field of research that employs listening as part of its practice (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and I read about some of the ways listening is understood in the fields of music, poetry, therapy, philosophy and ecology (Abram, 1996; Fiumara, 1990; Flickinger, 1992; Levin, 1989; Miles, 1997; Whyte, 1994).

The texts I have read are as much players in this work as are the teachers, the children and myself. Like the other players, their message becomes true by being taken

up, opened, and cultivated in the world, by being read in the company of others, by being journeyed through.

Much of what I read of listening in the educational discourse was strongly tied to an understanding of listening I was trying to work my way out of and served as a pointed reminder of the encompassing view of listening as a cognitive skill. Some of what I read held little significance for me. Some of what I read I resisted and some of what I read resisted me. Some of what I read I embraced and some of what I read reached out and took me in its grasp. Sometimes my understandings were confirmed and sometimes they were challenged. Sometimes I was presented with an understanding of listening I had not imagined and sometimes I encountered one with which I was familiar, but which I came to know in new ways.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE QUESTION OF LISTENING**

"Questions...occur to us" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 208). They arrive full of import and insistence. They address us and entice us. They are addressed to us and they lay claim to us. Once we respond to their claim, once we take them up and begin to lift their cover, to open them, they reveal themselves to be greater than we had imagined. What may have appeared at first to be a single note, is a thick and bunched text with creases and bends, where one thing lies on top of another, where things are hidden in the folds. As we begin to unfold a question, to turn it over, to read it, it reveals different traces of itself. The single folio shows itself to be part of a dense and compound foliage, part of the abundance of our world. The questions that occur to us are of the world. They have reach and range and roots. They extend into a web of significant relations. They touch and are entwined with others. One question is part of others. One question is many.

#### **A Question of Time**

The question of what it means to listen is one that has surprised me. It is not one I have expected to ask. In asking it now I must understand it too as one that has been asked of me. In many ways it is not a question I have raised so much as it is one that has arisen, not a question I have voiced so much as it is one that I have heard.

It is a question I have not always been able to hear, a topic I have not always found questionable. It is a question that I have at times been deaf to. Indeed, it has taken me quite some time to heed the call of listening, to hear it as what was at work in the midst of experiences that have shaped my teaching. My being hard of hearing stands not just as a personal failure, a burden I bear alone, but as part of my participation in the world, in texts and traditions that play out through me, traditions of reading, teaching, listening, and understanding into which I have arrived, of which I am a part, and of which I am now only partially aware. They are traditions in which I have unknowingly participated, traditions I must try to understand in order to make decisions about how to proceed here and now and about what I may wish to pass on.

Aspects of listening have presented themselves to me at different times in my teaching, in different forms, in different voices. They have made a claim on me, one that I have felt, but have not recognized. Having gone unheard, or having been misheard, they have gently persisted. They have "set in motion uncountable vibrations of uncertainty" (Levin, 1989, p. 237). They have created echoes of unsettled moments that have pressed upon me, calling for understanding.

The trail of listening can be picked up early in my teaching life when I was given a reading series and a teacher's manual to use and found I was unable to do so. The confusion I felt even reading to myself the list of questions I was expected to use in leading a discussion of a story was a confusion over the scriptedness of what should have been a meaningful learning experience. I was confused by the artificiality it imposed on

our reading. Were the children and I to be slotted into this predetermined sequence of question and answer? Was my teaching to be a doling out of questions and evaluations, waiting for the "correct" answer so that the next question in the sequence could be asked, passing by all other responses, ignoring the significance they might reveal? Was the children's learning to become a guessing game, an offering of answers until they found the right one and the sequence began again? What of the questions they wanted to ask? What of their speaking to one another? Were the children and I to become supporting players in someone else's monologue written in the guise of discussion in the teacher's manual? Was there room for who we were and what we thought in the work we did? Could we make a difference or were we interchangeable with the countless other anonymous students for whom the program had been written?

This encounter with a basal reading series unsettled me. It left me feeling dissatisfied and uncomfortable and ill at ease, out of place. I had a sense of something being amiss in the kind of teaching and reading that was being promoted and I had a sense of disorientation, of not knowing my place within the world. I had been "thrown" (Heidegger, 1996) in confusion from the place in which I thought I belonged. My position within the world shifted. I was no longer suspended in its normal conduct. When I questioned and rejected the expectations of the authority of the tradition, when I was unable to proceed in the expected way, when the tradition of reading and I could not easily co-exist, we both became more apparent. Strangely, the tradition appeared, and my limits, my prejudices, and my self, became apparent in relation to it. In my encounter

with the basal reader, I encountered a tradition of reading and teaching in which I lived but did not know, and I encountered myself. The tradition of reading read back to me a version of myself I had not known, a self for whom the tradition would not do. Gadamer (1998) says we always understand ourselves and things in relation to one another, that "self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self" (p. 97), that "all...understanding is self-understanding" (p. 260).

In trying to understand the meaningfulness of my encounters with the tradition of reading, in trying to understand what I am living out, I am trying to understand both the tradition and myself--not a private, subjective self, but myself as a subject of the world, a common, public self that seeks to know its way around. "Self-understanding [means]... knowing one's way around" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 260). The search to know my way around teaching and reading, to know myself as a teacher and reader, to know those worlds, has brought me to question listening. What it means to be a teacher, what it means to read, and what it means to listen are questions that are part of each other.

A few years after my experience with basal readers, my self-understanding in relation to the tradition of reading and its authority was again brought into question. I had returned to a classroom after a two year absence from teaching, during which time Reader Response programs had arrived as *the* thing to do. Basal programs had fallen from favor. They had lost their privileged position and Reader Response had emerged as the new successor to the crown, the new "'chosen' interpretation" (Gallagher, 1992,

p. 284). I had of course missed all the workshops sponsored by my school board and knew nothing about Reader Response, but keenly felt the expectation to "do" it. The authority of "rightness" of Reader Response, the authority of its prestige, worked upon me and I submitted to it. A colleague gave me photocopies of the handouts from the workshops she had attended and assured me it was everything I needed to know.

With such faint information (copies of copies of copies) I actually gave the program a try. On the surface I did the right things. I gave the interest survey, organized the blocks of time and the groups, worked with the kids to pick out books and handed out *the sheet*--sentence starters for response (I think... I wonder... I predict... ). It was a dismal experience, awkward, isolating, and tedious. It did little to engage us as readers, to bring us into meaningful and rich encounters with literature. When I think about it now, it seems we spent more time learning the method of response than actually responding. Our reading could not seem to extend beyond its method. It was an endless process that seemed to lead us nowhere and to be about nothing.

My intentions in undertaking Reader Response were good--I wanted to do the right thing--but as David Abram (1996) says, those who seek fulfillment by "mimicking the...methods without...[an] intimate knowledge of the wider natural community cannot...do anything more than trade certain symptoms for others, or shift the locus of dis-ease from place to place" (p. 21). In taking up only the methodology of Reader Response, in "doing" it (in copying it), I was only mimicking its meaning and I was putting the children and the work out of relation to one another. I did the very thing I

had at first moved away from. I placed the children and myself in the middle of a script. Our work, our reading, and the way it were conducted, were still pre-scripted even though neither I nor the proponents of Reader Response would have intended it so.

The methodology of Reader Response imposed itself on our reading. The "rightness" of Reader Response was reduced to its technique, to our technical knowledge (techne) of it. The "rightness" of it was pre-determined, its technique pre-determined in "I think...I wonder...I predict..." and removed from play, from the to and fro movement within the place of the reading event, from reading that has something to say itself about how it will unfold and about how it is to be read, about what is right in its situation. The application of the pre-determined technique of Reader Response replaced the correct application that comes from understanding, that comes from the development of judgment within and from a situation (phronesis).

My teaching suffered in the same way our reading did. It too became reduced to the enactment of technique, rather than judgment. My understanding of what I was doing and what I was asking the children to do was minimal and I quickly found I was unable to live with the "teaching" I was doing. I abandoned the practice of Reader Response, intrigued somehow by its possibilities, thinking that there *was something* right and true about what it had to say about reading, but knowing its potential, my potential, to make a difference for the readers in my care would come from an understanding that was not present in what I was doing, that was not present in the exacting application of its method.

Understanding in reading and teaching comes not from blind obedience to method and authoritative voices, but from obedience to the eventfulness of understanding, from a practice which Levin (1989) says is as "'obedient as a lute' .... This is not an imposed obedience; nor is it the obedience of conformity. It is the obedience of letting, freely, spontaneously, joyfully yielding [to the event]....'obedience' may be translated...[as] a listening that is heedful" (p. 224). It is a listening that hears each sounding of a text, each sounding of a child, as something fresh and new, not as something one has already heard, not as something one already knows and can dismiss to the automatic and systematic application of knowledge, but as something to come to understand. The strength of our knowledge, the correctness of our interpretations, our very expertise, is not in being able to say, "*now* I understand," "*this* is how it is," but is in the ability to be "corrected" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 39), to hear what must be understood, to hear how it is, to hear how it might be, over and over again. "To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced" (Palmer, 1993, p. 69).

Our knowing, our methods, our theories, find their truth in participating in the events of truth. "Theoria is true participation...being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees [and hears]" (Gadamer, 1998, pp. 124-125). A sound theory, a sound understanding is one that is like a "festival" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 124), that comes into being in being played out over and over again, that experiences "an increase in being" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 140) in being different. As James Risser (1997) says, "understanding is foremost an act of repetition where interpretations, which always remain a limited

instance of understanding, are continually played back into the process of understanding" (p. 4).

These moments stand out against the background of the ordinary life of teaching and learning which they have interrupted. Yet they too are very ordinary. They are extraordinary in their very ordinariness. They are the moments when the ordinary becomes problematic, when things cannot continue as they are, when something new must be created in the rupture of what was and when disorientation must somehow lead to a new sense of direction. They are moments when "time as a mere sequence is broken off" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 88), when a happening becomes *a* time, a time we can identify in reflection (remember the time...) as being part of something, something that emerges with a new sense of significance *in* time, as part of who we become in time.

It takes time to determine the meaning of an experience because this meaning is not exhausted by what was initially given, what it initially meant. An experience is something the meaning of which accompanies one through life, determining that life and being determined by it. (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 88)

The experiences I have had, the unsettled moments of my experience, are not moments of only *my* experience. The difficulties and troubles of these moments are not just *mine*. They are of the world. With time I have begun to understand my experiences as experiences *of* something, experiences that have "a character and vitality over and above the fact that...[I have] undergone this experience" (Jardine, 1992, pp. 58-59). The unsettled moments of my teaching are moments of the work of teaching, of a concern to teach well, and of a need to understand that work. They are moments when our relations

with students and curriculum are brought into question. They are moments when who we are as teachers is brought into question. They are moments that may speak with familiarity, may speak of the familiar, to those who teach. They are moments that may tell of listening.

Listening as a question of time is something David Levin (1989) writes about in his consideration of the sounding of echoes as a gathering of time. Levin writes of the presence of listening that exists in a generosity of time, time that does not speed along on its "linear and irreversible" (p. 259) path, existing only in the now-present, "a 'now' that is essentially self-contained: isolated from 'its' past and discontinuous with 'its' future" (p. 262), but in time that pauses, that ceases its relentless forward motion. Gadamer calls this "fulfilled or autonomous time." It is the time of the festival or the work of art, time in which we may dwell, time which carries. (Stambaugh, 1997, p. 134) Levin writes of a listening that emerges in the fullness of this time, time that embraces both the past and future, gathers them in and allows their intertwining to fill the present with a sense of wholeness.

This gathering Levin writes about is the *legein* of our *logos* that Fiumara (1990) reminds us of, the listening of our language and thinking. This gathering is listening, a concentrated listening without which our thinking and language are not whole. Listening is a concentrated openness, an openness to the field of temporality, an openness to the past and future within the present. Listening as a question of time is an openness to hearing the echoes of our past, to hearing the return of their sounding to the present.

Listening gathers the past and re-collects our echoes in memory, remembering them for the present and the future.

### **A Question of Remembering**

The quest to remember is a quest to retrieve something from the past, something perhaps forgotten in the noisy din of the present. It is a quest to bring something back, something that may have been lost or severed from our understanding in the severance of the now from the past and the future. What has been severed may need to be brought back, replaced, placed again in our understanding, so that our understanding may remain open to both the legacy of the past and the possibilities of the future, so our understanding may be re-opened.

The predominance of the present occupies us. It keeps us busy tending to the everyday matters of the "present-at-hand" (Heidegger, 1996). It occupies our understandings as well, filling them with a sense of the immediate. Caputo (1987) writes of our preoccupation with the present. He says that we become "preoccupied with the concerns of the present moment...tranquilized by what is actual and subverted from the possible, [that our] understanding is lured into a reading of the world in terms of actuality and presence, the always available stuff of things" (p. 62). We become enamored with the dominant tradition of now.

In order to collect and cultivate an understanding that is gathered in time, in order to remember, the readily available understandings that dominate the present must be let

go. "The work of recovery cannot proceed except by clearing away the superficial and commonplace understanding of things which systematically obscures our view and subverts...understanding" (Caputo, 1987, p. 64).

Thus the work of gathering is also the work of letting go, of making room for what may be gathered. The work of recollecting and remembering is also the work of forgetting. The openness of listening is an openness created in the clearing away, or moving aside, of what fills our understanding and our ears with its presence. It is the creation of a space in which we may hear something new, or in which we may hear something familiar as if it were new. It is a listening through the readily heard for what may sound in the background, for what is not readily present, for what may happen behind our backs.

### **Remembering Listening**

Listening is a word that is readily heard in classrooms. It is tossed about in schools all the time. It is used to catch children's attention (listen up), to direct their attention (listen to...), to elicit certain behaviors and to admonish others (good listeners do...). Listening is acknowledged as a component of the language arts curriculum but is often reduced to a specific set of cognitive skills aimed at following directions and recreating a speaker's meaning (good listeners can...). Often, the word listening is used in situations and with intentions that diminish its significance. When this happens its

significance is at risk of becoming fragmented into a set of discrete and teachable skills and its eventfulness may be lost.

Yet listening often goes unquestioned. It is accepted in our classrooms as understood, with a sense of "everyone knows." That sense of everyone knows, of listening being a known, of being fully present in our understanding, is pervasive. Many, many times, when people have asked me what I am writing about in my research, and I have answered "listening" I have seen that knowing on their faces and in their eyes. I have heard it in their voices, in the affirmation they offer of the importance of active listening skills, even in their kind offers to open their classrooms to my research, to allow me to observe their students who are poor listeners, who do not easily obey, who do not easily conform, who do not easily give the appearance of attending. I hear it too in my discomfort as I answer them, hesitating to say "listening," wishing that there was a way to by-pass the cognitive and behavioral traditions the word evokes, wishing that the full embodied and responsive nature of hearkening could be called forward in my answering and their hearing of "listening."

Sometimes I think I should not shy away from that knowing in others, that I should face that difficulty in the tradition of listening and engage it, that I should make an effort to open the topic with them. There is a closedness in the politeness of their inquiries though (for some people asking me what I am writing about is a way of asking "How are you?"), and there is a greater closedness in the knowing nods of their responses. What might be said will not be heard, and so cannot be said. It is a rare

pleasure to answer "listening" and to be met with an openness rather than a knowing, to feel the topic come to life in that openness, in that moment of listening.

This knowing of listening pervades our classrooms, our culture, and our general educational discourse. Much of the work regarding listening in education does just that--regards it--looks upon it as it is and then seeks to implement it. It seeks to efficiently and effectively teach listening without considering it as something beyond our current understanding. The pervasive presence of listening is what may need to be forgotten.

To remember listening we must understand it as not fully given, as not fully present. Levin (1989) says "we must break our inveterate tendency to listen with ears that belong exclusively to ontical everydayness--the world of experience as interpreted by anyone-and-everyone" (p. 208). To hear the question of listening it is necessary perhaps to remember both our listening and our deafness.

I have participated in the discourse of listening that takes it for granted. I have been caught up in the present understanding of listening, the one within easy reach. I have been both unable to hear of listening in the events I sought to understand and resistant to hearing them so because of my participation in the tradition of knowing. In Gadamer's (1998) words I admit my ignorance. I admit to the "opinions that suppress questions" (p. 366). I too have been knowing. I too knew listening as a set of skills and was deaf to its eventfulness and yet it was the eventfulness of listening, the events *of* it, that insisted I listen to it.

[An] event [can]...be seen as the moment in which something 'happens' to us, a result of which, however reasonably secure we are with our beliefs and habits (and thus our 'reality'), we find ourselves suddenly exiled from everything; we say that the 'world has collapsed around us'. (Fiumara, 1990, p. 121)

Such was my experience. Everything I came to know about reading and teaching reading, about the conduct of language in my teaching, about what I held to be real and true in my teaching, was broken open. My experiences with basal readers and Reader Response and what those experiences became, who I became through them, and who I encountered along the way, created an opening through which listening could be heard. They created an opening in which I heard my own language, my use of the word listening in my classroom, and in which I heard my preoccupation with the immediate presence of listening. Hearing the closure in my knowing re-opened my understanding of listening and gave rise to my questioning of it. *"To understand the questionableness of something is already to be questioning"* (Gadamer, 1998, p. 366).

Re-opening my understanding of listening has meant that I have had to re-understand it, understand it again in ways that have been forgotten, in ways that are at once old and new. Understanding listening, remembering it, has meant too that I must forget. I must let go of, must forget, my acceptance of listening as something already understood, as something known and given and simplistic. I must be open to a gathering of its complexities, its problematic and negotiated nature, its artfulness, its indeterminacy.

### **A Question of Timing**

There is a sense of timeliness in the arrival of a question, timing that is "beyond our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1998, p. xxviii). It is a timing that eludes our methods and desires and cannot be rushed. It is a sense of timing that leads us, that meanders us through the happenings of our life, that leads us toward something and away from it and towards it again. It is a sense of timing that leads us to linger in the gentle eddies of its pools and then picks us up in the strength of its currents, that does not show us its whole course at once, that surprises us with what is around the next bend.

Understanding is not a matter of method. The arrival of a question is not a matter of method. "There is no such thing as a method of learning to question, of learning to see what is questionable" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 365). The arrival of a question happens in its own time, in time that places us in the midst of something larger than ourselves, larger than now, and which may reveal to us truths beyond what our methods can uncover. We come upon questions in a particular time and place, in a place we go through, in events we live through and do not design. Questions happen. We happen upon them.

There is a rigor to questioning too though, to the hearing of questions. It is the rigor of making something of our happenings and happenstances. It is the rigor of gathering them in and giving them shelter, of tending to them. It is a giving of our concentration to them. It is a paying attention to the journey, to the subtleties of the course, to the differences in terrain along the way, to the songs sung overhead and the shadings of the stream and earth beneath, for what they may require of us. It is a

willingness to both rest and continue, to balance steady waters with turbulent ones, to greet opportunity and to be set off on a new course. It is a willingness "to live...through a course of attending, and be changed by what it discovers at each stage [and to know that] that change might carry...[you] anywhere" (Lee, 1998, p. 57). It is living with the knowledge that as you approach the gut, the tide may turn and reverse your course, sending you back where you came from. It is living with trust and doubt, with the hope of understanding, but not its certainty.

### **Approaching the Question**

My meanderings have led me around and about the topic of listening. When I first realized that there was something I needed to understand, that I had in fact already set out to understand, I headed towards reading. I have struggled with questions and uncertainties in other areas of teaching as well, but it is in teaching reading that my concerns are most compelling. Reading is a personal passion and the medium through which my passions about teaching most often find fulfillment and my frustrations most often find release. In teaching reading I keenly feel my obligation to my students and myself to understand.

During coursework investigating the theory and practice of reading, inquiring into what both the common discourses of reading and I held to be true about it, I began to develop an understanding of meaning as something that happens in the play between a text and its reader. Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading was a

beginning--an introduction to an understanding of understanding from which I cannot retreat.

Rosenblatt's work on aesthetic reading (1978) is concerned with the "lived-through experience" of reading. She writes of the value of reading for that experience. She urges the savoring of it and cautions against the overuse of reading for the skills, summaries, and analysis so valued in much of educational practice (Rosenblatt, 1980). Rosenblatt honors the participation of the reader in the reading event, acknowledging the difference each reader makes in evoking a work of art, "a poem", in aesthetic reading. She distinguishes what is understood in reading, "the poem," from the text itself, allowing that an abundance of different "poems" may be evoked in readings of any one text. Rosenblatt's work acknowledges the creative aspect of meaning, the creation of something new in the "transaction" of the reading event.

I was taken by Rosenblatt's description of the phenomenon of meaning making and I responded to it with what Gadamer calls the "joy of recognition" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 108). I recognized the truth in this understanding of reading, of meaning, as something I had already somehow known, but still as something new--as something familiar and yet unfamiliar--as something to know again, to know as "itself more fully" (p. 109).

Reading Rosenblatt's work and some of the things that led to it gave me a way to understand the questions I had about reading. It gave me some understanding of the history that was playing out through my concerns, the history I was living out. It is a

history of reading and teaching that seeks its existence in the polarities of its own belief, that gets stuck at times in a debate between substance and process, objective understanding and subjective understanding, reader and text, forgetting what exists in-between. It gave me a way to begin to understand the questions and dissatisfaction that had arisen in my earlier teaching of reading, and it gave me a way to begin to understand the reading experiences that were playing out in my classroom at that time. As I was engaged in this reading about reading I also happened to be living through some of the experiences that were being described. In one of the classes I was teaching, openly visible moments of meaning and understanding were being created by children and texts with a regularity and a character that claimed my attention. These are moments I return to time and again in my memory, moments I continue to read, bringing them with me to new conversations, to continuing conversations. They are moments I bring with me into this conversation, moments I read again in this text as I seek the enactment of listening in conversation.

I was intrigued by the creative strength of the conversations this class and I shared in our read aloud storytimes. I sensed that the interactions amongst the readers were connective and were contributing to the understandings that they were developing and I began to explore what they said to one another for what it made possible. As I explored these conversations I was struck by what the readers together could bring about in the reading and by what the reading could bring about in the readers. I was struck by the

way the readers and the text could exist together in an imaginative world of their own making and by the meaning they created there.

My entwined interest in reading and conversation led me to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. (Gadamer, 1998, Weinsheimer, 1985) Like Rosenblatt's transactional theory, the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer also denies the notion of a fixed, singular, and certain meaning. Gadamer too, interrupts the privileging of the interpretive authority of the author. Gadamer considers the author's interpretation to be a *first* interpretation, to be one among many. Gadamer holds that texts are multiple in meaning, that the meaning of a text surpasses the author's intentions, that a text too, experiences "an increase in being" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 140) in the re-presentation of itself. The text has integrity, but it is free to enter new relationships, to participate in new interpretations. The text is both open and closed, both free and bound. The meaning of a text arises in play, in a performative event of reading, in which the text, the reader, and the interpretation are not separate from one another, but exist together in that event of reading.

"All playing is a being-played," said Gadamer (1998, p. 106) and the play of hermeneutic reading becomes a being-read. We read to be read, to hear ourselves read back by the text in a new way. We understand the world so we may understand our place within it. What we create in an event of understanding includes a new understanding of ourselves. We are transformed in an event of understanding. We become something in understanding the events of our lives. We become someone new, someone more fully

ourselves. We listen, not to duplicate our understandings, but to create new ones, to create ourselves newly in understanding.

. My understanding of the work of Rosenblatt and Gadamer, in conversation with my experiences of reading and teaching, has formed and transformed me. In my experiences I have known readings of depth and significance, readings that create spaces for readers to live and to be together in "secondary worlds" (Tolkien, 1964) created by language and imagination; readings that truly allow us to meet others and to evoke the "poetry" of a shared "transaction" (Rosenblatt, 1978), readings that allow readers to know themselves, their world, and the text in new ways, readings that make the readers, the text, and the reading more than they were before.

I have known reading as a dialogic event between text and reader, as something that takes place in the "virtual" (Iser, 1978) space between them, and is not reducible to what they are apart from one another. I have particularly known the "grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989) of literature response and the collective, communal experiences they may evoke in a group of readers. I have known these conversations to be strong instances of responsive reading and I have found much support for my knowledge in the work of others. Incidents of children talking about texts are well documented in educational literature. Journals and books abound with testimonials to the dynamic, interpretive force of student talk. (Barnes, 1976; Eeds & Peterson, 1990, Gilles et al, 1994; Leal, 1997; Raphael et al, 1992; Strickland et al, 1989 ...)

I have been hailed by the familiar in the work of Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Eeds & Wells, and others who seek to understand the responsiveness of reading. I have felt "well come" as I have arrived at their door. I have felt invited into their home by what we share in understanding and by what I may come to understand by joining them in conversation. I have crossed the threshold of Reader Response theory on the weight of our accumulated knowledge, and I have been comfortably housed within it.

I have found a place from which I could understand. I have found comfort and security within its walls, basked in the light and warmth of its hearth, and found sustenance on its shelves. I have felt secure in my beliefs that meaning is created in conversation with others, that readers and texts together create meaning in a performative event of language, in the play between them. I have felt confident in my abilities as a teacher to bring children and texts together so they may speak to one another. I have settled into the habits and conduct of my teaching.

Reading...meaning...understanding...conversation...interpretation... the words rolled off my tongue and roiled in my thoughts. They are rich words to say and rich thoughts to think. They have a depth and a succulence into which I wished to immerse myself, a depth I could not fathom. The leg of the journey that would dislodge me, that would bring me to the question of listening, was one I could not imagine, one I could not design. The telling of this leg of the journey is a return to my classroom and to the students with whom I read. It is a return to the reading we did and the place those readings took us.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

I sit in the big cozy teacher chair at the front of my classroom with a group of young children assembled on the carpet before me. In my hands I hold an open book, its offerings turned towards the children. The familiar smoothness of the paper is under my fingers. The gentle sweep of the pages passing over one another caresses my ears. The pages turn and softly fall as my voice speaks the words of the print.

*There is a house, a napping house, where everyone is sleeping.* (Wood, 1984)

This is a comfortable space in which I sit. My chair is a well known companion. Over the years of my teaching we have developed an easy fit. We know what to expect from one another--where we need to push, where we need to shift, and where we come together almost effortlessly.

The familiar elements of home I find in my work are here together in story. The enchantment of this particular moment is steeped in my personal history as a reader and a teacher. The sound of pages sliding across one another is as familiar to me as my own breathing. The tingle of anticipation I feel is rooted in my experiences of participating in readings that have evoked meaning and wisdom from texts and readers and what they are together. The sedimented voices of other texts, other readers, and other readings gather around this story too. The delight and awe I find in the significance of what children and

books can be together is the means of my teaching life. It is what compels me onward and it makes much of what I can do with children possible. It is where I reside.

I feel in this moment, too, the enthusiasm born of a new school year and the freshness of a restful summer buoying me. This is a beginning. This group of children I am teaching and learning are full of promise. It is in their faces, turned upwards towards me and towards the book. It is in the ease with which they have slipped into school life and into my life. It is in the ease of the relationships we have begun to develop. It is in the anticipation of each as yet unexplored day we have to spend together. Anything seems possible.

The book I hold in my hands is a promise too, a shared promise with the class. It is an unspoken promise, but one I hear with my heart and my hopes. It is a promise carried forward on the echoes of voices from classroom readings I have known before-- collective, communal readings of depth and significance.

*And in that house there is a bed, a cozy bed in a napping house, where everyone is sleeping.* (Wood, 1984)

The story moves along and I go with it. I read and wait and wonder. What this reading, our reading, may become is a promise I expectantly wait to be fulfilled. Somewhere there will be an opening to the imaginative world where we can be together. It will begin with the text evoking something within us, with us evoking something within the text. It will begin with a word.

*And on that bed there is a granny, a snoring granny on a cozy bed, in a napping house where everyone is sleeping. (Wood, 1984)*

But the words are not coming. The readers are not speaking. Only the text is being voiced. Without the readers' participation there can be no conversation with the text and themselves.

*And on that granny there is a child, a dreaming child on a snoring granny on a cozy bed in a napping house, where everyone is sleeping. (Wood, 1984)*

"When I was little, my brother and sister and I and our dogs would all pile into bed with my grandmother early in the mornings. It was like we could snuggle forever."

This personal response is my own. In voicing it I make an honest offering of myself and I invite the other readers to respond to me and to that possibility in the text. But still there is silence. The pages begin to sound too loud. They scrape out their rhythm, resounding against the silent background emanating from the children. My body tenses. The silence and the scraping draw me up out of my comfortable chair, my comfortable home. I am lost. I am perplexed. I don't understand. The silence continues.

The immediate sensory world becomes more focused, more amplified, more jarring. Every wiggle, every twitch in the children becomes exaggerated and painful. The rip of Velcro, the exchanged whispers, the placid faces and averted eyes burn into my awareness. As the sensory world manifests itself larger and louder I worry I leave my imagination farther and farther behind.

The immediate world seems to trap me. I must carry on within it. It seems very small. It seems so close and confining. It moves in on me. There is no room for the others. Yet it looms so large as I pace off its boundaries alone. I rattle around inside the text--lonely, unconnected, marking off my limits. I can't find the others.

I call out for help. I point with my voice to the potential openings I can see and hear. "Rainy days make great sleeping days." "I think that child must be having a wonderful dream. Look at the expression on his face." "Have you ever been like the wakeful flea?"

Together we could escape the literal world and explore the possibilities of ourselves and the text, but there is no escape, no rescue from this reading. The call from one reader to the others has gone unanswered. The pattern of this reading is repeated again and again. It replicates and spreads. Its tessellations bind tightly together, with no visible spaces between them. No matter where I turn or how I read, the pattern of these unspoken, unnegotiated readings lays out before me.

This group of readers has had a "monstrous" (Jardine, 1994) effect on my understandings. They have thrown me far from what I have known. They have created a landscape with which I am not familiar. It appears bleak and barren, not at all "grand." I find myself wandering in uncharted territory, a wilderness without landmarks or signposts to show me the way. It is a landscape fraught with danger.

I try to find my way home to what I have known before. I try to take the children home with me. I believe that the journey we began when I gathered them together and

offered forth a text has somehow gone off course. I want to set it right. I turn back the way I've come. I retrace my steps.

I consider the texts. Among them are texts that have caused a surge of response in me as a solitary reader. Some of them are texts I have read with children before. I have known these texts to work with groups of children, to work upon them. Some of them are texts the children have brought from home. I have seen the relationship that exists between individual readers and these shared texts in the gleam in the children's eyes when they look upon the books they have brought and in the way they lovingly stroke their books when they lie in their hands. These texts are worthy of contemplation, of interpretation, of conversation.

I consider the readers. These are children for whom bedtime stories, trips to the library, and personal collections of books are the norm. These are the children of my own community, some of whom I have known for sometime. There are relationships of trust and goodwill at work among us--relationships that feed our classroom life and extend beyond it. We have the trappings of success.

I consult my map and directions. I believe I have done everything I could to provide for and invite children into conversations with texts, but still there must be something more, something I have overlooked. I try harder. I work harder. I search for the right text, the right question, the right way. It is though I believe my own determination, my own faithfulness to my beliefs can push us past this frightful place. I

run about in a frantic search, fighting off panic and despair. I run about in circles, ending right back where I started from, just more weary and worn.

The silence encircles us and it fills the readings. It is the predominant feature of the terrain and of my despair. It is the obstacle I know we must circumvent in order to find our way home. I want the children to voice themselves and collectively give themselves to the text. I want them to dwell in a dynamic linguistic environment. I know it will not guarantee that they will experience a deep response to the text, but I know it will make the richness of such an experience more possible. The sound barrier must somehow be broken or we must find our way around it.

I question the children's participation in the readings and I question them about it. As we gather again and I begin to speak the words of the text, I ask them, "Who is reading this story?" I take them by surprise. I have not questioned them in this way before. Perhaps the surprise will carry them off and cause them to examine themselves and what they do. They mull over the question in a brief pause and then answer together.

"We are."

"We all are."

"Everyone."

Such simple words--the simple truth--but I am so glad to hear them. I may be on the right path, the path home. This initial answer opens up more questions. I tell the children I need their help to learn about reading. I tell them I need them to talk to me about it, to help me understand what it is like to be a kid reading a story. I ask the

children what they do when they are reading. It is not an easy question. It is not an easy answer to articulate.

"Think."  
"About what?"  
"The story--what it is about."

Again a simple truth--a simply complex truth--and one that is eloquent in its reflection of actual experience.

I don't intend the next question, it just springs forth. "If you could choose between reading with the class and reading by yourself which would you choose?" The choice is easy for most of the children. Their voices ring out before I finish the question. The loudest voices answer "with the class" but in the quiet background I hear "by myself" being answered too. Now I must ask "Why?" The readers who would choose to read with others have their answers at the ready.

"Because it is more fun."  
"You get to talk about it more."  
"You can share your ideas *of* reading."

The readers who wish to read alone have no more to say. They speak with their bodies. They speak volumes about where they want to be in the way they position themselves during storytime. They sit in the background, around the edges of the class, as far away from the book, from me, and from the other children as they can. They've made their point. Enough said. They speak with their silence.

We reach a clearing through this process. It is a different place, a little beyond the silent, foreboding place we used to inhabit. Bringing forward the previously unstated

obviousnesses of reading has a liberating effect on several of the children. Verbalizing their own role in classroom readings seems to give them permission to interrupt. They begin to come forward and place themselves in the midst of the text. In their voices I hear hope.

Still in the light of this hope there are shadows. Among the voices there is discordance. The unleashing of personal responses creates a cacophony of sound. There is no harmony in it, no fusion as one. The responses don't work together. They clash and push each other aside rather than pull the readers together. They create competing discourses. There is no magic in the fact that the readers are speaking. Now it seems that everyone is talking and no one is listening.

*Tommy's face fell. If he couldn't have his mother, he wanted Aunt Nell* (de Paola, 1996).

"How is Tommy feeling?"

"Sad."

"Mad."

"He wants his Mom."

"Have you ever felt like that? When you just wanted your Mom?"

"Know what? I was crying when the ambulance came to my house when my Mom was having her baby. Then when they got the baby out I was happy."

This text has re-embodied a profound life experience for one little boy. He shares his fear, his trepidation, and his ultimate relief with us. In responding to him and his expression of his own frailty and resilience we could help him make sense of that event in a new way and we could perhaps find strength for ourselves in his strength. We could all

become more. This is a moment when we are offered the chance to truly meet another.

Before even I can respond to him though, another voice begins.

"When I was going to the nurse I cried because I didn't want to go and the day I got my needle I didn't want to go. I thought it would hurt and it did and I cried."

And another.

"You know, when I was a baby..."

And another

"Not in the middle of the story!"

These moments go flying by and disappear. It is not the same now for me or someone else to go back and talk to the little boy about his fear the day his brother was born, and how it all seemed out of control, or to acknowledge for the next child the bravery required to face the ritual of growing up we call the preschool booster, or to feed the connection between the original question of needing your Mom and his trip to the nurse. I think only he and I here know that his Mom couldn't go and his Dad took him to be immunized. I attempt to go back but the moment has passed. The other words have already been spoken, and they block our access to the other in the way we may have been needed.

Two other conversations began in that fray of voices too. "Not in the middle of the story!" What am I to read there? Is the story more important than the people who read it? Is her own personal experience with the text paramount? Was she talking only to that one child or was she talking to us all?

The participation of one child, the text, and myself is not enough to sustain a conversation, not here in the group. There are others and our understanding depends on them too. My attempts to build on one child's response, to enhance it, or to even just model conversing with another does not do what I want it to. Directing my attention to one child unintentionally excuses the others from that conversation. They do not seem to feel the need to contribute to the conversation, nor do they feel the need to listen to it. If it is not their own response that is being addressed they turn away, poke their friends, and absent themselves from the reading completely.

Gradually, without being aware of it at first, we move in a new direction, to another place. The children seem to enjoy reading together more than they ever have before. Books are pressed into my hands and they tell me over and over that they can read. The boys on the edge of the group begin to move in a little closer. I rarely have to invite them to join the group anymore. We share some rollicking good times with texts. Our conversations about reading explore the children's sophisticated knowledge of what it is like to be a reader and to read.

"You don't know what time it is. It's like there is no time."

"It is like you are stuck and you can't get out. You are the person in the book."

"When you read a book you think you are inside it."

"You get trapped inside a book. You can never get back and all the time you are someplace else."

"You shut the book."

Their descriptions of living as a story character, of the timelessness of a good read, and of closing the covers on the world of the text is only possible through their own experiences. They know reading as a lived event, but they seem to know it individually, not communally.

The landscape here is not so strange. Being invited in by the text, losing oneself in a book, and becoming what you read, are the familiar peaks of a place I have been before. It is a place I still like to go.

Living in each space on this journey has opened up the possibility of others. The possibilities open to us now are to converse about conversations and to negotiate the work of listening to others in such a way that it provokes your thinking and gives you something to give back to the others. This is the sort of dynamic linguistic environment I envision for my students. This is the ground we have to clear for ourselves. I am not home yet, but I am on the way. I can see its lights twinkling on the horizon.

I take another step. I approach the children again. I ask them about their listening. We stumble and falter over this route. My attempts to open conversations with the children about their listening brings to a grinding halt the rich expressions of experience they had been able to provide when discussing their reading.

"What is it like to be a listener?" I ask, "What is it like to listen to a story or to someone else?"

These questions are met with tense bodies, with furrowed brows, and with nervous fingers that fly to their mouths or to twirl in their hair in an attempt to aid the

search for an answer. Their voices are uncertain and filled with broken sentences and restarts.

"It is like...It is like..."  
 "It is like having to..."  
 "You listen... You listen to..."

I try to ease the situation for them. I try to phrase my question another way.

"What do you do when you listen?"

As soon as I voice that question I cringe. I know what their answers will be. The children will answer as I have taught them.

"You hold your hands still."  
 "You hold your feet still."  
 "Not bug anyone else."

As I wait, hoping that the list of "good listener" behaviors I have instilled in them will work its way to an end, the most piercing answer of all is given.

"Have I said 'Be a good student' yet?"

Is that what I have taught them?

These answers are too telling. I am sorrowfully aware now of having used the word listening carelessly in my classroom. I have removed it from its depths and heights, its breadth and natural reach, its multi-dimensionality. I have flattened listening and molded it into a tool for behavior management. I have impoverished the word in my misuse of it.

Now, just when I thought we were so close, that home was within our reach, I am called aside and called to account. My understanding of listening is called into question

and I am cast in a new direction. *I* am recast. What *do* I mean when I say that "everyone is talking and no one is listening?" What does it mean to listen?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SILENCE: OUR LISTENING OPENNESS

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;  
But it is on the space where there is nothing that  
the utility of the wheel depends.  
We turn clay to make a vessel;  
But it is on the space where there is nothing that  
the utility of the vessel depends.  
Therefore just as we take advantage of what is,  
we should recognize the utility of what is not.  
(Lao Tze, cited in Fiumara, 1990, p. 102)

Gemma Corradi Fiumara's book, The Other Side of Language, in which she cites these lines as a reference to the nature of silence, is a remarkable one. It has interrupted my accepted understandings of language and insisted I come to understand language differently. In reading it I was confronted with my deafness to listening. Reading it helped sound the question in my reading journey. It guided my attention to the spaciousness of silence and listening, and caused me to wonder if, in my struggle against silence, I had missed something of its quality and capacity.

Fiumara placed my discomfort with silence, my thinking that it was something to be overcome, in the midst of an understanding of language in which voiced rationality reigns, listening is passive, and silence is enforced. It is an understanding of language that has played out in education. The history of schooling is colored with images of teachers enforcing silence, enforcing listening, and in turn, enforcing speech. Silence, listening, and obedience are joined in traditional understandings of authority and submission. My

wish to resist the practice of traditional teacher authority in my classroom, my wish to resist the practice of enforced silence, may not have escaped that tradition. My wish to have students talk in my classroom may have been a perpetuation of the tradition in which silence is seen as barren, as only the absence of talk, as nothing.

### **Open Space**

Fiumara writes of silence differently, not as an absence, but as a spacious linguistic presence. She says that it is not just the absence of talk that we hear in silence, but the presence of listening. Listening is not a visible presence, but it is an audible one. It is not easily located and mapped, but it is heard in the rhythm and shading and punctuation of our language. It is the breath that passes between us, the "inspiration" of our understanding carried in the air (Abram, 1996). Silence is not a space which has been cleanly emptied of language, but one that is rich and fertile in its openness to the possibilities of language--possibilities which may be unheard of, which may be unknown until they germinate in the space a listening silence creates.

A listening silence is not a dead silence. There is life and language in a listening silence. Its language is not the powerfully dominant language of speaking, which seeks to colonize and to master each dialogic situation, but it is the strong supportive language of listening which seeks to dwell respectfully with others (Fiumara, 1990). It has the strength to let others live.

Leah and Elizabeth, the teachers I talked with, spoke about this part of listening in their work. Their speaking of their work often rested on students who had some difficulty in finding a place for themselves in school, who, at times, had difficulty living as themselves in school and who needed the spaciousness of silence to find a place for themselves there. They spoke of the students who perhaps most need the spaciousness of silence, the children who don't easily fit the normally available spaces, "the children who are often seen to be too bad, too slow, or too quick" (Clifford, 1996, p. iii), the ones to whom educational discourse may speak the loudest, telling them how they should be, who they should be, and how they should be different in order to fit in, the ones whom the powerful educational discourse of "normal" seeks to master. Leah and Elizabeth spoke about how important it is for all of their students to have a place where "they are able to be *themselves*," and in doing so to become better versions of themselves. They spoke about their efforts to create such a space for their students in their classroom. They spoke of being with their students, and of allowing their students to be.

It is like an empathy but without words, it's like... I know you are important, and I know you have something to say, and we have to work at making you comfortable enough that you can say it, or that you can just be it even... not even with words.

They spoke about Jamie, who seemed tense and serious, too serious, and about the ease in her that was eventually revealed. They spoke about Michelle, who at times avoided the difficulty of living with others, who withdrew into the imaginary worlds of her books, who needed to find a place for herself and her difference among her classmates. They spoke about Danielle, who arrived with a history of negative messages

about herself and her learning, who had developed a bank of behaviors that stood between herself and others, who had moved through the hallways of school the year before avoiding eye contact, defying contact, and who, in December, could smile and speak of her strength as a reader, who could begin to speak with pride of the difficult work she was undertaking in the space she had been given.

In the stories they told there was a sense of something in the child having come forward, something previously hidden. "Jamie all of a sudden was smiling and her sense of humor really came out... which she had all along." There was a sense of truth about the child having come forward, of an opening in which that truth arrived, and a sense of breaking through something to create that opening. "That seemed like a real breaking point for her [Michelle], with me." "That broke the ice with Jamie."

What, I asked Leah and Elizabeth, was being broken through or broken down? "Is there something in that teacher-student relationship that you had to break down? Is there something that they are expecting in their student-teacher relationships that you have to get a little hole in, to get in closer?"

Does the normal discourse of education assign us a place in our relationships with our students? Does it assign them a place? Is there a barrier between us, one that interferes with our hearing? Is it a barrier created in the students' history in schools? with teachers? with adults? Are the students expecting to have an understanding of themselves imposed upon them? Have these children been *spoken to* enough about what and how they are that they no longer expect us to listen to them?

Or, as Leah said during our conversation, perhaps it is something that *we* expect that must be broken through.

### **The Noise We Make**

In our conversation about Jamie I could hear frustration in Leah's voice as she talked about a comment made to her by Jamie's current teacher. "Low-average to average kid, but skill-wise... what was the expression? That she wasn't quite there." Leah felt the pain of these stinging comments on Jamie's behalf. Leah felt those words as a devaluing of who Jamie was. She felt the emptiness of the words, and in this brief summation of Jamie, a closing out of who Jamie was, and an attempt to marginalize her, to close her into a too-small space. Was this the new teacher's idea of getting to know her kids, Leah asked--pegging their skills? Was there to be room in that class for the children as themselves, for truths about them that their skills might not reveal? In our conversation about Jamie I could hear worry in Leah's voice as well. Without the space to be, what would Jamie become?

I have been like Jamie's new teacher. I have been that kind of teacher. Oddly, it seems that it is in the years that I have taught Kindergarten that I have especially been that way, or perhaps it is in those years that I have especially felt the strangeness of that way. It may be most fitting, may not be so odd, that the strangeness of some of our normal practices may have been revealed to me in teaching Kindergarten. Like Elizabeth and Leah, my understanding may rest on the different ones, the strange ones, the

strangers, the newcomers to this place. Palmer (1993) says, "God is always using the stranger to introduce us to the strangeness of truth" (p. 74), and in hermeneutics the arrival of the newcomers, the young, heralds the arrival of the possibility of new understanding.

The very youngest of our students, four and five years of age, enter our school, looking to find their place within it, and from the first moment they cross over the threshold I begin assigning them their places. It is my responsibility to evaluate them and to do it quickly. Referrals for speech-language support, fine motor support, etc. must be completed in October. The availability of these services within my school board is dependent on the identification of needs before the provincial funding deadline.

Just when our relationships are so fresh and new, when the students are so new to the world of school, when school and its curriculum could be most generous, I am taking note of their skills. Talk to me, I say. Tell me what is important about you. Let me listen to you. Oh, you have a cat (Note: articulation error, initial consonant substitution /t/ for /k/, /tat/). Is your cat cute? "Oh, she's a real tutie!" (Note: expressive language good, repeat of /t/ for /k/). Why don't you draw me a picture of your cat. (Note: right hand dominance established, tripod grip, lines strong and clear, posture and wrist stabilized).

I feel at odds with myself and my conflicting roles. I am trying to know my students, to understand them in relation to the curriculum, but I worry that at times it is done in a way that doesn't open things, that doesn't make the students and the curriculum

available to each other. I worry that I am listening in a way that narrows the world for my students, that makes it a more difficult place in which to live.

As teachers we have much to say, much to do. We have curriculum objectives and deadlines and report cards. We have dayplans and materials to attend to and many claims on our time and attention. There is a lot of busy-ness with which we must contend. There is an immediacy in which we live, in which things must get done. The urgency to do and to say can impose a meaning on our living with our students, upon them and upon us. There is a risk that in our busy-ness, in the business of doing, that we create "a machinery of thought that seems to have lost its original vitality as a result of its enormous success, [that we become] no longer able to hear the noise it makes" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 25).

This machinery may be at work when we find ourselves teaching out of habit, operating on automatic pilot. There are times in my teaching when I have found myself becoming an arm of that machinery, when I have found myself beginning the same teaching activity *again*. It may be one with which I have had enormous success, one that has worked well before, one that has arisen from a thoughtful reading of the needs of a particular student or group of students, in a particular situation, but not this child, these students, and not here. The life, the vitality, that may be missing on such occasions is the life of new generation. When we do something again, just because it worked well before, we may be forgetting to listen, to hear if that is what is called for in *this* situation, with *this* child, with *these* students. The judgements we make become our pre-judgements and

they need to be re-read, read into the next instance. They need to be brought into play, rather than being repeated just as they are, as if what to do were known in advance of the situation, in advance of the arrival of the child. The machinery of our automatic repetition can create a noise that is hard to hear through. Doing something again may deafen us to what may be the right thing to do here and now.

There are many times in teaching that it seems we live in the midst of a noisy din we ourselves have created and can no longer hear, a constant noise that may interfere with our hearing anything else and with our hearing what it is we talk about, what it is that we wish to understand.

Speaking a lot about something does not in the least guarantee that thereby understanding is furthered. On the contrary, talking at great length about something covers things over and gives a false impression of clarity to what is understood.  
(Heidegger, 1996, p. 154)

Leah, Elizabeth and I talked together about the irony of report cards, that the formalized procedure of assessing and reporting seems to take us farther away from our students when it should bring us closer to them.

"I find that that process takes me away from kids."

"Definitely. It [the report card] is not true. You pick a number for a kid, one number that stands for them, and it doesn't do it."

"It should be the opposite. When you are trying to report on a child, or when you are really trying to assess a child's needs and where their learning has come, that should bring you closer to them. But those report cards make you back off and they have you look at a child as an object to be measured."

"Take away all the parts of them that make them unique, number one."

All the talking and doing of reporting, the machinery of it, can make the intent of our assessments and reports less available, less understandable, and less understanding, less able to listen.

The same thing can happen with curriculum. The more we do, the more we say, the more active we are, the more activities we provide, the less understandable our curriculum may become, and the less able our students may be to live in a relationship with that curriculum, living instead in a relationship with only the activity. I remember a friend of mine speaking of the Language Arts program in her son's class in such a way. "They are so busy 'theming' that they aren't actually reading." She saw the activities of the Language Arts program as having taken over, as having become a substitute for the work they were supposed to support, as having taken the children away from the real work of their learning.

When this happens, when our activities become a fill-in, they also begin to fill in the quiet places and open spaces of our listening. As in my experiences with my newest students, and perhaps like Jamie's new teacher, our listening becomes formed by what we are listening for. We begin to listen for certain things and in a certain way. We engage in "a listening which constantly insists on making noise" (Levin, 1989, p. 79). We engage in a type of listening which is not silent. Our ability to be silent, to give something our silence, is in our ability to quiet this din, to hold back what we wish to say, to listen beyond what we want to hear, to listen for the unheard of.

### **"I'm a Twinkle"**

I remember Paul's first day of school, the moment he entered the room. Paul, his Dad, and his brother, came to school together. I was talking with some other students when they arrived and I remember looking up from across the classroom, seeing them paused and framed in the doorway, and going towards them. "Is this the school for four-and-a-half year olds?" I was asked. Paul was looking all around the room. He seemed curious and excited. He stuck close to his brother though, talking to him, following him, as they explored the classroom.

Over the first few days and weeks of school I became utterly charmed by Paul, and I became aware of a vulnerability in him. I learned that he couldn't yet read or write his name, or draw a recognizable picture, that he held a pencil with two hands, that going to the gym was an uncomfortable experience for him, that he needed help with his clothes and shoes, that he got very excited and swept away by what happened when he mixed paint colors together, and that he loved stories. I learned that his fine motor skills were weak, that he had a wonderful vocabulary, and that at times he had trouble organizing his thoughts. I also learned that he had rich thoughts, that reading a story with Paul could be exciting. I thought I was coming to understand him, that I was listening to him. I thought too that I was helping him, that I was helping make room for him in our class.

In November, as report card time rolled around, I asked each of my students to draw a picture of themselves. It was a repeat of an activity we had done early in September and from my experiences with it before, it was often a revealing indication of

growth in the children. It provided a glimpse of their fine motor skills, their sense of space on a page, their planning abilities, and a glimpse of some developmental markers. Some children draw themselves as a circle with arms out the sides and maybe legs below. Some children draw detailed pictures, including eyelashes, the pattern on their clothes, and a mixing of colors in an attempt to represent their hair color. Some children draw their whole families. Usually in each person's picture you can learn something about their skills and something about their sense of themselves.

Paul's "Me in November" picture was disappointing. There were so many lines and marks and little dots on his paper that I couldn't see his picture of himself among them. I sat down at a table with him in a quiet moment to go over the picture together. It may have been a quiet moment in the classroom, one when the noise and bustle was at a minimum, but it wasn't a quiet moment for Paul. He was in motion. He was fidgeting with his hands. His fingers kept tapping.

There was a circle in his drawing, one that could have been a head. I tried to talk to him about it, to question him about his drawing, but he couldn't hold still. His fingers kept poking at the paper. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at his hands. I wanted to reach over, to lay my hand on top of his and still him so he could pay attention to me, but somehow instead I asked him about what he was doing.

"I'm a twinkle." At this point my mind started spinning. I was taken aback. I didn't know what he was talking about. There were sometimes gaps in Paul's language that I had to try and fill in and then pass back to him to see if it was what he was trying to

say, but this time I couldn't do it. I couldn't make any connection between what was going on and being a twinkle, or between what had gone on earlier in the day and being a twinkle. (And what was a "twinkle"?) I was tempted to ignore the comment and re-direct his attention to the picture, to get back to what we were supposed to be doing, but I said, "You're a twinkle?" As I sat back then and let my hands fall onto my lap, as I stilled myself, Paul began to speak. This collection of lines and marks at the top of the page, the place where his fingers had been fiddling, was a picture of himself when he was "a twinkle in his Dad's eye." He told me then about growing inside his Mom as a twin, and about his brother being born first, and about more things than I can now remember. I learned more about who he was and how he saw himself in that conversation than I ever could have from looking for the person shape in his drawn lines.

I have a copy of that picture still. I've kept that drawing because I *remember* it. I remember thinking I could have missed that moment so easily, that moment to truly meet Paul and to listen to him. That whole opportunity could have been lost and I could have just noted "poor fine motor skills" in my anecdotal record. The opportunity for Paul to come forward, the clearing of a space into which he could come forward, could have been extinguished by my inability to listen.

Now when I look at that part of the paper I can see that perhaps it looks a little like a fairy or something winged, something "twinklish" but I couldn't see it then and it may not have mattered if I could. What it looks like is not what matters. At the time all I could think about was that nothing in the drawing matched my expectations for what a

person should look like, for what I thought should have been on the page. I couldn't get past what I was expecting out of the activity to listen to what it was for Paul, to listen to what he had to say. As Leah had suggested, it was my expectations that had to be broken through, broken open.

When I released my objectives for the activity and for my encounter with Paul I stopped listening in a way that made noise. I gave Paul and the situation my silence. I withdrew what was filling the space between us. I cleared the space and made it possible for Paul come forward into it. In that clearing I was able to understand Paul and his work in a way that had not been possible before, and I was able to understand myself differently as well. Paul, his work, and I were all revealed. We were all opened in a new way.

Gadamer (1998) says that "understanding begins...when something addresses us" (p. 299) and that openness (truth) belongs to the situation in which we are able "to experience the Thou truly as Thou--i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us" (p. 361).

In my early attempts to know Paul, to understand him, I may have been seeking an experience of him that only tried to understand what was typical of him. I may have been engaging in a type of "classificatory closure" (Levin, 1989, p. 22). What type of student was Paul? What could I expect from him? How did he compare to the typification of "normal" which I held as a standard? I was attempting then to encounter him as something other than myself, but as something of which I was not a part,

something which I could represent and classify in my observations of him, something I could perhaps render fully present with enough of the right kind of observations.

Later, when I sat down with Paul and his drawing, my efforts were still directed towards understanding just him. I could acknowledge his difference. I was willing to make room for him in our midst. I was willing to give him his own space, to let his drawing reveal something true of him, and maybe something of how my teaching techniques and activities needed to accommodate for him, but I couldn't imagine what it could reveal of me, of us, and of how we were involved in something in the world together.

When Paul and the situation in which we were involved became something other than what I expected, when they became something unfamiliar, when they left me speechless, then I was able to experience them as an "other" who had something to say that involved me. In the openness created by my silence I was able to hear Paul as I never had before, and in that hearing, I realized that I too had been heard. I had been heard by another in a way I could not hear myself. When Paul had not spoken, when he had fidgeted and played with his hands and his paper, it may well have been because he could "hear my deafness" (Levin, 1989, p. 86).

Until I stopped listening in a way that made noise Paul could not speak. Until I could listen to what he might say, and hear it as something true of me as well as true of him, I was robbing him of his truth claim, his power of address. "Something can 'speak' if it is listened to" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 72). Someone may speak if they are listened to. My

listening did not begin when Paul started to speak, but when I stopped pushing forward with my own concerns, when I stopped saying what we were to be doing and what we were to be talking about, when I stopped saying. Like the spaces between the spokes upon which the wheel depends, silence is the open space upon which our listening depends. Silence holds the strength and the capacity of our listening. "Silence is our listening openness: in order to hear something, we must first *give* it our silence" (Levin, 1989, p. 232).

### **Playing in the Open**

When we give someone or something our silence we hold our wish to speak so as not to fill the space with a "profusion of...utterances" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 103). When we create a listening silence and enter the space our silence creates, we de-center our concerns and ourselves. We give ourselves over to what may take place in the silence. We yield to it, to what it may yield. We lose ourselves in that space, in the playground of our listening. We become players in an event of understanding.

Gadamer finds play to essentially involve a decentering of the player in play for the sake of play's self-presentation. The decentering of the player is such that the player loses him or herself in the play... gives him or herself over to the game, participates in the playing of the game....In the loss of self one is still present, but being present now has the character of being outside oneself. "Being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with someone else...." [Truth and Method, 126]. (Risser, 1997, p. 140)

When Elizabeth and Leah spoke of their classroom they spoke of letting their students be, but they also spoke of being with their students. They spoke of a way of

being with their students that called both themselves and their students forth. Yielding ourselves to what may occur in silence does not mean we vacate the space. "Listening does not mean quietism or docility" (Levin, 1989, p. 299). A listening silence is not just a withdrawal, but a coming forward. It is not just the removal of oneself from the space, but an entering into the space differently, to welcome what else may come forth. Silence is our spacious linguistic presence. It requires our presence. The play requires our presence.

Elizabeth called the way of being she and Leah tried to live with their students "being personable." She used those words to describe the way she and Leah tried to *be with* their students, and on another occasion the words arose as she sought to describe the difference between teachers that made an impression on her, ones who made a difference for her, and teachers she could barely remember.

It was an expression that caught my attention. "Being personable" could be dismissed as a superficial or insubstantial attempt to make students "feel good," but I sensed a claim to truth in Elizabeth's words that told me they meant more. I sensed that somehow "being personable" could mean more than just being pleasant and amiable, being congenial in its most limiting sense, and that it could do more than just make a classroom a nice place to be.

There is an understanding of "being personable" that arises in reading it alongside Parker J. Palmer's (1993) writing on "hospitality."

This may suggest a classroom lacking essential rigor, a place in which questions of true and false, right and wrong, are subordinated

to making sure that everyone "has a nice day." But that would be a false understanding of hospitality. Hospitality is not an end in itself. It is offered for the sake of what it can allow, permit, encourage, yield. A learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning painless but to make the painful things possible. (p. 74)

"Being personable" may also be understood in this way, as not an end in itself. It too may be offered for what it makes possible, for what it can permit and encourage and cultivate. I explored those words with Elizabeth and Leah--being personable, being a person, being able to be a person, being able to be present with children in a way that surpasses the role incumbency of "teacher" and that gives kids room to be present in ways beyond the narrow definition of "student." As Elizabeth said of some of her teachers, "Those teachers were very much just... 'teachers.' They didn't get to know kids. They didn't tell you about themselves." They weren't wholly present.

In our conversations, Elizabeth and Leah both stressed the importance of letting their students know them as part of coming to know their students, and in doing so they suggested that there is something about "being personable" that makes listening possible. "Being personable" may be a way of coming forward that listens. Coming forward, bringing yourself forward, being very much present, may create a listening openness.

Hermeneutically, "being present does not simply mean being there along with something else that is there at the same time. To be present means to participate" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 124). Being with someone else becomes an act of play.

For Elizabeth and Leah "being personable" with their students allows their participation in the events of their classroom in a way that listens. It allows them to be fully brought into play, allows them to be placed in the midst of things. It allows them to

take up a certain position in their teaching--not as one who "merely gapes at something out of curiosity" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 126), nor as the invisible see-er that watches without being seen, the "panopticon" (Foucault, 1977) of our institutionalized existence, but as a player in a performative event of understanding. "Being personable" allows them to give themselves over to the play, to become one who both knows and is known (Palmer, 1993), one who both listens and is heard. The presence of "being personable" may be the presence of silence, a maieutic presence that brings new understandings to life. The maieutic act of midwifery, the act of "fostering the birth and life of thought" (Fiumara, 1990, p. 147), requires an abiding, listening presence.

In my conversations with Elizabeth and Leah I tried to be present in a way that both listens and is heard, in a way that participates in the creation of new understanding. Perhaps I too tried to "be personable." I brought myself and my work forward. I didn't keep my thoughts and interpretations tightly to myself. I submitted them to the conversation. I asked Elizabeth and Leah to read my writing about my "Journey Through the Wilderness" and I talked with them about the parts of listening and reading and teaching I found troublesome. I did so not just to "share" what I already believed, not just to be there at the same time Elizabeth and Leah were there with their thoughts, but to allow my beliefs, my prejudices, to be brought into the play of conversation, to give them the space to call out to Elizabeth and Leah and to give Elizabeth and Leah the space to come forward in response to the topic as it sounded in them. I did so in hopes of creating

a clearing of silence around the topic, to give the topic the abiding presence of our silence, to help our understanding of listening live and grow.

As Gadamer (1998) has said of prejudice, "Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself" (p. 299). Only by being given full play are our understandings able to call to others, to hear them, and to join with them in creating something new. In being given full play, teachers as well may be able to experience their students' claims to truth and make it possible for their students to have full play.

"Being personable" may bring teachers forward in a way that permits their self-loss, that permits them to be wholly present with their students in play, that permits them to call to their students and to hear them. By being wholly present teachers may invite and encourage their students to be wholly present as well. "Being personable" may make it possible for students to come forward as they are, and to join with others in the difficult and laborious process of creating something new and becoming someone new. The congeniality of "being personable" may well be the coming together (*con*) to bring about the birth or generation (*genialis*) of something new. Jamie's ease, Michelle's comfort, Danielle's smile, were not ends either, but they could be read as signs of those students being present, of their having found the space that allowed them to participate, to play, to learn as themselves and to generate new understandings. In play things become understandable.

In play we do not abandon the role of teacher, but take it up more fully, in a way that listens. We do not abandon the concerns of our students, nor do we abandon the concerns of our curriculum and our responsibility to assess. We submit those concerns to the "ordering and shaping movement of the game itself" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 107).

A game is not boundless. It has a playing field marking its exterior boundaries and it has parameters and rules that shape the game from within. Its movements have limits. Our listening openness is not boundless. It has limits. It has requirements. It has a *topica*. It is played somewhere. It is about something. There are others.

The space we create in schools must be both ethical and accountable. Our students must live in relation to the world and to each other. Some things are sustainable in that space and others are not. Some things will sustain us and others will not. The listening openness we create in schools is not one in which anything goes, in which anything and everything will do. We don't want our students to wander aimlessly in an open space. We want to lead them somewhere and to something. We want them to venture forth and return differently. Our listening openness is an interpretive openness, one that tries to work in the midst of the difficulties of bringing the new instance of the child into the established traditions of knowledge and convention. It is one that tries to open them both by reading them together. It is a space bound by the child, ourselves, and the world.

## CHAPTER SIX

### LISTENING IN CONVERSATION

The creation of a listening silence is part of the movement of the play of conversation. "*Hearing and keeping silent* are possibilities belonging to discoursing speech" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 151). "Authentic silence is possible only in genuine discourse. In order to be silent, *Da-sein* must have something to say" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 154).

#### An Exclusion of Listening

Listening and speaking work together in the creation of our dialogic understanding. In their dialogic reciprocity they support and create a space for each other. Yet the reciprocity of our oral language has traditionally been overlooked. Fiumara (1990) charges that we participate in a tradition of language which privileges expression and marginalizes listening, that considers listening as only listening *to* language and overlooks the role of listening *as* language. She says we participate in "a reduced-by-half" (p. 2) tradition of language, thought, and understanding which equates language with expression and which accepts "everything that is sufficiently and suitably enunciated...as an enunciation of knowledge" (p. 55). She says we follow "the most glittering emissaries" (p. 56) of talk, that we become "intoxicated by the effectiveness of our own 'saying' and increasingly incapable of paying heed" (p. 8). She charges that we

suffer a "crushing deafness" (p. 8) because of it and that understandings formed in our privileging of expression may in fact be "misunderstandings...rooted in the exclusion of listening" (p. 11).

Fiumara (1990) says too, that the ability to hear the unheard of, to understand anew, may be unthinkable when listening only from the framework of the dominant discourse, that the dominant discourse becomes a burden to our understanding. It is the source of our misunderstanding. She quotes Wittgenstein, "One keeps forgetting to go right down to the foundations. One doesn't put the question marks *deep* enough down" (p. 93).

I am implicated in the misunderstandings of language of which Fiumara writes. I have thought of listening as listening to language. I have privileged expression as language and I may have missed understanding because of it. Reading Fiumara I had to acknowledge that I may not have been able to understand what was happening in the wilderness of my reading journey because it was beyond the walls and borders of the theory to which I held, because I was viewing it from the perspective of what I had learned in the city and its rational life. The noise of the city, the noise we make, can drown out the sounds that try to reach us. Our own sounds can mask "the meaningful solicitations--songs, cries, gestures--of the larger, more-than-human field" (Abram, 1996, p. 6).

Fiumara's writing helped me understand that I had been trying to understand the readings that were taking place in my classroom in the midst of a partial understanding of

language. The understandings I had developed of the responsiveness of reading being brought about in what children reading together say to one another, was an understanding revealed in the natural conduct of conversation. That opening was a revealment of an important truth, one that still shapes what I believe to be true and how I conduct myself with my students, but in uncovering the importance of children speaking to one another, something else was covered up. In focusing my attention on what was said in conversations about texts, the importance of listening was concealed. The presence of listening which brings forth new understandings, the *language* of listening, was concealed. In the tapes and transcripts of the reading events I had seen the children's speech. I needed to hear their listening as well.

Fiumara turned me about and encouraged my return to the events of reading for what they may tell me about listening, and for what listening may tell me about them. She set me off to re-view my home in the light of my developing understanding of listening, not to just look at it, but to listen to it and its foundations. She challenged me to examine my domicile and my domesticity.

### **Reader Response**

Fiumara helped me come to understand Reader Response theory as the tradition which shaped my interpretation of the reading events, the tradition which both made those interpretations possible and limited them. In order to understand the events more fully, I needed to understand more fully the tradition in which they and I participated. I

needed to enter into a conversation with that tradition. I needed to inquire into and reflect upon what it is that the tradition makes possible and what it is that it limits, what it allows us to hear about reading and what sounds it masks. The way in which the tradition constrained my understanding could become the opening through which the tradition and its events become more comprehensible.

Hermeneutical constraints, although they are in some sense limitations, are not detriments to learning; they do not imprison our understanding but allow it to flourish. Language and the process of tradition are enabling conditions for learning because they provide the context of familiarity by which we can approach the unfamiliar. They operate as necessary conditions for the acquisition and advancement of knowledge. As Gadamer remarks, "in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself" [*Truth and Method*, 281]....The fore-structure of understanding limits, but also opens up, hermeneutical possibilities. (Gallagher, 1992, p. 123)

To be aware of the boundaries that limit our understanding of something is also to be aware of the space around it, the space in which it may be different, the space in which its possibilities may be worked out.

Reader Response theory is itself part of a larger tradition of understanding reading, one that sits amidst other traditions of understanding, of teaching, and of authority. Reader Response emerged as a response to a theory of literary criticism in which the meaningfulness of reading was understood to be located solely in the text. In the tradition of New Criticism a text was a solid and complete object. It was considered to be "self-contained and autonomous" (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 5). Its meaning was contained within it, and was accessible to the well read, the well educated. Meaning was considered to have been implanted in a text by an author, and was held in the trust of

expert reader-critics who could lead other, more novice, readers to that meaning through the provision of the correct tools of interpretation. The text held the authority of interpretation, an authority held stable over time and circumstance, an authority independent of the presence of the reader.

Responding to the dominance of the text in New Criticism, Louise Rosenblatt focused her work on disclosing the participation and contribution of the reader in a "transactional" evocation of meaning. In her theory of "aesthetic reading" Rosenblatt (1978) wrote of the active role of the reader in the evocation of a literary work of art, a "poem." She wrote, "'The poem' comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and 'the text'....A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event--a different poem" (p. 14). Louise Rosenblatt drew the attention of many reading theorists and educators to the particularity of reading, reading that exists at a particular time, in a particular place, with particular readers, and a particular text.

In schools, our understanding and acceptance of Rosenblatt's theory of reading helped bring forward the possibility of multiple interpretations of a text, and an acknowledgement of the interpretive authority of student readers. It helped change some of our practices of reading instruction. In the teaching of New Criticism, developing an understanding of a text was understood to be "a process of close reading, a careful attending to the words on the page" (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 5), a careful attending to "what the text is saying" (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 6), so that it could be replicated, so

that the reader's understanding could correspond to the given meaning of the text. The teacher's role was to "train pupils into a style of 'objective' reading" (Dias & Hayhoe, p. 6). The close reading of New Criticism, the close attention given the words of the text, shifted, with the advent of an understanding of aesthetic reading, to a close attention being given to the particular and individual response of the reader. Readers too, were to be given a say in the conduct of classroom reading. Guided reading comprehension lessons directed by a teacher in possession of the correct and singular interpretation of a text have, to a large extent, given way to a multitude of classroom practices designed to elicit students' individual responses to a text, to give voice to the meanings in which they participate.

The uncovering of the necessary participation of the reader in the production of literary meaning was the revelation of something that adds to our understanding of reading, something that adds to our understanding of our students and ourselves as readers, but in that uncovering of truth, in that event of *alethia*, what was then covered up? What was forgotten? Was it our own connection to one another? Our connection to the languaged land that has something to say if we will listen to it (Abram, 1996)? Our ability to listen? Has the turn away from objective reading been a turn into its own shadow, a turn towards subjectivity? In the playing out of Reader Response, in the encouragement of individual responses to texts have we exchanged the search for *the* meaning into a search for *my* meaning and *your* meaning? Have we forgotten how to live together in our common language? Have we participated in the tradition of individualism

and personal ownership that promotes the colonizing and offensive view of talk? Have we participated in a tradition of *logos* that promotes the pursuit of meaning at the expense of its cultivation (Fiumara, 1990)? Have we again privileged expression to the exclusion of listening?

### **The Baby Sister**

The children in my classroom who were reading The Baby Sister by Tomie de Paula (1996) were able to convey their individual responses to the text--the day *my* brother was born, the day *I* got *my* needle, when *I* was a baby. They could say what the text meant to them. There was meaning for them in their personal responses to the text, but there was something missing in the expression of these personal responses as well.

The child who spoke of his tears and fear and of the confusion, the displacement of the normal, on the day of his brother's birth, was responding to something in the text. He was beginning to explore its topic and its topography, what the text may have been about and the place in which we may find ourselves through it, the place in which we may form an understanding of the topic and ourselves. There is something familiar and common in the particularities of his experience, something familiar and common in the experience of being displaced by the arrival of a new sibling, the breakdown of the normal conduct of the world with the arrival of someone new, and the creation of a new stability in the wake of that breakdown.

There is something common and familiar as well in the experience of the child who wanted his mother present during his immunization procedure. The milestones of our childhood are sometimes difficult, and whether they be the birth of a new sibling, or the preschool booster, and the transition from pre-school to school it may initiate, those difficult events can seem to separate us from our parents in a way that makes us feel the need for them the most.

There is something in each of those experiences that could link the children to each other, to the character in the story, and to us all. The particularities of each of those experiences could be taken up by the group in a way that places both the children who spoke of them, and each of the other members of the group, more deeply in the world. There is a claim to truth in the text, and in the experiences told, that could open the world for us all, that could make the world and ourselves more understandable. Something presents itself through them that could make a difference to us all.

In being pushed along by the next expression of experience the responses are just said and not listened to. Their claim to truth is not listened to, not taken up. The responses are not understood as something in whose truth we share, something in which we may find we all belong. Each experience, each response, is deemed to be just personal and the students are left to find themselves in only themselves, rather than in the world.

In the turn away from the claim of the response, the exploration of the terrain of the text is interrupted. The terrain of the text begins to be divided into territories, with

no common ground. The diversity of the terrain of the text, its multiplicity, is dispersed into the multiplicity of its readers, and in its dispersal, we dispense with the need to converse with one another. That is *your* experience, and that is *your* experience, and this is *mine*, so there is nothing that we need to listen to and talk about together. What the text and the readers could become, how they could be transformed in understanding, is lost in the creation of independent co-curring monologues that remain just personal.

The creation of independent versions of meaning may stand as an example of a territorial language base at play in the practice of Reader Response. In not conversing about something together the readers are left with versions of truth that compete to be heard. Each version of truth is self-enclosed and sovereign. Each response stands alone with its understandings not at risk, not at play, listening for the chance to assert itself before others.

The discordance of competing discourses may illustrate the individualism of talking without listening. In passing by the responses of their classmates in their own rush to speak, the children may be enacting the powerfulness of speech, the privileging of themselves and their expression that is part of our cultural storyline. In their rush to speak they do not participate in the nascent thoughts of others (Fiumara, 1990). They do not make the sacrifice of keeping silent to allow a developing understanding to emerge. They do not show "interest" (Heidegger, 1968) in the thoughts of others.

"Interest, *interesse*, means to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and to stay with it" (Heidegger, 1968, p. 5). In not listening to what has

come forward, by talking over what has begun, the children may be dismissing the responses of others as merely "interesting."

Interesting is the sort of thing that can freely be regarded as indifferent the next moment, and [can] be displaced by something else, which then concerns us just as little as what went before. Many people today take the view that they are doing great honor to something by finding it interesting. The truth is that such an opinion has already relegated the interesting thing to the ranks of what is indifferent and soon boring. (Heidegger, 1968, p. 5)

"That's interesting" may not be explicitly uttered but I can hear it now in the space between one utterance and the next each time I hear or read a series of unrelated responses, responses that act as if they have no relations (Clifford, 1996). "That's interesting--next--click." Such readers don't act as if they are in the midst of things together, in the world together, staying with something and with one another. They surf the possibilities of the text individually, and in doing so they bring to fruition some of the changes sought by the move away from New Criticism. They make the literature "their own", and they assert their "autonomy" as readers (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 6). They act as if *they* are self-contained and autonomous, as if they are not of the world. They turn the truth of another reader's response into a "curiosity" (Heidegger, 1996), into only *their* opinion. They abandon the topic and their common world. Is the only truth they are able to hear the truth they think they own? Are they not willing to be owned by the truth?

There is room for us all in the multiplicity of a text. There is room for us as individual readers and as a reading community. There is room for us to speak and to listen. There is room for us to dwell in a text and to explore its truths and ourselves

together. We can play together in a text and in a conversation. We can play together in our listening.

### **Prince William**

*It had been three days since a huge tanker, changing course to avoid hitting icebergs, had grounded on a dangerous reef. Jagged rocks ripped open the ship's bottom, sending millions of gallons of oil gushing into the clean waters and now onto the shores of Prince William Sound, where Denny lived. (Rand, 1992)*

As this reading begins, questions and comments arise from the readers. They reach toward the text, questioning it and being questioned by it. They relate the text to experiences they have had, to situations they have encountered or imagined, and they seek to understand. They begin to form their own "live circuits" (Rosenblatt, 1978) of understanding and give voice to them. These questions, these ideas, these initial responses, may or may not be taken up by someone else. They may be built upon or they may be left alone. They may or may not interest another reader.

Claire: I used to live in [near] the ocean.

*"Remember, when you go out today, stay away from the beach," Denny's mother warned. "I don't want you near that oil. Do you understand? (Rand, 1992)*

Paul: But she does go to the beach.

*From a low bank above the shore, she saw rocks covered with a thick goop, and pools of black stood in puddles. The air had a bad, oily smell. Denny held her nose. (Rand, 1992)*

Class: Wrinkling their noses.

Geordie: Oh no, this is bad. They can't drink. There's no water to drink because the ocean is full of oil.

Me: I think they probably get their water from a different place other than the ocean anyway because the ocean is salty.

Adam: One time we were playing... I went to my Grandma's... We were playing at the ocean and I got a mouthful of salty water. It didn't even taste good.

Paul: I've tasted it and...

Matt: I've tasted it and it tastes good.

Paul: I tasted it... I tasted it... (grimace on his face)

Ali: I went to a swimming pool one time. It tasted so yucky because it was salt water.

Paul: I hate the wave pool.

The individuality of the readers' experiences with the text are presented and accepted. They are welcome to speak of their experiences, to speak of themselves. A connection is established between the readers and the text, and at times between their responses. Yet there comes a point in the reading where there is a sense of something more happening, something beyond an aggregation of personal responses, something collective. There comes a point where together the readers are participating in the reading in such a way that the reading experience engulfs them as a whole.

*"Don't cry, please don't cry."*

*The oil-coated baby seal was hard to hold, and almost impossible to pick up, but Denny did both. Then she gently bundled it into her sweater, and carefully picked her way back across the slippery beach toward home.*

*"I'd better warn you," she told the pup. "My mother is going to be very cross with me. But I couldn't have left you out there on the beach, could I?" (Rand, 1992).*

Geordie: Why doesn't she go tell her Mom?

Me: What would you do? You don't want to get in trouble but you don't want to leave the baby seal?

Ali: I would hid[e] the seal and take it home.

Geordie: I would tell.

Philip: I wouldn't tell.

Carl: I know

Paul: I would keep it and make it a secret.

Carl: I know what she should do...

Geordie: But you would tell me.

Carl: Hide him. Hide him somewhere there is no oil.

Me: I think she needs help.

Carl: Secrets aren't nice.

Ian: Or you could say that I'm sorry that I went to the beach... that I went very, very close to the beach.

The question of why the little girl doesn't go tell her Mom about the seal, and of what she *should* do in this situation, is not just a question that belongs to the person who voices it and it is not just a question for the character of the story. It is not just personal. It is a question the world asks of us all. The readers hear the question asked of themselves and together they explore the possibilities of their honesty and ethics. They respond to what one child voices, but the response becomes the group's. The group stays with the question. They follow it. They play with it and within it. The readers pull and tug and explore the question until together they are able to let it rest. They converse with each other about something that presents through the text. They listen to the text and to each other.

Together the readers become part of the possible world of the text and act as if... They suspend their individuality in their efforts to understand. They dwell in the language of the text together. They gather around the text and explore its terrain together. They go somewhere and to something together, and in going there and returning, they gain new understandings of themselves and the world of which they are a part. In a conversation the readers and the text bring themselves into existence in new ways. The readers and the text both become something different, something more than they were before, something more than they were alone. "In the wholeheartedness of [their]

concentration [on the question presented in the text] world and self begin to cohere.

With that state comes an enlarging: of what may be known, what may be felt, what may be done" (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 4). The readers and the text participate in a gathering in which they come more fully into themselves, a gathering in which Heidegger says *things thing* (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1998).

In such a gathering, the group "come[s] together as an integrated whole at a particular moment around a particular event" (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1998, p. 7). The unfolding and integrity and focusing of meaning is particular, but it is not just particular, not just personal. It is not subjective. The fullness and the richness of participating in such an event, the fullness and richness of its meaning, comes in the fact that it is larger than oneself. There is a sense in such a moment that "we did not and could not make the occasion a center of focal meaning by our own effort...that the special attunement required for such an occasion to work [is not ours alone, but] has to be granted to us" (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1998, p. 7).

Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is  
mere skill and little gain;  
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball  
thrown by an eternal partner  
with accurate and measured swing  
towards you, to your center, in an arch  
from the great bridgebuilding of God:  
why catching then becomes a power--  
not yours, a world's.

--Rainer Maria Rilke  
(Gadamer, 1998, epigraph)

In gathering around the text we "catch not a ball we've thrown ourselves," but one thrown to us "by an eternal partner," and the catching of it is "not ours, but a world's." In gathering with others we become more deeply placed in the world. The ancestry and expansiveness, the traditions and horizons of our particularities become more recognizable. We do not make the text just our own, fashion the world in our own image, but come to an understanding of ourselves in the face of something in the world. In gathering around the text, the particularity of the reader, the particularity of the response, and the whole of the "earth and sky, divinities and mortals" (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 1998, p. 6) are attuned and play together. Our particularities, our selves, are placed again in the world from which they have emerged.

The space in which such a gathering around a text may take place is one cleared by the arrival of a question, a question "thrown towards us," and by the catching silence we give it. Understanding begins, a conversation begins, when Hermes arrives, bearing a message that must be heard, a question that must be asked, a question both so profound and fundamental it is as if it has arisen from the land itself "[Latin, *fundus* land]" (Smith, 1991, p. 200), a question that is an opening.

### **Corduroy**

I have read the story Corduroy by Don Freeman (1968) many times. I have read it to my classes of young children many times, and often they have read it themselves or with others before we read it together. Corduroy is an old friend to many of us. It is well

known, familiar, and when I picked it up to read with my students once again, the reading began in a familiar way. Together we were enjoying the humor of Corduroy's foray into the department store, and we were enjoying the camaraderie of our superior knowledge. Imagine, thinking that an *escalator* was a *mountain*! I asked a question then that I thought would just slip easily into the rhythm of the reading that had been established.

Me: *You* know that it's not a mountain. How come *he* doesn't know?

Jan: He doesn't have a brain. [soft voice, overshadowed by the next speaker]

Ali: He's never been exploring before.

Jan: He doesn't have a brain. [spoken with conviction]

Up to that point the story had one kind of meaning for us and in an instant we were all called away from it and to a new question. We didn't often hear Jan's voice during our stories, but at that moment, the words she spoke became the only thing we could hear. There was an incredulous tone in her voice, as if she couldn't believe we were actually considering this question. How could Corduroy know anything? He's just a toy. It's just a story. And she was right.

Whatever might have been said before Jan spoke, and whatever we might like to have said to this spell breaker in our midst, was set aside in order to catch this new question with our silence, in order to listen to it, in order to consider how it could be true, or not.

Me: If he doesn't have a brain...

Geordie: He can't talk.

Paul: No, no. It's not because he has[n't] a brain. He's just a bear. That's why.

Me: If he doesn't have a brain how can he decide to do something? Don't you need a brain to make decisions?

Ali: Yeah...

Carl: You also need a brain to move your body.

Me: That's right. Part of your brain controls your body.

Jared: I know. 'Cause your brain controls your hands.

Geordie: And besides, if you don't have a brain you can't talk.

Jared: And lookit. See. He's got his hands down like that and there he's got one up on the stairs. So he wouldn't be able to move his hands like that if he didn't have a brain.

Ian: But that's just like Toy Story. When Nanny comes downstairs then Woody and Buzz come to life. He comes to life when the guy's on his feet.

Me: So you think Toy Story is sort of like Corduroy?

Chris: Maybe he just doesn't know anything.

Me: Would he know about...? What kind of things would a bear know about?

Ian: Nothing

Jared: It doesn't have a brain. If it had a brain you could cut the toy open and you'd see its brain.

Chris: Or it could have batteries in it.

Ian: It's because of the batteries.

Jared: Or it might be because he's never been looking around in the store before, or outside. All he did for his whole life was sit on the shelf.

The conversation continued in bits and pieces throughout the rest of the book. In it the children considered not only if Corduroy had a brain and if he came to life or if it could all be explained by batteries, but they also considered their own knowledge of when things were real and when they weren't, and why they talked to their stuffed animals when they knew they weren't alive. Through Corduroy and through Jan the readers were called to examine their own sense of reality and their play in an imaginary world. Their reading of Corduroy and themselves were no longer just what they had been.

The question voiced by one child made a claim on each member of the group. The readers answered the call of the question and gave themselves over to it. They gathered together, ventured forth through its opening and returned differently. They were transformed by what they heard, what they listened to. They were transformed by

one response. One response, each response, could be an opening through which things become different, could be an opening that makes a difference.

### **Making a Difference**

The hope and wish and desire to be able to make a difference is part of the ancestry of Reader Response, part of its generation. Making a difference in the reading, in the understanding that was to be developed, was something denied a reader in the tradition of New Criticism. The ability to make a difference was written out of the script of the teacher monologue in the basal reading series guide book, in "guided" reading that has only one place to go and one way to get there--the path the teacher's questions lays out. As is pointed out about such questions,

[they] aren't real questions; that is they are not questions to which the answers are not already known, questions that arise from genuine curiosity and promote inquiring....Rather, they are questions that programme a particular direction of inquiry and a particular destination. (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 7)

The askers of such questions accept only one answer, and they persist until they receive that answer. "No, sorry," they say, "That's not quite the answer I was looking for. Would anyone else like to try?" Other answers, other responses, are passed by and are not taken up. They are not listened to and cannot make a difference. The only responses that count are the expected ones, the ones they are looking for, listening for. Those are the only responses that can move the reading along. There is no room in this type of question and answer to greet the arrival of the unexpected. There is no room to

understand what question an unexpected response may have been an answer to (Gadamer, 1998, p. 370). There is no room to converse, no room to play.

The lack of conversation in this type of questioning is closely associated with issues of teacher authority, central authority, and with teacher-centered classrooms and practices. In the middle of the paragraph cited above, in the space of its ellipsis, belong these words: "And these questions are generally not the pupils' questions" (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 7). There can be no conversation when the children's ability to participate in discourse is reduced to being questioned, to being subjected to a "gentle inquisition" (Eeds & Wells, 1989, p. 14). There can be no conversation when the teacher, as a matter of routine, outtalks all the other members of the class.

Teacher talk dominates most classrooms because discussions tend to fall into an initiate-respond-evaluate pattern [Mehan, 1979]. The teacher asks a question, and students bid for the right to answer it by raising hands; the selected student responds by answering the question; and the teacher then makes some evaluative comment about the answer. ["Yes." "Uh-huh." "Very good."] Then the cycle begins again--with the teacher always taking two out of the three turns. (Newkirk, 1992, p. 4)

Concerned and thoughtful educators have responded to the revealment of their profession's domination of classroom discourse and meaning with an effort to do better by their students. Of course students have something to say. Of course they should be heard. Of course they need to be given a "voice" in the classroom. The silenced ones should be heard.

Reader Response came forth in the midst of the movement away from teacher-centered classrooms and product based learning and toward child-centered

pedagogy, and process based learning. These are its relations, movements of its same generation. These are the traditions that sound beneath the surface, the related traditions that usher forth in the opening of Reader Response, in the opening of listening. Reader Response and its relations were built on land cleared of the trouble of old ways, old sources of meaning, and were offered as a shining example of a better way. Their "original spirit...was extremely benevolent...[part of] a noble assertion of emancipation from a dogmatic, coercive authority and a passionate assumption of [individual] responsibility" (Levin, 1989, p. 11).

I understand that there are still classrooms where children are silenced, still schools where hegemonic traditions of authority are strictly maintained, and I try to imagine the relief it must be for some children and teachers to be in a classroom where talk by children is permitted, even encouraged. I understand that the movement away from text dominated and authoritative classrooms is not complete, that the movement toward meaningful dialogic environments is on-going. I have come to understand too, that even within current talk of listening and conversations among children, the implications and possibilities of this movement and the tradition of which it is a part, are continuing to work themselves out. I have come to understand that the implications of this movement go beyond the circumstances and intentions of its origination.

### **Talk of Listening**

As recently as 1992 Thomas Newkirk had a book published that strives to take up the limitations of I-R-E based classroom "discussions." "*Listening In* challenges the narrow, text-dominated, question-controlled, 'on task' model that passes for discussion in most...classrooms" (book cover). As part of the research for *Listening In* Newkirk has done what I have done. He has recorded conversations of young children talking about texts, and he has explored their conversations. He has been a listener in a classroom of young readers.

Newkirk's questioning and mine share common roots. My discomfort as a new teacher with "discussions" scripted in a teacher's manual made sense as I read of the history of classroom talk that has often been dominated by the central authority of the teacher-interpreter. Newkirk found a classroom that offered and lived a different way of reading, a teacher that lived a different way of being with her students. As Newkirk says of the talk in his research class and of Patricia McLure, his research collaborator and the teacher in the class he used as a research site, "Pat McLure's classroom doesn't fit this [teacher dominated I-R-E] pattern....I was struck by her silences and by her capacity to listen. I wanted to know more this talk, these silences" (pp. 4-5). I followed Newkirk into this book, excited by our common concerns, anticipating the possibilities the book might hold, and soothed at times by the words he offered, the expertise he represented. My anticipation soon gave way to disappointment though, disappointment in what the book did not offer.

Newkirk acknowledged that he was as "impressed by the ways [the] children seemed to control the talk" (p. 4) as much as he was by the teacher's ability to listen. And control the talk they did, to the extent that I wondered if anything had really changed. The participants in the discussions had taken on new roles, but the relationships didn't seem to be different.

As I read Newkirk's book I could not escape the thought that Newkirk, and many others of us, have not gotten beyond our joy in hearing the sounds of children's voices, the novelty of them, to delve into their content, to hear *what* they say, not just *that* they say.

### **What They Say**

Newkirk found as he listened in on the Book Sharing Sessions in the Grade One and Two classroom that the children had many opportunities to talk and many opportunities to ask questions. The children regularly shared with a small group of their classmates and their teacher the books they had been reading . In their sharing, each student in turn announced the title and author of his book, gave a brief summary of the book, read part of it, and then asked for comments and questions from the other students, "calling on members of the group who raise their hands" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 19). Newkirk noted that "each turn takes a predictable, almost ritualistic form" (p. 19) and he noted as well the ritualistic questions and comments the students put forth during the Book Sharing Sessions.

What's your favorite page? Why is that your favorite page?  
What's your least favorite page? Why is that your least favorite page?  
You're a good reader.  
Why did you decide to choose that book?  
(Newkirk, 1992, p. 38)

These are questions the students came to expect, questions they could list in advance of a reading, questions of which Newkirk said, even as the children asked them, "it was clear they were not particularly interested in the answer" (p.38).

How could they be interested in the answer? The questions and the attempts to answer them were not based on a consideration of something the children found questionable. There was no need to ask the questions except to re-create the institution the book sharing had become. The questions may have been meaningful and necessary at some point. They may have arisen in a situation of wonder or surprise or confusion or provocation. They may once have been responsive, but at the point of which Newkirk tells, it was as if they had been ritualized to the point of being reified. They were frozen and fossilized, not of that time, and not of that situation. They existed independently of the topic, the book, and the students. They were out of relation. The original dialectic, the necessary tensions between question(er) and answer(er) were lost. There was no give and take, no back and forth. There was no play between. There was nothing new, nothing different being created in the asking of these questions, or in a consideration of their answers. They did nothing to make a difference in the reading of the text or the conduct of the discussion. The presence of any one child could not bring about a

different understanding. The questions and the sharing could continue along of their own volition.

These ritualized questions of the children's are no more authentic than the pre-scripted questions of the I-R-E pattern. They do not arise from a genuine interest, nor do they promote inquiry and interpretation. The I-R-E questions asked by a teacher come from a predetermined perspective and expect a certain kind of answer. The formula questions asked by the children come from a predetermined pattern as well and are asked in expectation of a certain type of answer. The answer has to follow, to replicate the pattern. Newkirk relays an example of one student working to ensure that the pattern was kept intact, and working to ensure that he got the number of questioning turns he felt entitled to.

*Billy:* I have...why...I have a few [a number of questions to ask].

Why...What's your favorite page?

*Jimmy:* Well, there aren't much picture pages in this but it's this one. I like it. The picture--

*Billy (interrupting):* And why is that your favorite page?

*Jimmy:* Well, one reason--

*Billy (interrupting):* And you're a good reader.

*Jimmy:* Well, I do like...well, I don't like...well, I just like it because they're pictures in the story.

*Billy:* And you're a good reader.

Jimmy was probably on his way to answering the first question, but Billy cut him off because, had Jimmy added the explanation, Billy's questioning pattern would have been disrupted....Pat commented on the exchange, "It's hard to listen when you've got a 'few' comments and questions on your mind." (Newkirk, 1992, p. 40)

The teacher's asking of an I-R-E question may have only superficially listened for a correct or incorrect answer, but the children in the Book Sharing Sessions are only

listening superficially as well--listening for their next turn to be the speaker. It *is* hard to listen when you are only thinking about what you want to say, when you need to make sure your questioning pattern is not disrupted, that there is no divergence from the script the discussion is to follow. That is why the I-R-E sequence was so lacking. It offered no silence, no setting aside of what one intended to say. As Newkirk says of the children's questions, "It is...a game of control, of holding the floor" (p.41).

McLure and Newkirk both recognize the type of discussion that is being conducted as one that does not support listening, but still they seem to value it. McLure says, "I think that it is important that everybody in the group--anybody--can get into the discussion on a given day.... You have a few of these predictable comments and someone will kind of repeat them and then all of a sudden they will be more comfortable telling their own story" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 39). And despite Newkirk's acknowledgment of the ritual nature of the questions, and of the desire of the children to simply be speakers, to control the talk, he celebrates these language patterns as examples of the children's oral culture being welcomed in the classroom. He says, "At times like these, she [the teacher] is allowing the oral culture of her students into the classroom conversation" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 8). "The child culture brings in habits of responding to texts that are not adultlike....The range of response is richer [because of it]" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 9).

Is this welcoming of and advocating for talk that does not listen an example of the "crushing deafness produced by an assertive culture intoxicated by...its own 'saying' and increasingly incapable of paying heed" (Fiumara, 1990, p.8)? Is it another example of

privileging expression, of the belief that any noise is better than nothing, any noise is better than silence? After a period of silent reading in the classroom Newkirk says, "In this class talk is the sea upon which everything else floats. Peaceful as these ten minutes are, I'm almost relieved when conversation [talk] returns" (p. 26).

Newkirk says that the children "see the opportunity to ask a sanctioned question as a way of participating in the group" (p. 39). The teacher agrees. She says that "the formula questions are like a free pass that allows anyone to enter a conversation" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 39). She says that they are like the conversation starters adults use at a cocktail party, like "How are you?" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 39).

In these words the question of what it means to participate in a conversation arises again. These words seem to point to the belief that as long as someone gets a turn to talk, as long as they say something (anything) they are conversing. Any one response could not make a difference when only one response would do, and now, in this type of speaking, any one response can not make a difference because any response will do.

Does this understanding of participation mean just being there alongside someone else? Does it suggest that it is good enough to be in the same place as others, with everyone minding their own business, alone together as we often are in that prevalent icon of our consumer culture, the shopping mall? Is this the American popculture version of democracy--everyone gets a say, everyone gets to share--and its accompanying corporate capitalist economy--we are all consumers--intoned in what is often accepted as listening, as conversation, in our classrooms? Are our stories then just coinage from the

particular and exotic locale we inhabit? Are they something we can freely exchange for other coins from other equally exotic traders, unique trinkets we can collect and display, but that we understand as only tokens from somewhere else, something that is of no real value in our own world? Does an exchange of stories then count as participating in a conversation? Is a conversation to be a marketplace for exotic goods? That is *your* story and that is *your* story and this is *mine*.

### **Exchanging Stories**

Jimmy begins to read his book, an informational book on how chickens and other birds lay eggs and raise their young. In the questions and comments session, the class trade stories about experiences with birds and eggs. Sandy, always ready with a story, begins. "Once when I went to my friend's house, outside we found a bird's egg in two pieces. I was wondering what bird it was but we didn't have a dictionary so I couldn't find out."

Billy, who has something of a reputation for embellishing, follows. "I used to have a robin's nest right on my window. And once a chick fell out and I took two pictures, once when it fell out and once when it was grown."

Billy triggers Rob. "Once we had a bird's nest in the gutter. And when it rained we would have to clog the gutter."

This idea of protecting nests reminds Adam of an experience. "Once when I went for a walk I found a nest with eggs and my dad wouldn't let me take them in. I had to hold back my younger brother."

Adam's story reminds Jennifer of a time when she and her older sister found a pheasant's feather. Susan then tells of a time when her dog chased a mother pheasant and her baby.

When the stories are exhausted, Pat asks Jimmy to write the name of the book on a list of books about chickens that the class is compiling. (Newkirk, 1992, pp. 29-30)

This example from Listening In of children commenting on a book is breathless in its enunciation of self-assertive vocalizations that begin and end in the same place. It seems to be filled with language that bears arms and competes. One story triggers another and another and another. The students fire stories off the tops of their heads as fast as they can say them. They talk themselves out without return, without stopping to consider what their stories may be telling of, what they may be responding to. The children rush from one story to another without pausing to abide by anything, without pausing to dwell in a part of the world the text may open, without pausing to cultivate their understandings. Their language is not the language of supposition and wonder. It is not the language of questioning and exploration. From what we read of the children's talk, it does not seem to be "exploratory" (Barnes, 1976). It is not "marked by frequent hesitations, rephrasing, false starts and changes of direction" (Barnes, 1976, p. 28), the signs of it trying to venture forth. Their talk does not seem to support listening. It seems to be marked more by a search for variety and novelty than by the listening that could help it find its way, that could help it make a difference.

The problems with the children's conversations, the unworldliness of them is not just a problem of *theirs*. It is a problem of *ours* too. It says something to us, something about us and the way we live in the world. Hannah Arendt (1968) would remind us that we ourselves have helped create these unworldly children. She says that in assuming "that there exist a child's world and a society formed among children that are autonomous and must insofar as possible be left to them to govern" (p. 181) we have broken off the

"real and normal relations between children and adults" (p. 181), that we have in effect denied children their relations and the world in which "people of all ages are always simultaneously together" (p. 181), the world in which the new instance of the child is read into the traditions lived out by the elders, the world in which the present instance of the child may be heard as the intertwining of past and future. Perhaps we have denied the children the very world in which they might venture forth.

Newkirk writes with admiration of McLure's silence during her student's story exchanges. He admires her hesitance to speak, her hesitance to be a questioner, and her ability to let the children's speaking carry on without interruption. Arendt (1968) might suggest that he admires her ability to stand before the children, out of contact with them, observing their self-government. Newkirk mentions several times that during the Book Sharing Sessions the children see their teacher more as a recorder than a participant. He credits her listening ability to her diligent note-taking.

In addition to providing a splendid record of the talk in the groups, the very act of making these notations focuses Pat on what the children say. This stenographic task also limits her own talking in the groups because of the difficulty in talking and taking notes at the same time. (Newkirk, 1992, p. 139)

Understanding listening as an event of understanding asks us to go beyond this passive tradition of listening, the parroting attitude that insists we can repeat what has been said to us. It requires us to understand listening and silence more expansively, more actively, as something that requires effort, as something that we do. We *give* our silence. We *keep* our silence. It is a movement between. Silence *is* a way of participating in a

conversation. Understanding listening asks us too to reconsider the tone of our participation in the language and life of our classroom, the authority with which we participate.

Newkirk admires McLure's resistance to falling into "the swamp of initiate-respond-evaluate" (Newkirk, 1992, p. 54) but he says too that there are times when she can "be the teacher" (p. 130). Again, it seems as if little has changed. What it means to be "the teacher" is very much the authoritative tradition of teaching that sparked the movement that led us to this place. To "be the teacher" still means to be "dominant, didactic" (Newkirk, p. 134) and to intervene, but now to do it less often than before, to allow the children to govern themselves as much as possible and to intervene only when it is necessary to "prevent the worst from happening" (Arendt, 1968, p. 181).

The attempt not to be the dominant voice, *the* authority, is admirable, but attempting "not to be" leaves a void if it is only a pulling back. There is a need "to be" as well. Heidegger (1996) tells us that not talking is not the same as keeping silent.

To keep silent does not mean to be dumb. On the contrary, if a person is dumb, he still has the tendency to "speak." Such a person has not only not proved that he can keep silent, he even lacks the possibility of proving this. And the person who is by nature accustomed to speak little is no better able to show that he can be silent and keep silent. He who never says anything is also unable to keep silent at any given moment. (p. 154)

Perhaps this is again what Elizabeth and Leah were telling me when they spoke of the importance of "being personable." You cannot withhold yourself if you want to foster the birth of new understanding. You cannot stand at the edges not saying

anything, just looking in. You cannot deny the game the thread of tradition your playing carries any more than you can deny it the young, the fecund instance that might sound the tradition in a new way. You must allow yourself to be brought forward into the game. You must allow yourself to be brought forward to meet something in such a way that its message may be heard as a sounding of the sonorous field which hears us too. Perhaps this is another lesson to be learned from Paul as well. The kind of listening I brought to the situation with Paul was not only noisy, it was a form of withdrawal. I hid behind that listening so I could not be heard. I held it up as a shield to protect myself from the vulnerability of self-revelment and perhaps from the rigors of the game. By withholding myself from the situation it could not include me. It could not play me. I held onto myself, my separate position, too tightly to be a player. I could only be an actor creating an impression of listening until the separateness I held onto was pulled away from me, until I was both taken aback and drawn forward in surprise and confusion.

It is a mistake to think we can take refuge in not talking. In the openness of authentic silence we are most vulnerable. We are at risk. We bring ourselves and our prejudices and the traditions to which we belong forward into the openness so they may be heard, so they may be tested and returned differently, so they may be regenerated. It is a mistake to think that we can avoid the pitfalls and difficulties of hearing questions and conducting conversations by only withholding ourselves from speaking. There is as much a necessity to speak in a conversation as there is to be silent, but it is necessary to speak in a way that listens. Sometimes our silence is in our speaking. "You're a twinkler?" It is

a mistake to think that we can take refuge from the difficulties of being the teacher, the elder in the traditions of the world, to think that we can fix those difficulties by de-centering ourselves to the point that we no longer participate in our classrooms, but just record what goes on there. It is a mistake too to think that we are inviting the marginalized, the silenced, the young, into the center by inviting them to speak. They must be heard. It is in the to and fro movement of play, in the playful participation of our listening that we may de-center ourselves and open the game to the others with whom we live.

Pulling back without coming forward differently is an abandonment of the role of the teacher, and an abandonment of the difficulty of teaching well. It abandons the children, leaving them to find themselves only in themselves. Arendt (1968) cautions us that in the void created by the withdrawal of adult authority a stronger and more tyrannical authority of child culture may emerge, one in which one child is even less likely to be heard, one in which it is even more difficult for one child to make a difference. Because we want to hear what children have to say does not mean our only choice is to abandon them to their own voices. Because we do not want to ask dead-end questions does not mean we must pass the custodianship of the I-R-E question into the children's hands. Because we do not want to carelessly assert ourselves into the center of everything does not mean we can not enter anything.

It is a mistake to think that we can simply exchange one story of ourselves for another, to think that we can leave behind the difficulties of a teacher-centered classroom

in favor of a new version of ourselves that does not contain ghostly traces of our ancestors, and that does not contain new difficulties of its own. The stories of ourselves as teachers are handed over to us as a living tradition. Attractive or not they are our inheritance. We have an obligation to the world to work out the truth of what we are and what we have been. We can only live well in the world, can only decide how to proceed here and now, and how we might shape what we will pass on, if we understand how we have arrived. We must take up the difficult instances of our experiences with child-centeredness, not just to exchange our story again, not just to replace it with something else, but to dwell deeply in it, to gather around it (complete with its Romantic image of the self-expressive and unworldly child), and return in our understanding to the world from which it has arisen. We must take up the stories of ourselves and enter into a conversation with the traditions of which they tell. We must make both the limitations and the possibilities of our traditions audible by listening to them. We must sound them and find in them the possibilities, the openness, that allows us to go on. We must receive the stories of ourselves as "a toss from an eternal partner," one that may be thrown to us again and again, one that we may catch with open hands and open ears, one that we must hold lightly and with care before we lift our arms to release it again into the world.

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