

4: Listening and Writing with the Third Ear

Listening is input for writers. It is how we gather our raw material. Not just listening with our physical ears, but listening to writers when we read, listening to media when we are bombarded by it, listening to colleagues and friends, listening to our own gut. It means listening with all our intelligences, all our ways of knowing, with our “third ear.”¹ And, to find our authentic voice, it especially means listening to our core.

The psychologist has to learn how one mind speaks to another beyond words and in silence. He must learn to listen ‘with the third ear.’ [Reik, p. 144]

This is equally true for writers. Writing with voice speaks clearly to another mind “beyond words and in silence.”

Author and actor Anna Deveare Smith performs listening. She makes it visible. In her *1992: Twilight Los Angeles*, she interviewed people within a few degrees of the Rodney King trial; Rodney’s aunt, a truckdriver witness, lawyers, as well as leaders of affected communities. Then she took verbatim excerpts from these interviews,

¹ Theodor Reik’s *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948) takes this phrase from Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part VIII, p. 246.

studied the voice and mannerisms of the speaker, and “performed” the interviews for us. Remember the picture in our science books from elementary school that showed the scientist’s conception of how a fly sees out of each of those ocular cells? I felt like an auidial cell in the collective audience of Smith’s ears. I saw, heard, experienced a piece of how she listens. She shows how I/we don’t listen carefully enough to what we say.

A good piece of writing will likewise invite us into the author’s inner mind, listening to her voice in her writing, experiencing through her.

When we are writing, we often become keenly aware of information, serendipities that relate to what we are writing about. Much like when you are shopping for a new home, you’ll go to a friend’s house and suddenly notice the layout of the kitchen, or the baseboards or cornices. Just so, our attention gets focused on what our mind is ‘hunting.’

We can also train ourselves to listen for details that will be helpful in future writing. Bag material as we go along in everyday life, noticing the fullness and richness of material.

I had the privilege of meeting young adult author Robert Cormier (*I Am the Cheese*, *The Chocolate War*). Robert was talking away, telling me how he writes, and he said

If it’s an action scene I’ll try to get that forward movement and that thrust. Once I have that locked in, then I go back and layer in the setting, just the action between two people sitting there talking. Like me talking with my hands a lot and you not. I might write that in.

Here, he gesticulated a lot, and then held his arms quietly to his body to show me what he was taking in. I became instantly aware that Robert was acutely listening,

kinetically, even while he was engaged in speaking. He was taking in details, watching, recording. I was indeed keeping myself very still, to listen as completely as I could. He was gathering material. Robert was multiplexing tasks, “taping” even while outputting.

I have heard that for writers, there are no bad experiences, just more raw material.

How we listen is partially shaped by our inherited voice, how our ear was trained. It is also partially shaped by our own factory modeling. Like cars, each of us is shipped out with special features right from the factory, our own unique packaging that sets us apart as individuals even within our families. One might be especially talented at empathy while another of us is musical, carrying a tune even before we could speak.

Seven intelligences

Educator and researcher Howard Gardner purposes that human beings have several intelligences. Gardner describes seven intelligences, allowing that there are probably more. They are:

- linguistic intelligence
- logical-mathematical intelligence
- interpersonal intelligence
- intrapersonal intelligence
- spatial intelligence
- musical intelligence
- kinesthetic intelligence

Author Gerald Grow applied these to technical writing. Let's look at some of the ways our authors use these "intelligences" as modes of listening and writing.

Linguistic intelligence

A love of words and language can be heard in many of our interviews. Writers often have a fondness for words, collecting them, and being aware of the shades of meaning. Yoko calls it a "special play" with words. Carolivia admits she "loves all the words, all the adjectives." Joan recalls searching for just the right word in an elementary school essay.

I was relieved to find this love of words in our authors. I can lose myself in any bookstore just browsing. Sometimes I sit with a thesaurus and a dictionary and play, opening one at random and reading, then finding a word I like the sound of and excavating its meanings. I like that words have at least two shades: what it really means void of political dressings (denotation), and what it has come to mean in a particular culture (connotation). The most beautiful sounding word I've collected so far is "ferracarreal" (sp?) (FAIR-ah-ka-RE-ahl), Spanish for train. My ugliest one, avergle, (ah-VER-gla), French for "blind."

Linguistic intelligence is similar to musical intelligence, but linguistic intelligence deals with fine tuning of meaning and sensitivity to words, alone and in strings of meaning, in narrative, while musical narratice is concerned with fine tuning of sound along with meaning. The poet searches for both. Our poet Phyllis has rich linguistics intelligence:

Phyllis: I have cared about words for as long as I can remember. My
mother fastened and fastified that I was. My mother used to say to

mother fostered and fortified that love. My mother read poems to me before I could read them to myself, and she put the right books into my hands while I was still very young. . . . by the time I was twelve, I had played with every metrical convention and rhyme stanzaic form described by whoever wrote the narrow red book I trusted. . . .

I love figuring out which words sound truest and best, I love how they fit into a line or a sentence or a phrase. I love their weight, I love all they assemble of thought or feeling. What they remind me of apart from what I have chosen to say. I love how they're spelled and where they came from. I love working out in lines their music, which is for me very securely based in the old-fashioned mythics I learned before I grew up. I love fitting everything together and I love finding out what the poem says when at last it feels right.

Phyllis Hoge Thompson starts with words at the top of her page, like a painter mixing her paints, before she starts a poem, *“a rainbow of words across the top of the page, just--I have no idea what their relationship is, just words that I feel like bringing forward at that moment, and they just kind of scatter across the top of the page and down the side margin.*

They ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~sea~~ ^{sea} two fishermen
 In a ~~small~~ ^{small} ~~boat~~ ^{boat} under a low overcast sky,
 Two fishermen in a small motor boat
 work their nets ~~under a low overcast sky,~~
 The ~~ocean~~ ^{swells} ~~rolls~~ ^{rolls} under them
 down the slopes of
 the swells
 Kingfishers
 Good Rain obscures the horizon
 Two fishermen in a small motor boat
~~are still~~ ^{are still} ~~work~~ ^{work} their nets ~~on~~ ^{on} the ~~rolling~~ ^{rising} slopes of swells
 Beneath the ~~overcast~~ ^{overcast} ~~sky~~ ^{darkness}
~~the~~ ^{the} ~~ocean~~ ^{ocean} ~~rolls~~ ^{rolls} ~~under~~ ^{under} them
 But ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~rain~~ ^{rain} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~falling~~ ^{falling} ~~on~~ ^{on} them
 They ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~struggling~~ ^{struggling} ~~with~~ ^{with} the catch in
 their hands ~~and~~ ^{and} the ~~power~~ ^{power} of
 every motion
 Keep them ~~near~~ ^{near} ~~of~~ ^{of} the ~~surface~~ ^{surface}
 which ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~full~~ ^{full} over their heads,
~~spinning~~ ^{spinning} their ~~big~~ ^{big} ~~oil~~ ^{oil} ~~skins~~ ^{skins}, they whistle.
 Through ~~that~~ ^{that} ~~ring~~ ^{ring} is certain
 mesh
 huddle
 bustle
 quiet
 bunching
 whistling
 full

And here, Phyllis's finished poem:

FRIENDS²

for Janet Fredericks

Beneath a muscular dusk
And a storm coming on fast,
Two fishermen, rocked in a bucking craft,
Still work their nets on the plunging slopes of the sea swells.
They shout to each other
As they struggle dragging the catch in,
All steel and dull silver,
Rain drowns the rounding horizon,
And now the bruised clouds crack open
In driving gusts, spattering their oilskins.
The men keep an eye on the weather but go on hauling,
Hunched over the ropes or standing braced
And balanced in the baffling wind.
Their trust rests in the skill of their hands
And the power of their arms spread wide, or strained, pulling.
Wet-faced, they grin.
This is not the first time they've tackled the Atlantic
Dangerously late.
And not the last.
Their trust in each other is steadfast
And commonplace
Under the skies of driving rain,
Out on the cold salt water.

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Linguistic intelligence can start very young, as it did with Phyllis, and here, with Joan:

Joan: I was probably only six or seven. I was searching for a word and I used a thesaurus to find a word with the proper beat, the proper rhythm, so that it would work in that poem. . . . I really loved the power of words. I really, really felt a sense of fulfillment in being able to share this.

As noted in the chapter *Inherited Voice*, growing up with more than one language or dialect “tunes” the linguistic ear for writing. It can provide both sensitivity to language and extra challenges.

Carolivia: The tension between the Black dialect and the standard English became a very intriguing connection for me, which comes out in my writing. If you saw my book *Asenath* that Nappy Hair is taken from, this is the only part in African-American dialect, in the whole book. It is a book of Standard English, but this crucial central moment *has* to go into the African-American speech patterns.

Yoko: It is very difficult for me, because I am an English as a second language person. I often use Japanese expressions. Still, I can't translate it directly into charming English. So what do I do? I frustrate. But I do the best of it. I think and walk a little bit, I

depend on Japanese-to-English and English-to-Japanese dictionaries. Then if I could not find any words, I just vacuum the whole house. Maybe you can jog, but in my case, I clean the whole house, vacuum very frantically, and then I calm myself down. And I often do the Tea Ceremony, knowing the way of the Tea.

Logical-mathematical intelligence

Logical-mathematical intelligence helps us with structure—those steel girders I mentioned in the Preface. It helps us with building the blue-print of our pieces, and seeing the x-ray of the structure. Also we can use this intelligence when a piece doesn't "hang together." Some bridge needs to be built.

Caroline Bird's research is well ordered and thorough, a good logical path through.

Carolivia: I have the capacity to set up a frame, a voice frame, or a concept, a way of looking at a thing.

Jill: My main writing voice is this logical, mathematical rational mechanical voice, which the technical writing has trained. Allowing any other range of voice now has been difficult until I found a way to use that technical voice in service of the others. And so I have given that persona the task of organization and craft, dealing with the authoring tools and technology and indexing.

Interpersonal intelligence

This is your instincts and ability to connect to your audience. This aspect of writing intelligence is the relational aspect we discussed in the chapter *Describing Voice*. When I first met her, I asked Phyllis why she wrote: “For the audience,” she said. Joan writes because “I believe in the story. Characters are so real to me that it’s almost as if they must live.” This intelligence is the “connecting” part of “writing to connect.” Stephen King in his book *On Writing* talks about writing as a telepathic communication that is delivered in a time warp; he creates pictures he wants his readers to see. They will not receive them until months or years after he has written them. But he holds his audience present when he writes.

Regina’s books are an ongoing conversation with her readers:

Regina: It is like a running conversation. I sit down at the computer and, I have a sense of who my readers are . . . I got comfortable, talking to women my age. “My age” is now anybody who is too old for work-study and too young for Medicare: 18 to 60. In our most intimate lives, we have incredibly similar experiences. We get our buttons pushed because the culture has planted those buttons, so they know how to push them.

Intrapersonal intelligence

This is listening to your own voice centers; our inner dialogue is deciphered with this intelligence.

Two images represent the intrapersonal for me. One is the folk art of a bird, its head bent in a loop with its beak upon its own breast. The other is a picture I saw of a pregnant woman with a stethoscope, listening to the life in her womb. Intrapersonal is what Phyllis Hoge Thompson terms “interior listening.”

Carolivia: My main writing voice is one that deals with human voices: it weaves them together, rather than a single voice. I’m recovering from multiple-personality disorder, so this is not just something I’m making up as a technique, but as a way my mind has worked for much of my life, and if you look at many of my writings, you’ll find that there is a single voice. . . . a strong major personality that pulls the other ones together. The others are in conversation with each other, and the major voice . . . looks over, hears them, and then speaks them out, almost into a space, in a certain way.

Megan: . . .an autobiographic journal-writing segment in which I separated out and identified multiple internal personalities that I named and made very specific and real in my life. I orchestrated dialogue between them, I used them. And figured out just what all the hum had been in my mind for years. Then, . . . I used those characters to describe a process to get back in touch with my creative process. That was the book about families and alcoholism and I was in the book this time, because I belonged in the book, from the very first, and so the whole thing kind of went full circle.

Without intrapersonal listening, we can erase ourselves from the book, from our writing.

Musical intelligence

Musical intelligence orchestrates cadence, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and harmony, playing with the sound of words. It informs sentence structure and images, and the inner harmony of thoughts and structures. This quality is what is typically called “having a good ear.” Read your writing into a tape recorder and listen to it, or read it aloud to a friend. Poet Donald Hall dictates most of his poetry first, then reads it on paper. When we read writing aloud and hear with the physical ear, we often find new understandings, or hear miscommunications that the work carries because this technique invokes the ‘signwave’ auditorially.

Phyllis describes her writing voice as musical. As a child, she won a contest writing about music, though she knew very little about music itself. Her childhood piece was musical, and reflected the music of the concert in her words, rather than theory and critique of the concert.

Phyllis: I could write poetry about music, but I didn't know anything at all about music. It really was not an exercise in music appreciation, although I know that the judges thought it was. Because my piece was musical. What I wrote was musical. It was a scrapbook about the five concerts, and it contained a poem and I probably drew a picture, but it had nothing to do with music.

And we use musical intelligence to listen to pacing:

Joan: . . . if you get to a sluggish point, you've lost the audience. You want to keep a pace. It's similar to a ballgame or a dance.

Spatial intelligence

The ability to visualize or recall detail is helpful for creating three-dimensional writing, transmitting images to the reader. Some writers layer in these spatial/visual details after plot and structure, while others of us may begin with the images. Carolivia Herron's writing (and mine) often starts with inner pictures she then translates into words.

Carolivia: I am so abstract, mythical and poetic in my writing . . . I almost need a plot, or a hint of a plot, or something to pull it into the world people see. . . . That's why I talk about the visions I can see. To me, it is like this table, but since other people can't see it, it is hard to convey what I've imagined. With the power of the computer, I can convey it, along with the words.

Jill: I think in pictures . . . I "see" or sense an image on an inner screen. . . . and then put words to them.

Kinesthetic intelligence

Feeling your writing in your gut, or your head. We write from different voice centers, different parts of our body for different voices and purposes. Sensing where we are

writing from is useful in keeping focus in a piece. This writing intelligence can also be used in developing stories and characters.

While Rachel Vail walks around in her characters, exploring their physicality before she commits them to paper:

Rachel: I try to find who my character is physically. . . . I try to figure out where the character holds her weight, how the character sits, where she clenches when she's tense, what she does with her fingers when she's nervous, how she stands when she feels confident, and how she stands when she's feeling awkward. I try to get inside the physicality of my character.

Inter/Intra community intelligence

Most of our women authors talk about their communities. They are sensitive to how their writing informs, creates, furthers the communities they contribute to and live in. This is different from looking at the interpersonal aspects, which is a small group. And this attending to community fits with current research on women's attention to relationships. Let's listen:

Carolivia: I think you would see the interest in creating an oral story my group, my group being many particular groups: I am African-American, I am Jewish, and I am of course a woman, I am a US American, and all those sorts of things come together in my wanting to tell the story about epic.

I think the 21st century needs that epic--we need to open up the next century with the concept that it is possible not to lose artistic value even when you have many voices.

Louise:

I began to realize that what I had hoped, which is that it would help people, was happening. Especially as the book came out and people--a lot of people who had read it--wrote me. I felt connected with the outer world and other survivors of childhood abuse for the first time. That experience for me was also really, really powerful.

Yoko:

I was not going to be a writer, I was going to be a mother, which is very important: well-balance the kids to the society. Not everyone can be a mother, you know. I was going to be a super mother like my own mother. But somehow I find of fell into this occupation, and it is good. I go around to schools and tell the children “wake up and be humble.”

Jill:

The excitement of, and the connection to writing being a way of giving voice to community, because my dad was editor of a small-town newspaper. Writing was always a way of connecting to others in a way that was exciting, and affirming to the other people as well. Giving them more voice. More visibility.

Writer as Leader

Howard Gardner's recent book on leadership³ defines a leader as someone who listens to her community and can give voice to its story in such a way that others are inspired by her voice and want to follow. A voiceful writer, by this definition, is leader of her readership.



A leader is an individual who creates a story that significantly affects the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of a significant number of persons who then become followers. Since followers invariably know many stories, a leader can only be effective if his or her story is powerful and if it can compete successfully for influence with already prevalent stories. The most powerful stories turn out to be about identity: stories that help individuals discover who they are, where they are coming from, where they are headed. A crucial element in the effectiveness of a story hinges on whether the leader's own actions and way of life embody and reinforce the themes of this story.³

Gardner further defines direct and indirect leaders:

Some . . . leaders provide indirect leadership through the powerful symbolic products that they create. We think of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Henry (Cardinal) Newman, and John Dewey in this vein. Other leaders provide direct leadership through the stories that they communicate to students, Faculty, and other constituents.

This reminds me of the theory that we talked about in chapter one: the most honorable profession is teacher, so that you may have students (direct leadership).

³ Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Barring this, then write a book so that you may have students, but at a distance (indirect leadership). Yoko's mothering of her family was direct leadership, and writing her books for her is helping to "balance the children to the culture," indirect leadership.

Carolivia refers to this concept also, when she discusses praise song. The praise singer, with little or no direct leadership, influences listeners through indirect leadership:

Carolivia: the context of the praise singer, in the African communities--
 what do you actually do to keep the kings and the nobles in line?
 If people are being praised, and to make sure [they stay in line],
 "You wouldn't do such-and-such, would you? Because you are
 so wonderful! Therefore you would not hurt the this one and the
 that one and the other." It is a way of controlling when there isn't
 any real power to control but there is verbal power and cultural
 power to help make the people who are high and praiseworthy
 be praiseworthy, be heroic, and of course that's one of the things
 I'm after.

Listening to ourselves

How we hear our own voice is usually quite different from how others hear us.

Our physical voice sounds differently to ourselves on a tape recorder, because we are hearing our voice external to us, listening the same way we listen to others. When we hear our own physical voice as we are using it, we have all the internal sonic

feedback and vibrations from our bones and cavities, which changes the sound. We are receiving the sound waves inside out.

Similarly, our writing voice sounds differently to us. We may take for granted our natural intelligences, since they come easily to us. Given that they are second nature to us, and observations and information gained from these intelligences seem almost obvious to us, it is easy to think they are obvious to all others. Not so, of course. Perhaps it is all the internal dialogue causing audial feedback which can help to distort an author's perception of her writing voice as well.

Many of our authors speak about having to learn to value their inner dialogue, what comes naturally for them in writing. Since the natural voice runs in our heads all the time, we can easily think that others have the same perceptions. By honoring our process and listening to what our writing says easily, we can begin to know our own writing voice.

Megan: When I started writing, [fiction] was not what started to come out. And I just tried and tried and tried and tried to make that come out. It was a long time before I got out of my way and realized this flows [gestures to the right], and this doesn't [gestures to the left]. And I didn't know what this [gestures to the right], what I did, was called. I knew that this [to the left], what I called fiction, didn't. So I finally just decided, "Well, let's listen to what it is that you have to say, what just comes out of you easily. Let's not worry about the name of the genre, and if it's justified. Let's just see what comes out."

I hadn't known what to call it until . . . I discovered creative non-

fiction and then it was like ‘Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, that’s a name that fits for me.’

Use these intelligences as a starting point to pinpoint your voice’s natural talents.

Now you

- Identify your primary and secondary intelligences.
- Which intelligence “leads” with each of your genres?
- Is there an intelligence you have that you could use more fully in your writing? How would you use it? What do you need to take advantage of that talent?
- With a fellow writer, discuss this chapter. Each take 3 minutes, timed. Then reflect back to each other what intelligences you heard the other person use and how. Respond with how these show up in your writing.