

Listening

At six years old I was sitting at my cousin's piano in Brooklyn making believe I was playing a song and singing along with it: "In the gloaming, oh my darling . . ." My cousin, who was nine years older, sat down beside me on the piano stool and screamed to my mother, "Aunt Sylvia, Natalie is tone-deaf. She can't sing!" From then on, I never sang and I rarely listened to music. When I heard the scores from Broadway shows on radio, I just learned the words and never tried to imitate the melody. As I grew older my friends and I played a game, Name That Tune. I would hum something and they would break into peals of laughter, not possibly believing I was actually humming "Younger Than Springtime" from *South Pacific*. This was a way I received attention, though my young heart secretly longed to be Gypsy Rose Lee. After all, I knew all the words to all the songs. But basically, the world of music was not available to me. I was tone-deaf: I had a physical defect, like a missing foot or finger.

Several years ago I took a singing lesson from a Sufi singing master, and he told me there is no such thing as tone-deafness. "Singing is ninety percent listening. You have to learn to listen." If you listen totally, your body fills with the music, so when you open your mouth the music automatically comes out of you. A few weeks after that, I sang in tune with a friend for the first time in my life and thought for sure I had become enlightened. My individual voice disappeared and our two voices became one.

Writing, too, is ninety percent listening. You listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it

Writing Down the Bones

pours out of you. If you can capture that reality around you, your writing needs nothing else. You don't only listen to the person speaking to you across the table, but simultaneously listen to the air, the chair, and the door. And go beyond the door. Take in the sound of the season, the sound of the color coming in through the windows. Listen to the past, future, and present right where you are. Listen with your whole body, not only with your ears, but with your hands, your face, and the back of your neck.

Listening is receptivity. The deeper you can listen, the better you can write. You take in the way things are without judgment, and the next day you can write the truth about the way things are. Jack Kerouac in his list of prose essentials said, "Be submissive to everything. Open. Listening." He also said, "No time for poetry, but exactly what is." If you can capture the way things are, that's all the poetry you'll ever need.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter once told a group of people at the Lama Foundation that when he was in rabbinical school the students were not allowed to take notes. They had to just listen, and when the lecture was done they were expected to know it. The idea was that we can remember everything. We choose and have trained our minds to repress things.

After something is read in class, I often have the students do a "recall": "As close as you can to the exact words of what was said or written, repeat anything that was strong for you. Don't step away and say, 'I liked when she talked about the farmland.'" Give us exact details: 'Standing in the field, I was lonelier than a crow.'" Besides opening and receiving what was said, this kind of deep, nonevaluative listening awakens stories and images inside you. By listening in this way you become a clear mirror to reflect reality, your reality and the reality around you.

Basically, if you want to become a good writer, you need to do three things. Read a lot, listen well and deeply, and write a

Writing Down the Bones

lot. And don't think too much. Just enter the heat of words and sounds and colored sensations and keep your pen moving across the page.

If you read good books, when you write, good books will come out of you. Maybe it's not quite that easy, but if you want to learn something, go to the source. Basho, the great seventeenth-century Haiku master, said, "If you want to know about a tree, go to the tree." If you want to know poetry, read it, listen to it. Let those patterns and forms be imprinted in you. Don't step away from poetry to analyze a poem with your logical mind. Enter poetry with your whole body. Dogen, a great Zen master, said, "If you walk in the mist, you get wet." So just listen, read, and write. Little by little, you will come closer to what you need to say and express it through your voice.

Be patient and don't worry about it. Just sing and write in tune.