

Lowell Speech

Draft 1

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Last spring break, I was on tour with my a cappella group, and on the last night before we returned to Cambridge, we decided to stay up as late as we could and just talk. We went around the circle and each member had to give, in summary fashion, the story of her life. About five minutes into my account, I suddenly heard myself talking. I listened to myself and thought, "Wow, what am I even saying?" and then the crazy part - I couldn't stop. I went on talking, and as I was going, a part of my mind was saying "Come on, Amrita! Can't you hear yourself? You don't mean that! That's not how you want to tell your life story!" And then the painful, yet welcome, eventuality: after a few more minutes of backtracking, redacting, and clarifying, I stuttered to a halt. I was received with smiles, hugs, nods of understanding. But afterwards I was left back with my fragmented thoughts and with the strange realization that I am, in some way, broken, or at the very least, fractured.

Sometimes, when I'm listening to someone, I find myself experiencing the same disconnect. There's a part of me that is listening, accepting, trying to understand and be understanding. And there's a part of me that is panicking, trying to think of the right thing to say, the best way to respond; trying, also, to reconcile what I'm hearing with everything else I know about the speaker, and, in moments of existential angst, everything I think I know about the world.

Last year, one of my best friends from high school told me about some problems she was having with her current boyfriend, whose behavior *she* described as border-line abusive. My voice went into overdrive. I peppered her with questions, passed quick, irrevocable judgment,

told her she had to break up with him immediately. This seemed like a logical response, perhaps even an admirable one. But I know the truth, and the truth was that I was completely freaked out. I didn't know what to do with this piece of information about my friend's life - I didn't know if I should even be trusted with this story. As I was attempting to convince her to get out of that relationship, I was also trying, as hard as I could, to be a good friend, and an effective listener. To take what she had told me and turn it around, catalyzing her confession into a tangible force that would rescue her from disaster.

When I listen, I often feel that push to turn what I'm hearing into something real, to take the fact that someone wants to tell me something and assume they are doing so because they want me to do something with that story. But when I try to respond, I usually find myself back in that first position, of speaking and being aware that what I'm saying is woefully inadequate. I saw her face fall as I kept on talking, heard her trail off, shut down, stop telling me any part of her story. I heard myself. My quasi-commanding tone: a product of my fear. My dismissive, unequivocal pronouncements: a product of my uncertainty. I tried to put the brakes on my train of advice but couldn't. She didn't break up with her boyfriend for another few months, but when she did, *she told me* that it was the right thing for her to do.

I started this speech by talking about two different moments of disconnect - one associated with speaking, and one associated with listening. But perhaps this isn't a distinction I mean to draw. What I'm really worried about, what really scares me, is the fact that listening and speaking - dialogue - is challenging because those two acts are in no way mutually exclusive. As I sat urging my friend to end that awful relationship, I didn't let her speak. My listening was failing her, because perhaps what she needed, more than being told what to do, was to talk. To talk and to hear herself talking and from there, to enter into dialogue with herself.

When I'm the one telling the story, I realize, that's often how I feel. I stumble, I correct myself, I stop and start, I talk in circles. I speak in fragments, hear myself, and revise. I am speaking and listening and speaking again, always. Yet, when I listen, I experience an irresistible urge to pin down what I hear, to analyze, dissect, take every word of someone else's story as an accurate representation of how they feel and who they are. After fixing them in place, I can move into advice mode and turn their physical act of speech into something more. And I forget, or choose to forget, that often, as we speak, we find ourselves thinking, like Prufrock: that is not it at all. That is not what I meant, at all. And it's only when we are accepted in all of our uncertainty and worry, when our listeners don't try to pin us down, that we can even try to piece ourselves together.