

## Learning to Listen and Listening to Learn: The Significance of Listening to Histories of Trauma

Susan Huddleston Edgerton  
*Western Michigan University*

Sharon Todd presents us with a fundamentally disturbing, disruptive and vitally important challenge in asking us to learn more *about* listening...to learn *from* listening without projection of selves, egos, or predispositions onto the Other. And though listening in order to learn, to expand one's self, is a worthy enough endeavor, the responsibility to listen reaches deeper. Todd argues that we have an ethical obligation to listen to and to hear in this way especially those who suffer. Indeed, there is much in the literature about trauma to suggest that the difficulty involved in beginning to understand another's trauma is profound, corroborating *at the very least* Todd's assertions about the difficulty of truly hearing another, and that listening in this way is not simply a "common sense" phenomenon that "decent people do anyway."<sup>1</sup> It is this connection, made explicit in Todd's essay title, between listening and suffering that I wish to explore and elaborate further.

In the effort to honor the imperative to "never forget," the literature from and about Holocaust survivors is substantial. Apparently, victims of trauma need witnesses, and, significantly for education, histories of trauma need reliable means of transmission to the general public and through the generations. But, given these needs, we are faced with a number of extraordinary difficulties. In reviewing the literature about trauma and testimony to it one repeatedly encounters the following assertions: (1) Most people do not wish to hear about another's trauma in any direct sense; (2) There is a tendency for people not to believe a victim's testimony; (3) Trauma victims need witnesses (either direct or from having been listened to); and (4) Trauma victims can re-experience a trauma should they decide to testify and are then not believed. Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, explains why there is so often a recoiling from the messenger of trauma. She writes,

To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature. To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events....It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides....It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing....The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering.<sup>2</sup>

Herman goes on to explain the ways in which perpetrators work to either silence or rewrite history, and how without power or support, even the victims may wish to "forget the past and move on," and hence may punish other victims for not doing so— for not allowing the story to remain buried.

Victims of trauma perpetrated by others are probably already well aware of the possibility for punishment long before they approach the possibility of telling or writing. Agate Nesaule, in her memoir *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile*, was a child witness of brutal rapes of women she knew, executions,

and a victim of near starvation.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, once they were in the United States her family's mantra was, "It wasn't so bad; others had it worse." And because of that sentiment she judged harshly those of her Latvian community who displayed weaknesses, and judged none more harshly than herself. To finally write about it was to finally recognize herself as something other than the child who was "not worth feeding." Though Nesaule's book has won a National Book Award and the praise of many within her own community, there were those who resented her telling. For some her work revealed a shameful secret of victimization. This experience is apparently so common that when she spoke about her book and its writing to an audience of Hmong students who had immigrated to the United States as children, one asked her, "How has your community punished you?"<sup>4</sup> Further punishment came for Nesaule from those close to her who simply could not empathize. Her own ex-husband responded to any talk of her past with the same comment for years: "Oh, you were one of those soldier-got-a-chocolate-bar kids; Oh, boo hoo!" In addition to that she once overheard a colleague remark, "I am so tired of hearing about war-torn childhoods."

Given the commonsense-defying psychological tangle of trauma and witness, how are we to proceed as educators and teacher educators? How do we become good witnesses (that is, listeners!) and provoke others to do the same? To come to a compassionate understanding of events about which no one wishes to speak or to know requires the best translation imaginable. I am thinking of translation in many ways now: translation of traumatic memories embedded in the body to language, translation by witnesses to the event(s), then by witnesses to its narration, and translation to a situation of teaching and learning.

Todd's use of Emmanuel Levinas and Corradi Fiumara to re-position listening and listeners offers a promising approach to the problem of education about history, for one, which so often is or should be education about trauma. In listening to the language of histories of trauma one must go beyond simply "suspending disbelief;" one must approach from a position of ignorance, of un-knowing, and of susceptibility. This command flies in the face of an education that trains our critical and analytic capacities *at the expense of* our hearing capacities. It flies in the face of common scholarly sense. After all, that is, do we not all complain of the very *lack* of critical and analytic capacities in our students? My response to this anticipated complaint is that the phrase "*at the expense of*" is a key to unraveling, or at least bringing to consciousness, this dilemma. Perhaps we might be able to imagine an education that does not train critical and analytic capacities *at the expense of* listening, hearing, and believing capacities, or vice versa. Perhaps the best and most appropriate education is one that *discriminates* between the right time to listen and the right time to speak, and assists us in bringing the two parts of language, listening and speaking, to a higher synthesis.

Todd's work might enable us to see more openings for reframing Herbert Spencer's fundamental curriculum question, "what knowledge is of most worth?," and instead, begin with the question, "what are the fundamental conditions for knowing?"<sup>5</sup> How different a question this is for thinking about "the curriculum" and

all of education! After reading Todd I would like to alter Spencer's question to "what are the fundamental conditions for knowledge that best enable us to care for ourselves, one another, and the non-human environment?" What is the value of kinds of passivity and ignorance, that is, of susceptibility and openness to the inescapably unknowable that is the other, rather than complacency or lack of exposure?

These questions also point toward the necessity of abandoning "hope" for "solutions" and embracing the interminable process of striving toward ethics as a condition for knowing. I worry a bit about the use of notions of "hope" for this project. *Hoping* for significance from an other can impose an agenda on listening and can foreclose the deepest levels of susceptibility.

Early in her essay Todd calls for "conditions for a non-violent relation to the other." Is this possible? Later Todd remarks that, with regard to education that attends to the suffering of others, "education is fundamentally a violent process in its demand that students be moved to the point of such suffering." Is this a contradiction? Are there times or moments for this ethics of listening to be more fully in place than some other times or moments? Should we always listen to others with "participatory consciousness?"<sup>6</sup> Or are there good times, or acceptable times, to tune out? In other words, can we even live without a certain level of violence and, if not, what level is that?

There are, for me, religious overtones in these questions and in this work: I am reminded of Simone Weil's notions of "self-effacement" and "love."<sup>7</sup> Todd warns that she does not mean to suggest that one must lose the self in a gelatinous passivity. But Weil and others might not see that as such a bad thing now and again. And is it possible to approach the level of non-projection onto the other that Todd and Levinas suggest without such a melting away of the self? Is it possible at all? What are the boundaries? As feminists we worry about the historical tendency and reward for women to give up too much of themselves in just such a passivity. Can a feminist woman, therefore, be a spiritual or listening being without risking more than her male counterpart? Or, might we find for ourselves a position of "bold humility" that allows us to open ourselves up from a position of strength? Is this what it means to be saintly or heroic?

---

1. See, for example, Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and a quote from Paul Standish in his response to Todd, "Learning from Levinas: The Provocation of Sharon Todd," in *Philosophy of Education 2001* (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002).

2. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 7-8.

3. Agate Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

4. Nesaule, personal communication, 1999.

5. Herbert Spencer, "What Knowledge is of Most Worth?" in *Education* (New York: Appleton, 1860).

6. Lous Heshusius, "Freeing Ourselves From Objectivity," *Educational Researcher*, April (1994): 15-22.

7. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 1963).