

## Angles on Listening

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To listen at an angle, Audrey Thompson explains, is to be touched. Sometimes touch is reassuring. Listening at an angle, however, is like being punched in the gut. The other touches us in a way that exposes our entrenched assumptions and reveals our understanding to be “fragmentary, broken, sometimes trustworthy and sometimes not.” Our very being can feel broken and thrown when we engage in this kind of listening.

Thompson does not want to ameliorate the pain, disorientation, or confusion that listening at an angle engenders. With María Lugones, Thompson instead asks what risking our ground entails and what understanding is like when we don’t know how to move. Becoming more diligent, sincere, or deferential, honing our listening skills, and entertaining reasonable arguments will not help us listen at an angle. Adopting these strategies, we disengage, Thompson claims. We refuse (often politely or covertly) to move from the sovereign position that allows us to judge others without being personally affected by the judgments we render or shaken by the challenges that others level on us. Preserving our sense of equanimity and self-certainty, we protect our “agentic privileges” and shield ourselves from the kind of vulnerable listening Thompson encourages.

Rather than place us at a safe intellectual or emotional distance, listening at an angle requires us to actually be touched, to experience and absorb the sinking, tight feeling of being punched in the gut. Thompson suggests that acknowledging our flaws can help us become responsive to the kind of self-insight that another’s touch, however painful, can evoke. She writes, “Listening at an angle involves a kind of receptivity that is engaged, accountable, but not the perfect holding that we imagine for mothers and teachers. It is like a broken bowl in which what is held is not wholeness but movement, the dance of sounds or shadows or air.” The bowl’s broken edges, not its ideal form, allow it to catch the light. Similarly, “our very inadequacy may prepare the way for surprise, for joy, for hearing things we have never heard and did not expect to hear (or overhear).”

I want to underscore two angles on listening that Thompson articulates in this essay. These ideas are compelling, because they challenge practices and aims that educators tend to assume but do not examine. They also raise questions, which I hope Thompson will continue to explore.

First, Thompson’s analysis of listening provides a perspective on understanding that educators typically overlook. Usually we regard understanding as a state of clarity or depth that we achieve through our own effort and practice. Learning to regulate our thinking, for example, allows us to catch and correct mistakes we otherwise would miss. Understanding improves as we exercise and strengthen our capacity to reason and monitor our own cognitive processes.

Thompson, by contrast, argues that some insights cannot be grasped unless we experience being inadequate and flawed. Feeling our inadequacy, not running to remedy or dispel our imperfections, is what allows new, more insightful understanding to emerge. Not only do we tend to resist accepting our frailties and failures: we tend to deny that falling short is endemic to being human. Thompson suggests that accepting the jagged edges of our existence is especially important when it comes to recognizing how privilege is complicit with oppression. Complicity is not an abstract problem one may choose to reject or consider. Complicity breaks one's humanity and spirit, Thompson suggests. Rather than try to smooth over this break, Thompson wants persons to feel it, to "anguish over how to get it right," knowing full well that perfect action is an impossible ideal.

The premise that feeling inadequate can help us experience insights we might otherwise hold at bay connects with a second idea Thompson discusses. Feeling inadequate can be painful, Thompson points out. Pain hurts. We therefore try to avoid it. This is understandable. No one likes being in pain.

Thompson suggests that pain, while unpleasant, should not necessarily be shunned. This is because pain can be liberating. Thompson does not equate being liberated with being free from relationships. Nor does she think we can liberate ourselves from the possibility that relations with others may hurt. Liberation rather suggests "a different relationality, a visceral, embodied shift." In the kind of shifts Thompson has in mind, new avenues for choice emerge that may not be apparent unless and until we experience pain. Thompson draws on Sharon Welch to suggest that experiencing pain can create "a matrix in which further actions are possible."<sup>1</sup>

Thompson's insight invites us to reconsider the role of pain in education. Thompson notes that educators tend to reassure students rather than risk hurting students' feelings by disapproving of them. But if Thompson is right that pain can be liberating and that some forms of liberation are impossible to realize outside of experiencing pain, we can conclude that educators sometimes must punch students in the gut. If educators simply soothe students' feelings, they will not promote or sustain the kind of relations Thompson believes can be truly transformative for students and teachers.

While Thompson may be right that acknowledging inadequacy can promote understanding and that experiencing pain can liberate us and propel action, these ideas also introduce several questions. I want to explore two questions that Thompson's essay raises. To appreciate these issues, it is helpful to note that listening at an angle presumes two participants. One participant touches; the other participant is touched. In the give-and-take engagement of listening at an angle, touching and being touched may be hard to disentangle. Like partners in a dance, the one who touches and the one who is touched interact in an intimate relation. Thompson herself does not always distinguish the two sides of the relation she describes.

Nonetheless, each side of the listening relation poses challenges. Clarifying these challenges can help us think more deeply about what listening at an angle

requires. Let's first consider a question that listening at an angle raises for those who are touched. We'll then consider a question that is raised by those who touch others.

For listening at an angle to occur, the one who is touched must be open to being touched in a way that will shift her perspective and understanding. The question is: what allows a person to be open to transformation, especially when a transforming touch is painful? In the example of her mother's shrug, for instance, Thompson was able to hear her mother's response as an invitation to reinterpret the effect of her classmates' behavior on her life. Describing this event, Thompson emphasizes what her mother did. I urge Thompson to also consider what *she* did and did not do. Why did Thompson not shut down when her mother shrugged off her concerns? What enabled Thompson to take her mother's shrug as an opening to shift?

Our tendency to stand our ground and protect ourselves from pain is one reason Thompson's openness is remarkable. At another level, Thompson's openness raises a logical question. As Thompson explains, neither she nor her mother could know in advance how she would respond to her mother's shrug. The shift in Thompson's understanding could only occur within the particular experience that she and her mother shared.

Thus on the one hand, Thompson's understanding could not have shifted outside or in advance of experiencing her mother's shrug. At the same time, experiencing her mother's shrug could not guarantee that Thompson's understanding would shift in a positive direction. Given the hurt that Thompson was feeling as a consequence of her classmates' behavior, she easily could have understood her mother's shrug as another instance of being dismissed.

For Thompson to regard her mother's shrug as liberating, not dismissive, Thompson on some level already had to be open to this understanding. Listening at an angle, in other words, cannot open us up unless we already are open or prepared to listen at an angle. Listening at an angle thus presumes the disposition it requires. What enables or encourages this disposition in the first place? What allows us to be open to being opened up?

Turning from the one who is touched to the one who touches, a second question about listening at an angle arises. This question concerns the distinction between harm and pain and Thompson's association of harm with refusing to engage. Touch is a form of engagement, Thompson maintains. When we listen at an angle, we touch others and thereby engage them. While our touch may be painful, it does not harm. Harm arises instead when we do *not* touch others, when we do not engage. Speaking of her mother's shrug, Thompson explains: "Shrugs can also be violent — a refusal to engage, a refusal to listen."

I appreciate Thompson's distinction between harm and pain and encourage her to continue distinguishing these two experiences. At the same time, I question Thompson's assumption that harm arises only when we do not engage. Can engagement sometimes be harmful? Conversely, are there times when not engaging may provoke pain but not harm? Can refusing to engage be a wise or appropriate

choice? It seems to me that refusing to engage may not necessarily signal avoidance or a desire to protect one's agentic privilege. Sometimes refusing to engage may be just the touch that the other person needs to shift to a more liberated position.

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1. Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 46.