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The Audacity of Listening

Last June, when I was still absorbing the news that my work had been chosen for the Kyoto Prize, I received an email from the Japanese translators of my 2023 book, *In a Human Voice*. It was my use of the English word “audacity” that prompted them to write. They wanted to know: had they understood me correctly? Previously, audacity had been translated as the Japanese words for “boldness” and “daring,” but I had written about the audacity of love and of caring, and it was, as they said, “a kind of boldness that may appear arrogant to social norms because it challenges patriarchy, hierarchy and injustices that are otherwise ignored or overlooked,” and, “a sort of daring that risks norms and the current state of relationships for the sake of renewed norms and transformed relationships.”

I had devoted the final chapter of my book to the work of three filmmakers, all men, artists working in the mainstream, who in their films had shown a stunningly audacious act, a boldness that flew in the face of hierarchy and transformed relationships.

Paul Shrader, one of the filmmakers, said this was the film he had always wanted to make. Paul Thomas Anderson used the word “audacious” to underscore the daring of the act needed to break through an armored self. And in effect, Spike Lee echoed his sentiment. I saw this as Act II of the drama that had been set in motion by *In a Different Voice*. The different voice I had identified as an ethic of care, although initially heard as a, “feminine voice,” had come into the mainstream as an audacious act of love.

And now, being here with you, in Kyoto, still overwhelmed by the recognition of this extraordinary prize and daunted by the responsibility to keep alive the hope for humanity that it sustains, what strikes me is that my work began—began twice, so to speak—with what I saw at the time as a simple act: I listened. First to women, and then to girls. Both times, and especially with the girls, I discovered the audacity of listening because in both instances, by listening, I disrupted a story and broke a silence.

I was writing about an ethic of care and then about a healthy resistance to losses that compromise our humanity. And especially with the girls because girls are everywhere, and the work had received a lot of attention, I often felt as if I had put my finger in an electric socket. Which led me then to ask, what is the investment in not talking about care and the realities of responsibility and relationships and interdependence? And what is at stake in the silencing of girls? I had started out listening to women who were deciding whether to continue or to end a pregnancy, and I found myself writing about the tensions between democracy and patriarchy, and about the audacity, the boldness of love and of caring in the face of pressures to silence the self. I found myself engaged in a drama about voice and silence.

Would you like to know what I think?, or would you like to know what I really think?, a woman had asked me one day early on in my research. I had asked her to respond to a moral dilemma, one of the problems psychologists use to assess a person’s stage of moral development, and what she was telling me was that she had learned to think about morality in a way that differed from how she really thought.

I learned to listen not only for what was said but for a voice that had gone under cover. I was astonished to discover that people will often signal the shift from saying what they think to saying what they really think, or how they actually feel, or what they would say if they were to be quite honest. I learned to listen for the words “really” and “actually” and for the phrase “to be honest,”

and I found myself asking: does a human voice go under cover, the voice that says what I really think and feel, what I know first-hand on the basis of my experience, the voice that says what I would say if I were to be honest?

I learned that if I wanted to hear what had become an under voice, I had to recognize and then question the cover voice. Is that true? Do you really believe that? Do you really feel that way, I found myself asking early on in the studies with girls, and then I would hear the word “actually.” This is how I actually feel, this is what I really think, this is what I know.

Which brings me back to the audacity of listening—listening not only to what is said but also to what is not said, the conversation under the conversation, listening in a way that holds a potential for transformation. I love the line in Spike Lee’s film where the main character, a black man, the black Klansman, says to the white Jewish cop who becomes his cover, what makes you think you don’t have skin in the game, brother? Which is to say, we are all in this together.

I will tell you something about myself. I will tell you some of what I have come to know about listening and how to listen if you want to hear a voice that has receded into silence. And having just won this prize in Arts and Philosophy, I feel compelled to make a confession. Although my degree is in psychology and my research has been in psychology, I do in fact have one foot in the arts and one in philosophy. I have just completed a novel called *Solstice* that will be published next summer. The story, which is about a marriage and family, spans three generations and takes place on three continents. Eve is a dancer and a choreographer, Gabe her husband was a child on the Kindertransport, the trains that took children to safety on the eve of World War II, and he is now a journalist covering the Middle East. The questions raised by their children—how do you know what is true and how do you know what you can trust—are philosophical questions about knowing, and they take us back to the Garden of Eden and forward to the opening night of a controversial ballet.

It was Chekhov, the great Russian writer, who said that the role of the artist is to ask questions, not to provide answers. With *In a Human Voice*, I provided answers to questions that had been dogging me for years: the different voice is in fact a human voice, the voice it differs from is a patriarchal voice—listen for the tell-tale gender binaries and hierarchies because in contrast to democracy, patriarchy is an order of living based on gender—and perhaps most poignant, given this present moment of backlash and reversal, where patriarchy is in force or enforced, the human voice is a voice of resistance and care ethics is an ethics of liberation. It is a guide to preventing moral injury and to freeing democracy from patriarchy.

I had reached the end of the road that began with *In a Different Voice*, and I find myself now in an unfamiliar place. It was striking to me that in their second email, sent at the end of the summer, my translators, the ones translating my latest book into Japanese, wrote that, “after much discussion” they had concluded that what was needed was a new word. There was no Japanese equivalent for my use of the English word “audacity,” none that conveys the nuance and the complex implications of daring to risk relationships for the sake of transforming relationships. The solution they came to was to combine two existing Japanese words, the word *futei*, which means insubordinate, and the word *fuson*, which means unhumiliated, and then to add the word for boldness, thus creating a word that means, quote, “insubordinate and unhumiliated boldness,” a word that conveys the audacity, the boldness, of releasing care ethics from subordination, that is, from being considered, “feminine,” or in Kantian terms, a supererogatory duty meaning not obligatory or essential, and also from a humility that had stood in the way of saying what needed to be said.

One of the first things that caught my ear in listening to women was hearing a woman use the word “selfish” to denote whatever it was that she wanted to do, while considering it good and responsible to do what others wanted her to do or thought she should do. In the name of morality, women were rendering themselves “selfless,” meaning, responsive to others but seemingly without

a voice of their own. In the study with pregnant women considering abortion, if the woman wanted to have the baby, that was selfish, if she wanted to have an abortion, that was selfish. But at that time, in that historical moment, I also heard women question the morality of selflessness, seeing it as morally problematic, as an abdication of voice, acting as if one had no voice, and an evasion of responsibility and relationship. To care, to be responsible, it is necessary to be present, in relationship with oneself and with others, to pay attention, and as one woman said, to be as awake as you can and to know as much as you can about where you are walking. To step in rather than step away.

The research with girls exposed a paradoxical choice: a choice between having a voice and having relationships. Paradoxical because without a voice, you are not in relationship, paradoxical because for the sake of having, “relationships,” you are giving up on relationship. I heard girls articulate this predicament with surprising clarity: if they said what they were feeling and thinking, no one would want to be with them—as one girl said, “my voice would be too loud”—but if they didn’t say what they were feeling and thinking, no one would be with them. Either way, they would be all alone, giving up relationship for the sake of having, “relationships.” It was a sacrifice that marked the initiation of girls into an order of living that depends for its continuation on the silence of women or on the willingness of women to just go along with the way things are.

Just last year, I was interviewing a high school junior, part of a study called *Breaking the Bargain*, meaning the bargain of silence that patriarchy makes with women. She was a student at a top school for girls, and when she said, “I hold myself back for the sake of deeper connections,” and I said, “Can I ask you the obvious question,” she told me that she was, “okay” for the moment with “letting it fall by the wayside.” It was, she explained, “a battle not worth fighting.”

But the battle for relationship is a battle worth fighting—it’s essential for love and also for democracy—and here is where audacity comes in, and more specifically, the need for an insubordinate and unhumbled boldness. The translators put it this way, quote: “We found it powerful to recognize that audacious love and care are essential to overcoming the relational and social challenges we face.”

My work has led me to an edge, and what I have now are questions. In the spirit of Chekhov, perhaps we can only discover the most profound human truths through the arts because to get out of the binds we are in, to break through dissociation or not knowing, we need to work in an associative mode. Otherwise, and all too easily, we become trapped in outmoded ways of thinking and speaking. What is needed now is a different voice, a new word, an unfamiliar way of speaking. I began with what turned out to be the audacity of listening, and I have come to a place where I think I understand the strength of the investment in women’s silence.

I said I would tell you something about myself.

I was born and raised in New York City, the much wanted and much loved only child of Jewish parents, whose parents had immigrated to the United States from Europe at the end of the 19th century, thus escaping the fate that was to befall the Jews of Europe in the 20th century. To my parents, America was a land of opportunity, and they lived the American dream. My father was born in the back room of a dairy store, and he went to college on scholarship and became a lawyer. My mother, who was an artist by nature, worked for a literary journal and as an interior decorator before going back to college and becoming a nursery school teacher.

I grew up with my mother singing to me in French and German as well as in English. In school, I learned French and Hebrew and then Latin. I played the piano and learned to track the lines of a fugue and to follow the voices in a counterpoint. In high school, I sang in choruses and madrigal groups. In college, I studied literature, and it was the time of new criticism where we learned how to analyze a text in its own right and on its own terms, to ask how a narrative was structured, to pay attention to metaphors and symbols, to notice repeated words and also the silences, to ask about point of view and whether or not the narrator was reliable. And I say all this

because when I started to do my own research, after I had finished graduate school, after I had my PhD, after I had married and become the mother of three children, after I had registered voters in the Civil Rights movement and marched to protest the war in Vietnam and worked to stop the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, when I was teaching very part time at Harvard, inspired by the work of Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg, but with no particular aspirations of my own, when my husband had finished medical school and thus was coming into a position where he could support our family, all of which is to say, when I had a certain freedom to do what interested me and I was curious about how people think about themselves and how morality comes into play at times in life where you come to a place where the roads diverge and you have to choose which way will I go, questions I was struggling with in my own life.

I began interviewing people who were in this situation, who had come to a crossroads in their life, and as you know, as it happened, I was interviewing women, and I did what I knew how to do: I listened for different voices and I listened to people in their own right and on their own terms, rather than fitting them into this or that psychological theory.

If you ask me who I am, I would say I am a woman who listens. To this day, given the choice, I would rather listen than speak. Listening is how I get my bearings, it's how I find out where I am and what's going on. At a certain point in my education, I discovered that if I listened to what I was taking in about psychology and about morality, it became harder to listen to myself. And to trust my experience.

If you ask me who I am, I could say that I'm a novelist who wandered into the field of psychology and listened, and then at a certain point, wrote about what I heard. I love the empirical foundation of my research, its grounding in experience. You can hear what I heard, for example, by listening to girls. And as I tell my students, the psychological world is open all day, every day. And although you cannot see the psyche, you can hear it. It's a matter of learning how to listen when you have a psychological question, how to listen for the associative logic of the psyche, for a both/and logic that resists either/or categories. And how to listen for the polyphony of voices that speak within and around us and track their interplay or counterpoint. And if discovery is your object, then how to pay attention not to what you already know but to what you don't know, to what surprises you.

"Everyone here is really nice," Ella says. She is 14, a ninth grader at her new school. She has moved with her family across the country and is starting a new school. She needs to make new friends. She is taking part in our current study with girls, part of the Radical Listening Project, and when she says, speaking of her new school and the challenge of making new friends, "Everyone here is really nice," what would you say?

The interviewer, a woman, says, "Everyone?"

How do you hear this? What would you have said?

In response, Ella says, "Well, actually, that's a lie. I don't know why I said that," meaning why she said that everyone here is really nice. She knew it wasn't true.

What would you say now?

The interviewer is curious: "Why do you think you said that?" she asks.

Ella says, "Some people feel more judgmental."

In fact, Ella knows why she said what she knew to be a lie. It was because of judgments. She knows that girls are judged on the basis of whether or not they are nice. If the interviewer hadn't said anything, she wouldn't know what Ella knows.

I teach a class on listening. I would love to continue.

But I want to read you a scene from my novel. It's where the Garden of Eden story comes in, with a character named Eve, because in my experience, characters tend to arrive with their names, and it was inevitable that at some point I would ask, Eve? Why Eve? And at least in the Western tradition, Eve's eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge is the original act of insubordinate and

unhumbled boldness.

The scene is a conversation between two women. When they meet, they are strangers. Eve, the dancer, is spending the year in Amsterdam, doing a residency with a Dutch dance company, and she will choreograph a piece for them. On the day in question, she has ridden her bike out into country, “the willows were yellow with spring,” and when she comes to a village and sees a small restaurant, she gets off her bike. Reading the word *soep* on the handwritten menu outside the restaurant, she decides to go in. Sanne, a Dutch woman, greets her. She and her husband own the restaurant, and the carrot soup, made by the husband, is their special. She shows Eve to a table by the window.

And here’s the scene.

The fresh ginger cut the sweetness of the carrots and the warmth of the soup spread through her. She tore a slice of the thickly seeded dark bread and felt her mind settle into the quiet of this village restaurant.

Sanne turned the sign in the window: *gesloten*, the restaurant was closed. The lunch hour was over and when she brought Eve’s coffee, the other diners had left.

“Do you have time to sit down?” Eve asked.

Sanne glanced toward the kitchen. “I’ll get my tea.”

When she came back, she brought a small piece of cake.

“It’s my daughter’s favorite, the apple cake.” She balanced the cake on Eve’s saucer. “Do you have children?”

“Two sons and then a daughter. She’s in Kenya now with the Peace Corps.”

“My daughter is also the adventurous one. She’s living in Iceland training ponies. My husband didn’t want her to go.”

“With us, it was the opposite. I was the one who didn’t want Sophie to go. I thought she was going because her boyfriend was going and I didn’t like the boyfriend. I never thought of Sophie as adventurous, but now it turns out I was wrong. Or being in Africa has changed her, because now she’s broken up with the boyfriend and it really has become an adventure.”

She surprised herself by talking so freely to this Vermeer-like Dutch woman with her broad hips and muted clothes. It turned out they both had lost their fathers. Sanne said that her father had died early that year, early in the winter. Eve said her father had died last spring. “It was a difficult time.”

Sanne looked down, her eyes overcast with what Eve took to be a tacit acknowledgement of her loss. Eve straightened her back and leaned forward.

“I mean,” she said, “it was a difficult time for me to lose my father. He wanted to die and I felt selfish for wanting him to live but it was a difficult time in my marriage.”

Sanne gave her that sighing look married women give when the subject of difficulty in marriage comes up. She glanced at Eve’s bare hand.

“I didn’t think you were married.”

“I’m not,” she said. “I mean actually I am....” But she wasn’t sure how to finish the sentence—“I’m here on my own.”

The afternoon sun angled through the window with its insistent February light. The room felt hot. A faint smell of ginger hung in the air.

What was it about marriage that she was reluctant to talk about? For all the closeness she felt with her mother, she knew surprisingly little about her parents’ marriage beyond the surface details—none of the intricacies of two people, their lives meshing and not—and even more surprising when she thought about it, she never had asked. She wondered about Sanne’s husband—peeling carrots, the inspiration of the ginger. Here, taste it, extending the spoon. Sanne saying yes to him, it’s just right. Or maybe that’s not what she said. And then he would feel chastened, adding more ginger or whatever it was that she said the soup needed. And later, when

people complimented the soup, would he say that it was her inspiration?

With Gabe, she praised his work unsparingly. It was how she felt about his writing, whereas he would point at something she'd overlooked, something, as he'd put it, she might want to consider. Or he would say that she assumed people knew what she was saying when in fact often they didn't know or couldn't tell what the dance was about. She said she assumed we all have the same feelings—we all want to be loved and we're all afraid of death—and her work was about feelings we have in common. She was aware of this difference between them, but she told herself, that's pretty much how things are.

Sanne was telling her about her father. He was a pastor, and during the war, he had been active in the resistance. It was extremely dangerous then for anyone to speak openly and especially for him, so he spoke to his congregation through his sermons, choosing passages from the Bible so no one could object.

Sanne was a teenager then. She remembered one Sunday late in the war. "The resistance was active around our town. An RAF, Royal Air Force, British pilot had been shot down, and members of the resistance had gotten to him before the Germans did. They brought him to our house to stay while they prepared false papers for him, and my mother was very tense. She told my father he mustn't do anything that could draw attention to himself. The reading at church that Sunday was from Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden."

Sanne's English was close to fluent but since she pronounced Adam A'dam with the accent on the second syllable and called the woman Ava, as though the e's were a's, at first Eve wasn't sure who she was talking about. But then she spoke about the tree. The tree of knowledge, good and evil, she said—that was the subject of his sermon.

Sanne picked up her cup as if to take a sip, but then she put the cup down and lowered her voice.

"I remember the day so clearly. My father began by asking the congregation: 'Why is that tree in the garden?' The tree is in the garden, in nature, he said, because it is in our nature to know good and evil. He was telling the good Dutch people that the knowledge they needed was within their grasp. They didn't need someone on high to tell them what they should do. By then the situation here in the Netherlands was desperate, and people felt that God had abandoned them."

Eve was astonished. She hadn't thought to ask the question. In one sense it was obvious, yet it came as a shock: Why was that tree in the garden? Because if the knowledge of good and evil is in nature, then we have no need for a God on high to tell us what to do. No God on high, no King of the Universe, no Lord of hosts. She envisioned a tower crumbling, a fortress collapsing, and in that moment, she glimpsed the form of her piece.

The words tumbled out of her mouth.

"I want to leave my husband."

She was stunned that she'd said it, said it to this stranger. When she opened her mouth, she hadn't known what would come out. She could as easily have said that her husband had left her, which literally was true. But listening to Sanne, she had felt a rush of inspiration impelling her forward and suddenly she saw where her work could go. Yet to go there, she would need to trust her perceptions and not be distracted by Gabe and his questions.

Sanne blinked, then drew in her breath. The blue of her eyes seemed to have grown more intense. She covered her mouth with her fingers as though to conceal what Eve glimpsed as the start of a smile. Perhaps the impulse to leave her husband was one that she shared, though Eve would not know this because just then a man's voice called "Sanne?" and Sanne got up from her chair. From the kitchen, the sweet acrid smell of onions sauteing. "I'm sorry," she said. "I must help with the dinner."

She squeezed Eve's shoulder. "I wish we could talk more."

"One question," Eve asked. "What happened to the airman?"

“Ah,” Sanne said, and a wistfulness came into her eyes.

Light skimmed the surface of the canals. The sun had crossed the equator, days now stretching, extending, reaching...her mind scrolled back to the sermon. The pastor’s story about the tree.

She raised herself on her bike, her full weight on the pedals, the sun reddening on the horizon. Behind half-shut lids, against the red of the sunset, she saw her dancers shaping the sequence. The part about the tree and then just after, Eve in the story reaching for the fruit. Suddenly she stopped pedaling. The bike faltered. She had to read that Bible story again. There was a King James Bible on the shelf in the flat. She righted the bike and pedaled fast.

Back in her room, she found the page. Her eyes raced over the words, then she went back and read them slowly: And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eye, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took the fruit thereof and did eat and gave also unto her husband with her and he did eat.

The woman had not been duped by the serpent. Despite all that was said, the story was clear. The woman had looked at the tree, and she had acted on what she saw. What’s more, and this she found incredible: when the woman ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, nothing happened. She doesn’t die or move to cover her nakedness. Instead, she gave some to her husband who was with her.

She read the story again, this time tracking the movement sequence: the woman saw...she took...she did eat...she gave. It’s only after Adam has eaten that the shaming and the blaming begin. Only then did the hiding start. Adam blamed the woman and she blamed the serpent, and the two of them covered their nakedness, hiding themselves from God.

Her words came back: I want to leave my husband.

Tree branches held the light.

She would not labor in sorrow, or bring forth children in sorrow, or bind her desire to her husband’s desire, or let him rule over her. She would not stay with someone who abandons her, her feet moving as she began to discover how it might go, the steps unfolding in response to what she had now come to see. Suddenly, as if in a vision, she found herself energized by the challenge: she would take it on with the dancers, exploring this perception, her realization of the truth, of when the hiding began.

I have called the novel *Solstice*. The story starts in 1969, at the height of the anti-war movement, and it follows the changing of the light, moving from the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, to the summer solstice, the day with the longest light. In fact, Eve does not leave her husband, but the marriage is transformed. A question—what is the alternative to blame and regret—is raised in the context of the marriage, but also by the Garden of Eden story and the conflict in the Middle East. It is, perhaps, the question of the hour, at least for those of us in the United States.

And it is in this changing light and the unexpected disappointments of this time, that the choice of the Inamori Foundation to award the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy to the ethic of care illuminates a contribution made possible by listening to what had not been listened to, at least in this context, or taken seriously, the voices of women and of girls.

I am deeply moved by this recognition, by this honor, by this most generous gift. In spirit, I share it with every woman and girl. I still recall the mid-winter afternoon. The year was 1975. My three children were at school, my husband was at work, the dog no doubt was asleep at my feet, and I put a yellow sheet of paper into my typewriter and I typed the words, “In a Different Voice.” It was the first thing I wrote that wasn’t for school, the first thing I wrote just for myself. I was responding to an inner voice that said: If you want to know what I really think....

In my book, *In a Human Voice*, I tell a story from my first visit to Kyoto. At that time, a graduate student kindly offered to accompany me on the train back to Tokyo so I wouldn’t get lost

in the Tokyo railway station. She was asking me about voice, about losing one's voice, and when I said that nobody loses their voice, her face brightened. Would I write this in her notebook? she asked, handing me the book. "Nobody loses their voice," I repeated as I inscribed the words on a blank page; people may silence their voice, I said, but it's always for a reason.

Yet in the world of today, there are compelling reasons not to silence the voice of care ethics, which brings me back to the new word. Because the daily work of caring is still largely done by people typically viewed as subordinate, people who are expected to be humble, an insubordinate and unhumbled boldness may be precisely what it takes to bring this voice forward.

I am profoundly moved by the choice of the Inamori Foundation to award the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy, in thought and morality, at this moment in history, to work that began with listening to women and to girls and that was inspired by their voices—the decision is breathtaking in its audacity and its simplicity.

In retrospect, I recognize that the audacity of my listening, as the Japanese translators saw, lay in the challenge it posed to established ways of speaking—and, perhaps even more, in my daring to risk the existing state of relationships for the sake of transforming how human beings live with one another.

For this recognition, I thank you with all my heart.

The interview held after the commemorative lecture is available on the Kyoto Prize YouTube channel.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbqTzTVKNcc>)