CHAPTER 21.

LISTENING, WHEN THE LISTENING IS HARD

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Over the course of her luminous career, Anne Gere has offered the field of rhetoric and writing studies numerous landmark studies, ranging from the history of women's clubs and the evolution of writing groups to ethical hiring (and retention) practices and productive writing pedagogies. Our chapter builds on just one site of Gere's much-heralded scholarship: her groundbreaking explorations of silence and listening as rhetorical strategies. In "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing," Gere rues the diminishment if not dismissal of silence in writing studies despite its "productive and empowering" qualities (209). Gere's foray into silence was extended by Cheryl Glenn's development in her book *Unspoken* of a rhetoric of silence as a historically persistent phenomenon (the counterpart of speech), a source of power when deployed across rhetorical situations, and, thus, a means of communication.

The practice of rhetorical silence, however, remains a challenge for those of us who are steeped in Western traditions and belief systems. After all, our spoken language has long been considered a gift from the gods, with Wilhelm von Humboldt assuring us that language is the distinguishing blessing immediately conferred on humans (Isham and Frei 485); Max Picard declaring that it is "language and not silence that makes [us] truly human" (xix); and Thomas Mann arguing that "speech is civilization itself" (518).

If silence has been marked as suspect, listening has been marked as a position of weakness, passivity, even stupidity. Yet Gere has interrogated both rhetorical positions, offering rhetoric and writing studies scholars good reasons to consider them. In her landmark *Writing Groups*, Gere extols listening as an effective method for cultivating responsive writerly practices, one that supports writers as they develop the intellectual capacity of listening to one another and "learn to extract meaning from one another's language" rather than "relying on the teacher [or group leader] to make connections between statements and answer

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all questions" (105). Such listeners "create meaning through dialogue" among themselves, which enables them to "re-vision their work, improving it substantially" (93). They give their peers' comments "careful attention," "become more willing to take risks with their own language," and ultimately use their deepening listening skills to "engage in productive problem solving" (105).

THE PROMISE OF SILENCE AND LISTENING

Across these works, Gere underscores the fundamental capacities of silence and listening: trusting that others just might have good ideas that may transform one's own thinking and action, quieting one's own anxiety or confidence; opening oneself to communicative discomfort (even confusion); attending to the ideas of others; and collaborating in both shared problem-solving and democratic meaning-making. In short, Gere helps her readers appreciate how listening can serve as the basis for surprisingly successful collaborations and rhetorical engagements.

Why Listening?

To be sure, Gere's early emphases on the significance of productive silence and attentive listening remain relevant, given the ongoing urgency for better communication practices in our classrooms, in our homes, in the workplace, and in our public—and political—lives. The quotidian violence in our schools (from bullying to physical and sexual violence), in our homes (domestic violence of all kinds), and in our civic lives (seemingly unbreachable political polarization, widespread institutional distrust, and merited racial unrest) call for the palliative practice of listening, a rhetorical position animated by the feminist rhetorical theories of the last two decades. For instance, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch affirm that the ever-developing project of feminist rhetorical studies includes "sharpening rhetorical listening and responding skills" (126), which aligns with the open-ended initiative led by Krista Ratcliffe on the power and potential of rhetorical listening. Developing the ability to remain silent while listening productively might be one of the most necessary and challenging features of a rhetorical education today—one that implicates not only our classroom practices but the rhetorics in which we engage in all parts of our lives.

A commitment to a stance of productive silence or deep listening is, of course, rarely an easy matter, even when people come together in goodwill with an agreement to engage, exchange, collaborate, and problem-solve. Remaining silent when the listening is easy—when we're among like-minded people

(listening to Rachel Maddow or Tucker Carlson, for instance)—can affirm our sense of self-righteousness, bolster our feelings of identification with others (and separateness from Others), offer succor to the aggrieved, spark productive emotions that foster collective identity and action, and otherwise bring pleasure. Easy silence and listening might be neither good nor effective listening at all—but experiencing it may encourage us to think of ourselves as good or effective listeners (after all, we have remained silent) rather than alert us to the presence of our confirmation bias or the likelihood that our interlocutors are (helpfully or not, depending on our rhetorical purposes) already like us in important ways.

Easy listening is, well, easy. But hard listening is, well, something else.

Hard Listening

Listening to everyday complaints, worries, pain, anxiety is demanding enough, but "hard listening," when the messages are unsettling, is even more difficult. When we are confronted with bad news, seemingly unreasonable demands, painful or offensive words, we want to talk—not listen or remain silent. Instead of silently considering our lack of patience and stamina, our emotional rigidity, our own (often unacknowledged) feelings of guilt, defensiveness, and anger, our impulses to fix the situation, we want to talk. We want to defend ourselves, critique the other, advise, explain, express our frustrations, compare our own experiences. And little wonder.

After all, our words (not our silence) are our gifts. For most humans, maybe especially for folks like us (scholar-teachers of rhetoric and writing), speaking has always been the cynosure of our efforts, not only our endowment, but our calling. Most of us have been trained to speak up and out, to proclaim our advice (and our innocence), and to explain *our* own emotions, response, rationale, arguments. We struggle to listen. Speaking is our work, even as Mary Oliver reminds us, "To pay attention, this is our endless / and proper work" (264).

This chapter focuses on the rhetorical activity of listening when it's hard. Despite explicit calls by Gere, Glenn, Royster and Kirsch, and, of course, Ratcliffe, research on listening remains fairly new. Few of us in rhetoric and writing studies have concentrated on developing our own listening power, let alone theorized it toward conceptual or pragmatic ends. Ratcliffe demonstrates how listening facilitates identification between self and other. Alli Tharp and Emily Johnston, warning that "not everyone listens the same, or listens at all," scale the work of rhetorical listening to account for possibilities in first-year composition programs, which they offer as an approach to teaching "actionable empathy" (734). And Cristina Ramirez, Ellen Cushman, Phillip Marzluf, Julie Jung, and

Brian Gogan advocate for listening that goes *beyond* the Rogerian rhetoric of "I hear what you're saying" to reach the level of self-reflective meditation of "Why am I so threatened by this speaker's argument?" All of these scholars recognize what Ratcliffe and Kyle Jensen refer to as the "systemic constraints and … possibilities of the rhetorical worlds in which they listen and speak" (7).

Deepening our listening skills—especially when the listening is hard—can enrich our strategies for resourceful problem-solving across varying rhetorical situations. It can also, in the process, illustrate the good reasons for taking up such demanding rhetorical work, work that often entails, according to Ratcliffe and Jensen, (1) realizing that one often stops listening when engaging like-minded speakers, (2) clarifying one's own beliefs while listening in disagreement, (3) recognizing that some people act in bad faith, (4) and attending to weariness in body and mind (7-9). In this chapter, then, we explain the dimensions of hard listening, offer strategies for becoming good listeners when the listening is hard, and conclude with the potential rhetorical power of hard listening.

Indeed, hard listening is, well, *hard.*

WHAT HARD LISTENING CAN FEEL LIKE

In preparing for this chapter, Cheryl and Heather kept records of instances of hard listening they found themselves (imperfectly) practicing in their everyday lives. We share the following stories and strategies as a way to reconsider contexts of hard listening and to reconceptualize them not as "destructive collisions" but rather as "entanglements," rich sites of unexpected possibility (Gere, "Presidential" 134).

In the following section, Cheryl recounts a complaint that nearly every WPA (writing program administrator) has heard a version of at least once. Heather follows by recounting her experiences with listening to and through shame in unfamiliar and uncomfortable work in a community-partner-led writing collaboration.

Cheryl's Experience

The most demanding listening I've done of late was in response to a complaint that I tried *very hard* not to take personally. After stepping into my office on campus and before I'd gotten off my coat, hat, gloves, scarf, and down vest, I was visited by a new adjunct instructor, whom I'd been wanting to see. He told me he'd recently seen our department head because he was so ticked about having to take our year-long teaching practicum and having to follow the protocols of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR), a nearly 20,000-student writing

program that I direct. Requiring him to do so was disrespectful, he said, and "I do not condone nor deserve this kind of disrespect."

The previous semester, he had walked out of our practicum (admittedly, the graduate-student presentation was not very good), and he hadn't returned this semester, refusing my several email invitations to meet for coffee so that I could listen to his concerns and maybe try to address them. You see, I was trying to relieve his pain, resolve his complaint—all the while thinking about me, me, me in trying to relieve my own discomfort. Yes, I wanted to hear more of what he had to say when we met, yet somehow, I wanted to find the space to talk about *my* confusion and anger and to offer *my* intentions and rationale—to defend myself! But I listened, remembering Deborah Tannen's dictum that people who come into a conversation with the most real-world power tend to display the signs of that power within the conversation by asserting their own position rather than deferring to the position of the other, by speaking rather than listening (231). But listening, according to *my* own dictum, does not guarantee any shift in those power dynamics.

This man went on to tell me that he felt denigrated by the graduate students involved in the practicum, that his previous teaching experience had been invalidated, that he had much experience teaching the modes, and that the entire PWR lacked direction, purpose, and logic. Ouch! So much of what he said just isn't true to me. But that doesn't matter, does it? He needed to complain. I needed to listen, just listen. I needed the practice. Heck, I still need the practice because I need to tell you that we don't teach "the modes"; we focus on genres. The PWR has direction, purpose, logic. I want to defend and explain. But more important was listening, paying attention.

After all, as Simone Weil reminds us, "L'Attention est la forme la plus rare et la plus pure de la générosité" ("Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity"; Weil and Bousquet 18; my trans.). We all need that attention.

Was his speaking an instance of "invitational rhetoric" that leads to mutual participation and understanding, as Karen Foss, Sonja Foss, and Cindy Griffin have taught us? Nope. Was this an instance of Diana Mutz's "hearing the other side" that develops greater self-understanding, understanding of others, and tolerance? Nope. Was this an opportunity to relinquish persuasion and control and to coalesce, to come together in a moment of inherent worth, equality, and empowered action? Yes—but not for him. Did he want any explanations about the PWR, its philosophies, practices, rhetorical foundation, logic? Nope. Did he want to unpack any of his assertions (which felt like accusations to me) to see if together we could translate his complaints into actionable change? Nope. He wanted me—as Mikki Kendall succinctly puts it—to "STFU and listen." And I did, all the while struggling with my instincts to say "Yes, but …."

Surely, I'm not the only person who, instead of remaining silent and purposefully listening, too often listens to detect openings for talking in these situations, for trying to fix a situation. Isn't doing so considered to be a "natural" response to someone else's pain—as though *our* words can relieve *their* pain? As though our words can make *it* stop? Make *them* stop?

Heather's Experience

I have been challenged to rethink how I listen as I participate as an academic partner with a group of harm reduction activists—people whose grassroots efforts aim to reduce the negative consequences of (in this case) drug use in ways that do not demand abstinence and that do affirm others' inherent worth. Among other activities, this group develops and delivers trainings to help professionals (including care providers) identify how their implicit (or explicit) biases toward people who use drugs contribute to stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors. Biases have consequences; they can, for instance, result in situations where people who use drugs are discouraged from seeking care or situations where a parent loses custody of a child, even if they are making reasonable—and objectively good—parenting choices. The group shares personal stories about the struggles of surviving and parenting—stories of near-death overdose scares and stories that depict the taboo, if not largely unconceivable, daily realities of being a good parent who uses drugs. Given my research on shame, stigma, and pregnancy, I was invited to collaborate on a grant sponsoring this participant-led research.

Although I tried to listen carefully during our early web meetings, my mind was full of nervous chatter. *Did the others in the meeting know why I was there? Would they see me as an uninformed and troublesome interloper? What would my contributions to this important work be, given that I had not participated in harm reduction activism? How might I be of use to this group when their expertise is so unlike my own?* Although I was not searching for gaps in conversation to fill with my own voice, I was letting my insecurities usurp my ability to be present and listen. I wanted to respond with understanding and care, but as a newcomer to this group, I lacked the language to do so. Instead of settling into active and open listening, I worried about how I could be a useful ally.

In some ways, this anxious non-listening was noise that distracted me from the deeper listening challenge at hand. Unsurprisingly, given the aims of this group, I grappled with my own biases as I experienced the discomfort (in my thoughts, in my body) of hearing stories that dug into the realities of pregnant and parenting people who use drugs. I had to—and to be honest, still have to—wrestle with the incompatibility of the narrative of (bad, immoral, irresponsible)

"drug user" that is lodged in my mind and the stories of parental joy, care, and love that some of the stories convey. One such story depicts a mother and her sister being high and safely playing a tabletop game with the woman's gleeful daughter, who was thrilled to have so much uninterrupted time with the adults. The story leaves no room for the ubiquitous characterization of drug users—zombie-like, not present—especially because it depicts a deep and loving connection between a mother and her daughter. It is a hard story to listen to because hearing it without objection feels like an act of condoning what can feel like—what many of us tell ourselves is—unassailably bad behavior. Hearing one team member's story of anger at a friend's overdose—ire that comes from this not being the first time that the friend nearly died—is hard because I struggle to even imagine what such a situation would look like apart from some dramatized depiction on Netflix.

In so many of the group's stories, the "good" person/"bad" person tropes that characterize drug war and moral panic messaging fall away as listeners get glimpses of what bias and struggle look like from within this harm reduction community. I ask myself, *How can this horror be someone's reality? Who should have my empathy here?* My reactions range from surprise and disbelief to confusion. Intellectually, I am pushing myself not to judge, but the story's compelling narrative is meant to force listeners to grapple with these very challenges of bias. The story is doing its job. Listening is very hard.

How ironic. In my effort to support this group—a group whose primary goal is to explore with others the value of listening through hard stories and putting that listening to work—I have shown up as a bad listener.

It has been relatively easy to share a sense of frustration within the group as we agree that *other* listeners, those outside our team, are resistant to what the story-share method offers. One hospital resident participating in a training session disrupted the workshop by suggesting that a person who uses drugs could in no way be a good mother. This vocal resistance to listening made me mad. How could the resident encounter these brave, heart-breaking stories (read aloud by presenters of our group) and then vocally and publicly reject a story and its teller? My anger lingers, but it also forces me to do the harder work of confronting my own (undisruptive) resistance when listening to these stories. Through hard listening, I gain a deeper understanding, a fuller sense of how stigma propagates, lingers, harms. Such insights are part of the ongoing labor of being a listening ally, offering opportunities to extend our group's shared work and aims.

Together, we—Cheryl and Heather—contemplate these experiences in an effort to recognize and render more legible these various experiences of hard listening. Moving from recognition to responsive rhetorical action, we offer three considerations emerging from this collaborative reflection.

THREE STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING WHEN LISTENING IS HARD

Listening in Neutral

As we have learned in sharing these representative experiences, hard listening comes in many forms and varieties. Our own attention to the challenges of listening enables us to appreciate even more situations and contexts in which listening is hard. Our attunement, then, leads us to explore the range of *ways* in which these situations are thorny "entanglements," each with their own dynamics and (frequently) power differentials that prompt us to reflect on *how* we listen. Cheryl could have written about the teaching faculty member who came to her office to talk about her long-depressed adult child who had recently died by suicide or about the phone call from a dear friend whose middle-school niece was cut down by a speeding car when walking in a crosswalk at dusk and who is now facing a long recovery from severe brain trauma. Or she could have written about her good colleague, whose tumor was recently debulked, who called to talk about being suddenly moved out of her clinical trial at Johns Hopkins and into brain-stem surgery because her cancer has spread. Perhaps the only reliable gauge of hard listening is our own discomfort.

Listening can be hard, as Heather's example illustrates, when we listeners don't feel qualified or worthy of listening to such measures of pain, suffering, and shame. Instead of quieting ourselves, sitting silent with our discomfort, we listen only to the nattering of our insecure selves. Our negative self-talk is unproductive. More, it can take up the listening space that could be held for others' voices. Heather could have shared stories of other compromised listening situations: A family member's political aside about the harm educated "elites" are inflicting "on" the US feels like a personal barb directed at her. The literature colleague's invocation of a dystopian future where everyone has to teach writing stings because it suggests hierarchy—until Heather realizes that it probably reflects that person's (justified) fears. In these cases, a defensive mental script, a (troublesome) sense of having already reached an impasse, fills the space of listening. In other cases, we worry about what on earth we can say instead of sitting and listening to stories of grief and struggle. Each of those examples of opportunities to practice listening-when-it's-hard was in response to people's biases, to their sharing of problems, to their unloading of their pain, sorrow, fear, and shame. Maybe if we think of this genre as neutral, we can listen. After all, it asks only that we bear witness to another's pain and injustice and to acknowledge the other's knowledge of their own reality.

In some instances, though, listening seems loaded, not neutral at all, as in Cheryl's example of the disgruntled new teacher who was leveling a complaint

or Heather's example of a colleague whose frustration seemingly reifies divisions and hierarchies within our academic field. Whether fair or not, a complaint often calls on us to listen to ideas that we consider to be wrongheaded, an accusation, a poor use of our time, or our problem to solve. Maybe we should work to consider the complaint a neutral genre, to consider the complainant nothing more than a conduit of information rather than doing what we too often do: nullifying the complaint while rendering the *complainant* the actual, negative problem. How we listen to a complaint, a complainant, matters. If we do not listen, we might save time, but we waste rhetorical possibility and opportunity. After all, the richest and most complex of questions, Adrienne Rich reminds us, is "what do we know when we know your story?" (*Arts* 155).

Appreciating (and Practicing) Silence

If we cannot actively listen rhetorically, then we can choose to occupy an expectant, intentional, and open listening-silence. When we stop talking, stop defending, stop letting our internal chatter occupy all the rhetorical airspace, perhaps we create an aperture for more gentleness, more possibility-rich outcomes. Our silent listening with kindness, maybe even compassion, lowers our defenses, helps us see things differently, even to hear the previously unheard. What is at stake in any silent listening is understanding, coming to accept what has been up until now unheard, maybe even unthinkable or unbearable. Such silence means, "I am here for you." Or as Rich suggests, "The earth [is] already crazed / *Let me take your hand*" ("Terza Rima" 877).

To appreciate the value of silence, however, we must also actively *practice* holding silence. For those of us trained in Western traditions, such practice is an effortful activity that can disabuse us of our learned desire to respond, to disrupt (uncomfortable) silence, and to talk over others' voices and ideas. Perhaps we can bring this attention to silence into our personal conversations, the discussions around our tables be they kitchen or conference room, and the interactions in our classrooms. We can also seek out opportunities to scale our practices of active listening with attention to silence. For instance, activist-teacher Loretta J. Ross has leveraged decades of organizing experience and wisdom to articulate the value—and needed dispositions and skills—of "calling in" culture, which provides an alternative to blame-focused "call-out" or "cancel" culture ("Loretta"). Part of Ross' work has been to create and offer a low-cost "calling in" course that includes "learning labs" ("Calling In Course"). Devoted to "explor[ing] challenging questions" and moving "from theory to action," these labs ask participants to actively listen and to avoid participating in any sort of cross talk, or the talkative habit of verbalizing one's own connection to or take on another

person's comment.[1] The course privileges the collective experience of remaining quiet, of holding space for others to share, and of listening openly as an expected disposition.

Engaging in these activities in community experientially demonstrates the sway many of us feel toward talk and away from intentional listening silence. When people choose to be silent together, they may not be choosing to (individually) meditate in the presence of others. Instead, practices of collective listening silence can encourage us to listen for knowledge with *and* beyond our talkative minds—and in "holistic and kinesthetic" (or embodied) ways (Searl). Adopting some regularity in the practice of occupying silence holds great promise for developing the skills of hard listening. We might consider how such practice is similar to the many other habits of mind and rhetorical dispositions (such as contributing to discussion, inventing arguments, developing main ideas, and responding to our own and others' writing) that we center in our pedagogy.

Anticipating Imperfect Listening

Indeed, listening is critical to establishing identification, invitation, mutual understanding, maybe even mutual respect and trust. And listening is foremost an act of compassion, especially when it's hard, when we find ourselves bearing witness to someone's suffering, shame, or complaint, someone who might be taking a risk by speaking. Still, the need is for us to be fully present to the measure of their pain without trying to point out the silver lining, their misperception, our own fragility. The loving action that constitutes such listening establishes a mutual relationship, if only temporarily. We can recognize another's insights as well as their wrong perceptions, as we come to realize our own wrong perceptions, too—about the issue, the other person, ourselves.

Listening that is hard demands that we release hold of our desire for perfection (in ourselves and in others) and embrace our human fallibility and propensity for imperfection in our rhetorical encounters. Truly listening requires that we approach others *and* ourselves with a sense of humility and a willingness to "think again" (Grant). Or as adrienne maree brown advises, truly listening means that we take time *after* we have (imperfectly) listened to formulate reflective and self-directed questions, questions that help us better formulate listening as a practice in and of community (54-55). After all, what other option do we have, save hunkering down in our staid positions and reveling in our echo chambers?

Listening is hard because our gift of speech is also our limitation. As Kenneth

1 Heather participated in a Calling in Course in August 2023. See https://www.lorettajross.com/callingin-descriptions for more information on the course and learning labs.

Burke reminds us, we are "symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing" beings (60) who, though "goaded by the spirit of hierarchy," are "rotten" in our pursuit for order and ideal (70). To be sure, it does not feel good, right, or useful to admit that to show up for the hard work of listening means doing so inelegantly. We know that in embracing this work, we will trip up and make mistakes along the way. By foregrounding our human imperfection, we set the stage for listening work that is effortful if not impeccable and that leaves space for development, growth, and (necessary) introspective reflection.

These strategies are not exhaustive (as feminists, we resist closure and certitude) but they are sites of possibility. We offer them in the spirit of Gere, whose careful contemplation of writers and contexts in which their writing develops encourages her readers to assess and reassess practices and dispositions from the classroom and from everyday life. So, too, have we considered the all-too-familiar experience of listening-when-it's-hard (in the light of contemporary scholarship) in order to recommend possibilities, practices, and dispositions for attention-giving.

CONCLUSION

Yes, it can be an honor to be entrusted with someone's pain, their confidences, their frustrations—their complaints. But that does not make it easy, especially when we cannot fix things, when we may be part and parcel of the complaint, when we are being asked to listen *only.* Not to explain, not to advise, not to solve, not to brainstorm. Just listen. As Native American Earl Ortiz says, "Be quiet. Listen. And you will learn" (qtd. in Glenn 142).

From Cheryl's reflection on a disgruntled instructor leveling complaints to Heather's reflection on the stories shared by harm reduction activists, the examples in this chapter remind the two of us of the difficult and vulnerable work of speaking up in ways that call for hard listening. The messages of shame and sadness that we encounter are, after all, a part of and not apart from the speaker, the person who wants us to listen. Hard messages might reveal a person's anxiety or fear—at least if we are patient and attentive enough to consider this possibility. That speaker may also be reexperiencing the injustices, harms, wrongs, and other negative emotions that constitute the problem or complaint itself. They might find themselves sharing their pain with a listener who is not just a listening ear but is—directly or indirectly—a source of that very same distress. In speaking up, a speaker may court risks—dangers that could jeopardize their status or reputation or that may exert an emotional toll on those to whom they speak. And such speakers can pay a heavy price for choosing to voice their troubles, especially if they end up losing—status, a job, a home, a life—because they did

not remain silent. They can be judged unworthy of a listen, incredible, illogical, uninformed, ill-fitting—they are whiners and complainers. And they can be undone by a judgment—our judgment.

After all, there is an immense difference between having permission, a platform, to speak and enjoying the hope that someone might actually listen to you.

So how we listen matters.

When we listen with kindness, maybe even compassion, when we lower our defenses, we can begin to see things differently, to notice the previously unseen. This is listening-silence that constitutes bearing witness, which means simply taking the person's hand, walking them home, giving them the psychic companionship they know they need, that they are asking for specifically. Such silent listening does not mean taking on their emotions but rather standing silently with them, seeing them, hearing them, respecting their story. What is at stake in any listening is understanding. Such silence is hard, as is the listening. But when we can stop talking and listen, something of the other person's stance seeps into us; we can begin to understand.

When we practice such compassionate listening, we are creating an imaginative space that opens up possibilities between two people or within a group, possibilities of invitation into the future, transformations of understanding and an expanded sense of self. Anne Lamott reminds us that most of us are stripped down to the bone, living along a thin sliver of what we think we can bear and control. But bearing witness to some one or some thing—when the listening is hard—can nudge us into baby steps of expansion, to an expanded sense of self, of understanding.

Let's face it, it's ridiculous how hard life can be. Because it's one of the most powerful statements ever, we end with Ram Dass's brilliant meditation: "When all is said and done, we are just walking each other home" (qtd. in Lamott, 109).

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