

writing about listening - eleanor  
1 feb 04

I did a lot of listening today. To things said and many more unsaid. I visited old family friends. Friends of my Mum's really. My Mum (Sue) met Beccy and Anna's Mum (Judith), whilst they were in the maternity ward of University College London Hospital, each waiting to give birth to their first child. Mum had me. Judith had Beccy. 2 days apart. Both premature. Both kept in hospital for a few extra days waiting for the ok from the Doctors to go home with their respective first borns.

Judith and Peter (Beccy and Anna's Dad) still live in the house I knew as a child - just round the corner from where we lived in Hackney. The close proximity of our homes and the like mindedness of our families meant that our families stayed in touch and became friends. As Beccy and I grew older we did a lot of running (and eventually cycling) round the local park and playing over at each other's house together. Then I moved to Australia and didn't see them 'til today. Which is a 24 year gap.

So, my listening today. It was complicated. As Beccy said as she walked into her family kitchen where we were all sitting about drinking wine and playing with their big fat fluffball cat - you look exactly the same and totally different. My listening was kinda like that. It was exactly the same as ever - and totally different.

I listened to myself answer the questions about family and living and working in London and how I met Kate and how long I'm going to be in London and what my brothers are doing and are my grandparents still alive and did I see the snow the other night? I listened to their version of family and achievement and how the apples were baked and to stories of me as an 8 year old.

But what I noticed most strongly was how I listened to the gaps and absences. I listened to the not said stuff. I listened to the story I knew without being told. I listened to the complicated and largely silent stories of family and grieving that heroin tells. Stories I've heard before. In other families close to mine on the other side of the world. I listened to those stories that, it seems to me, resist being told any other way. That's the thing about heroin addiction in particular that strikes me - that it lives in the silent parts of our language, communications and stories. Christmas letters can be exchanged for 24 years, people can very honestly tell the story of their families and life and it can slip through the web of story so very easily. It remains unsaid, unnamed, unheard. Until it speaks for itself through its own words. Through its other language. Its own language.

Reflecting on this has been interesting in that it makes me consider how the task of listening to a community of people, be they a family or another grouping, who are skilled and experienced, dexterous in hidden story telling. Some folk are so very good at that shit. An elusive, slippery, subterranean. Resist being listened to. It is my experience that heroin is amazingly skillful at that. It is layered, like the damaged state it springs from. I'm not sure you listen to the unsaid but I know from my experience today and the feeling of familiarity that brought with it that it is this in particular - the unsaid - that is the most interesting thing to listen to.

I'm not sure where I'm up to with that. I've certainly no resolution on the subject. It's a bit big one. On going. Probably a life long kinda consideration. And that's just fine. And of course, not fine at all - it's also irritating and consuming and frustrating. Which is, when it doesn't just feel like something specifically designed to seriously shit me, is kinda interesting.

Frustrated by it I may be, but what I am interested in around this slippery listening is the extension of this to the question Jane posed to us to consider: what are the intrinsic problems with listening to a community? I guess my link here with the above spiel is with the unsaid. I am familiar with the particular familial impacts and unsaids related to heroin. There's plenty of other equally powerful unsaids I am entirely unfamiliar with - for which I have no radar, no measure of what lies in the silences, no listening skills at hand to use as tools. That's the killer and the point of interest with listening to a community I reckon. It's the lack of tools. Not just to access, consult and listen to a defined community (let alone the nightmare of defining the community in the first place) - but to listen to the unsaids from that community too.

I know myself well enough that it's always that which is left out, unsaid, edited or unthought that engages me most strongly. I like layers. And that which isn't fully revealed.

Which again, leaves me unresolved about this piece of writing. I'm not sure I've addressed the task fully. But I guess what I want said about this is that listening to a community contains the same issues for me as does listening to a single person or group or family - quite simply, there's always more going on than there are words for. This awareness or position doesn't make anything any clearer - in fact it complicates and messes everything up because it implies that the gaps have to be filled with something else. Something invented or implanted. It does though make listening a more interesting task. Frustrating, but interesting that's for sure.

The exercise we did the other week about when I feel listened to, when I listen to others and myself, and when I stop listening to myself feels a long way away at the moment. Very briefly, it was interesting to consider my patterns and triggers around my personal listening. And to notice the physical signs for being listened to - particularly the requirement for silence and pause in my listening.

Over the last few years I have invested a lot into the question of what makes me happy. I've figured quite a lot of it out. And mostly I know that what makes me happy is staying connected to the question itself, not the actions that deliver me happiness. What makes me happy is interest in, asking of and listening to myself.