Listening and Not Listening to Voices of Women Who Worked as Maids in the Jim Crow South.

By

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Abstract. This article discusses the art and science of listening. The focus is on listening, with an emphasis on the personal narrative which can take us into others' lives, into their feeling memories, as they describe what they saw, heard, tasted, and smelled in another place, another time. The voices are those of storytellers who are older African American women who had worked in the homes of white families in Mississippi and Alabama and who shared their pasts in taped interviews with a passion, anger interspersed with humor.

To hear or read the stories of these older African American women who grew up sharecropping and working as servants in the Deep South is to come face to face with injustice and trauma, and the guilt that many of us southern whites bear. This paper briefly looks at the importance of listening in order to understand. It also discusses failure to listen as a common defense mechanism, well known in social psychology. Many do not want to hear, so they tune out. They do not ask the questions of those who were oppressed because they do not want to know. The final portion of this article presents an excerpt from the transcribed tapes of the women who wanted to record their memories for posterity. From the collection of interviews, the reader can get a glimpse at least of the hardship of the lives of the descendants of slaves forced like their ancestors to endure the systemic cruelties of a system designed to keep one race subordinate, uneducated, and subservient to the other race.

Background for Recording the Maid Stories

Growing up in New Orleans in the 1950s, I had close relationships with several African American women who worked for my family and friends' families as maids. We called them cooks; some were even Creole cooks. Anyway, I knew the norms and customs of segregation, how they were enforced and how the people—white and black— got around them in clever and creative ways. If my grandfather's maid wanted to attend a wedding at a white church, for example, she could be dressed in her maid's uniform and present to care for an infant or to push the wheelchair of an elderly wedding guest. She was actually in attendance because she was regarded as a member of the family.

School integration was a big deal. No one objected to white and black children playing together as they often did, but after puberty, any interaction between the races took on another meaning entirely. No one ever said why. I was in high school when integration was fought all over the South with a vengeance that seemed all out of proportion to a mere interest in education. Lower class whites had their own reasons for wanting to maintain the vestiges of white supremacy. The battle for civil rights in the South was therefore huge. Although I marched in the Civil Rights Movement in college, I did not appreciate the magnitude or nature of the resistance until years later. And when I argued with segregationists, I certainly made no effort to listen.

As a college professor in Iowa in the 1990s, I learned of a settlement of a black population in Waterloo, Iowa, many of whom had migrated from towns in rural Mississippi. For years I thought about these people and about the wealth of knowledge they would have. If only I could hear their stories, record their stories and reflect on them. Southern history seemed to be all about slavery and the suffering in the South of slaves; some attention in the media was paid to racial attacks on black men. But there was practically nothing from the point of view of black women who had worked in such close contact with white people. "What did they really think of those white families?" I wondered. And what did they think of the spoiled-rotten children who they had to pick up after and even sometimes to address as Miss Nancy or Mr. John? Theirs is a personal, insider's knowledge, preserved in a rarely pure form because they had moved away during the midst of Jim Crow. In other words, the early memories of life in the South had not been fused and therefore contaminated with later events as integration came to the region. I felt an urgency to preserve the stories and soon, before these chroniclers of history had passed on.

And if the stories are not preserved, their children and their children's children will not know what they endured and also how they overcame their hardship.

To be convincing, the stories needed to be told to black interviewers. Fortunately, I had a graduate student in social work—Charletta Sudduth—who had that warm, nurturant quality the project needed. She was more interested in having children, though, than recruiting and recording narrators. It took several years, but she finally had a change of heart, and her recordings are beautiful. The second interviewer, David Jackson, was a local oral historian who requested to be involved in the project. So over 20 years later, after I first got the idea,

we had a collection of over 40 maid narratives, which were published into a book by LSU Press (van Wormer, Jackson, and Sudduth, 2012).

I have these interviews on tape; they are being preserved in a lasting form for posterity by the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa library. Hearing them on tape in the voices of their rich southern accents and inflections is a moving experience. But reading them is another form of listening. Because here you can analyze the words, slow the speed of transmission, and pause to absorb the content. The content is powerful, especially for those who grew up in the South of long ago and experienced these things directly or indirectly.

Not Listening—Tuning Out

Responsive listening is an art that draws on imagination, sensitivity, and empathy. Science comes into play as we analyze the words and get beyond the words to the meaning. For people who want to know, the words will resonate. For people who don't, the words will just seem to drift away; the speaker will be delivering a monologue as the person he or she is talking to is tuned out, and the lack of reciprocity between speaker and the one spoken to will be discernible.

Not listening has psychological and social functions. We listen when it serves our purposes, and when we want to hear the sentiments that are being expressed. We respond well to statements and stories that are consistent with our preformed belief systems. Today, people expect to hear negative histories of slavery and the Jim Crow South, for example. This is consistent with media portrayals of the slave owners, redneck white sheriffs and families who had servants. We can expect then that positive memories shared by the black women would be discounted and overlooked. Indeed, as we presented narratives from the book, and as narrators told their stories publicly, people in the audience sometimes grew angry if the speakers said anything positive about their earlier lives in Mississippi or about their employers. Parts of the stories that did not fit the audience's preconceptions

were discounted. Life is complex and so are relationships; attachments grow, even under the most trying and unjust of circumstances.

We do not listen now to the whole story, to the good along with the bad. In the past, this refusal by white southerners to acknowledge the hypocrisy in their social system was much more extreme than anything we have today. Within the white circles of southerners who had maids, questions could not be asked. Children learned this from the earliest ages, children of both races.

Kathryn Stockett, author of *The Help* (2009), states in her autobiographical appendix to the book that she was taught not to talk about such uncomfortable things as race relations, and certainly not in the presence of black

people. Generations of whites, in fact, were brought up to keep their mouths shut. Race, like sex, was a forbidden topic in white southern households because these

topics caused embarrassment and tension. Silence is also a way to preserve the secrecy of facts that are troublesome in some way. (See for example, Blassingame, 1985; Dollard, 1937; Powdermaker, Rogers, 2006; Sensibar, 2009; and Tucker, 1988).

Several instances of white children being hushed by their elders over their feelings of concern for what they could see was mistreatment of the servants emerged in the white narrators' stories. Some, such as historian Hal Chase, visitedthe woman who had worked for his family later in his life, someone who had so strongly influenced them in childhood. Chase talked to her about the black migration northward, a topic that never would have come up in earlier days. In his words:

> I learned she had a younger brother who left home at sixteen for the steel mills in Pittsburgh, where he died tragically in an industrial accident. Clearly, she had been very close to that brother. His death was a lifelong loss for her. So for me, what I learned from our conversation was that to really understand the person behind the uniform, you have to talk with them, and really listen to them. (van Wormer, et al., p.218)

Children also learned as they grew up that the deep emotional attachments they had for their maids who often nurtured them and helped raise them were inappropriate and to be suppressed. Sallie Bingham (1991), of the Louisville newspaper-publishing dynasty, explains the feelings most poignantly:

> One of these facts was the passionate love white children often developed for their black nurses, who had raised and loved them from babyhood, an attachment that must be suppressed as the white child came into maturity, and finally replaced by humorous stories about devoted darkies" (p.67).

From the black perspective, some of the storytellers from the older generation found that members of the younger generations do not appreciate the legacy of the past and are even critical of their elders who lived under Jim Crow for following the laws and the social norms. Narrator Irene Williams from Springhill, Louisiana, shared this frustration:

> You know sometimes I set up here and I tell my grandbabies how we used to have to do. You know what they tell me? "That was back in the olden days." I say, "No, Honey, you
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> just don't understand. This wasreal." And I tell them how we were being treated, and they say, "No, Iwouldn't have took it." But I say, "No, you would have took it, what wedid, because there was nothing you could do about it." The kids today, they think it's a joke, but it's no joke, it was real. (van Wormer, et. al. p.169)

This is another form of not listening, in this case, probably because these young people do not want to feel the pain.

Interviewer Listening

To promote the genuineness of the sharing and to make the interview less like a formal interview and more like a chat between intimates, we used only a few standard questions, and these were all open-ended in nature. Samples are:

Describe your family and the community you grew up in.

Who in your family worked for white people and what did they and you do?

What were the rules of the household where you worked? Could you use the bathroom, enter through the front door, etc.?

What was your relationship like with the woman of the house and other family members?

Reflective listening is interactive. Charletta Sudduth, the book co-author mentioned previously, put her communication skills to good use in connecting with the women, including her own mother who had worked as a maid in Oxford, Mississippi, who shared their memories. With all her interviewees, Sudduth achieved a striking sense of oneness, even with women she had never met before. On the tapes, one can hear the shared laughter one moment, and the shared anger or

sorrow the next. At one point in her first interview with Vinella Byrd, she responds to woman's story with, "You've got me crying right now." At another point, they are both laughing. In her second taped interview, which was with Annie Victoria Johnson, she can be heard gasping along with her storyteller on hearing a description of black women wet-nursing babies for the white women. Throughout those interviews, the sharing of emotions is palpable to the extent that the roles of interviewer and interviewee had become intertwined.

Mamie Johnson shared a harrowing tale about a boy who left the fields in the hope of attending school but was shot in the arm for his efforts. Then sheadded:

> I'm going to tell you something. When you hear these people talking
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> about uneducated people, now this is why, in the South, so many of them can't
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> read and write their name—because they didn't get no education, and they
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> had to work. Now, you know, when you had a bunch of people, you bringing
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> them up and giving them a house to stay in and then they working, they working
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> for you for nothing!" (van Wormer, et al., p. 82)

By simply saying "Uh-huh" several times in a tone of distress, the interviewer echoed Mrs. Johnson's anger effectively.

Vinella Byrd, born in 1922, provided this general description:

> The white kids started school in September and us, the ones who should
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> have been in school, were picking cotton. So that would be different. We

didn't get to go to school until the cotton was picked. I think it shaped how I

feel about education. I believe education is the most important thing you can

have when you are growing up. (van Wormer, et al. p. 75)

Charletta Sudduth's response to Mrs. Byrd was to pick up on her valuing of education and to credit her with her contribution to the community. This affirmation turned out to be especially meaningful as Mrs. Byrd lived only a few months longer.

The Stories

Today, historians and others talk about slavery and the legacy of slavery while overlooking another generation of oppressed but resilient people who endured a social system that no longer exists. For various reasons, these

stories have been suppressed for some time, often by lack of enthusiasm by the next generation, and a desire to bury the history by the class of whites who grew up with servants in their household.

Think of our storytellers as you read these lines of Langston Hughes (1931):

Children, I come back today / to tell you a story of the long dark way

That I had to climb, that I had to know

In order that the race might live and grow" (p.155).

There is a strange prescience in these lines, which have great relevance today. Let us listen to the words of African American women who grew up and worked under the cruelty of Jim Crow,

who raised their families (and some white children as well), formed relationships with the whites they worked for, but ultimately left for a new life up north.

Excerpt from One Narrative

Of all the women interviewed who migrated from the Deep South, Annie Victoria Johnson, born in Ripley, Mississippi, in 1925, had the least education; she also in many ways is the most articulate and detailed.
. Mrs. Johnson's interview is remarkable for her memory down to the minute details concerning matters from the mundane (food preparation, quilting arrangements) to the profound (race relations, religious worship). As

you read this transcript, consider that this story was told in a lively conversational tone to Charletta Sudduth, amid shared animated laughter and gasping at some of the content.

Interviewer: Coming back to your work as a domestic worker, can you say more about that experience?

My grandmother was born a slave. She had to do it [work as a house servant] so my mother watched her do it. Back then, that was the only way they had to get anything. Some black women got married and their husbands didn't allow them to go to the field. They didn't allow them to

work in the yard orthe garden. They didn't allow them to work for the white women. Some black men back then are just like they are now. They wouldn't have you working for any white folks. And it seemed that they had a

harder time because back then, everyone got along and helped each other. But because some of theblack men didn't want their wives around white folks, they caught hell because when they needed help, they wouldn't help them.

Interviewer: Can you talk about some things you learned from this work?

I learned a lot about caring for children from my mother…. We didn't lie around the house and sleep late. Every time a child got big enough, he had a job: feeding the chickens, slopping the pigs, going and getting the cows to be milked. There was no toilet, so, you know, we had night pots. You learned how to take out that night pot and keep it clean. All that kind of stuff! *[laughs]*. And we went down the hill to the spring to get water before it got dark, before the snakes started crawling. We kept our butter and milk in the spring to keep cool. We didn't have any icebox or freezer or refrigerator! So we kept our milk and butter in the spring. (van Wormer, et al., p. 94)

Conclusion

The overall purpose of the original study was to obtain personal narratives from a time in this nation's history that is largely unknown to the younger generations. It is my belief that we can learn much from this period of history, both about how people survived psychologically and physically as well as to discover facts about life in the Deep South during the Great Depression up through the 1950s. Gathering the stories required that a sense of rapport be established between storyteller and listener. Potential topics included events of a likely disturbing nature

ranging from threats to the lives of friends and family members to sexual harassment to deprivations of education and livelihood. Due to the responsive listening skills of the interviewers, the narrators shared a great deal of personal details that they otherwise might have been ashamed to convey.

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