On Listening

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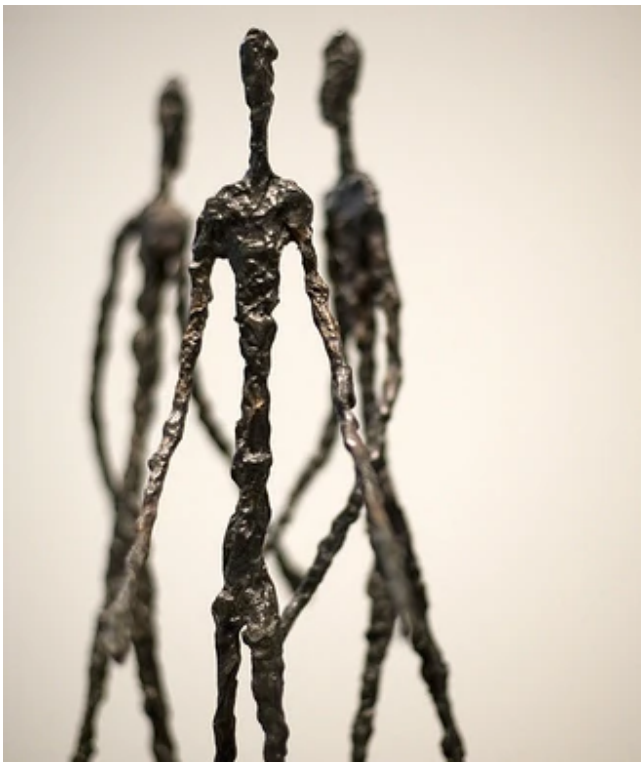

The late Lucie Brock-Broido, the best teacher I ever had, told her students to hold nothing back. *Put it all in there*, she'd say. *Give yourself away*.

After we had given our poems all we thought we had to give, after the group's discussion, Lucie crossed our lines out in exquisite ink. She moved stanzas. She circled and starred our few shining, indisputable moments. Then she read us back to us: our own voices, heightened by omission; ourselves, only more ourselves than we had previously learned to be.

Every line of mine she'd stripped away was something I'd affirmed and sharpened through countless revisions. Each of those lines was a sentiment some part of me insisted must belong.

In *The Divided Self*, R. D. Laing describes an argument between two patients that breaks off when one of them says: "You are arguing in order to have the pleasure of triumphing over me. At best you win an argument. At worst you lose an argument. *I am arguing in order to preserve my existence*." That is what the parts of us are doing when they hold their ground through draft after draft. All the voices in our inner menageries can be honored, at the right time and place. Learning to write well -- or to lead well -- is learning how to heighten by omission. As we become quieter inside, we turn our listening outward, to the work.

In the first episode of Marc Roudebush's new podcast *On Listening*, Jennifer Garvey Berger distinguishes listening to win from listening to fix and listening to learn. My conversation with Marc,

titled *Unlearning the "Curse of Sophistication,"* begins with a pattern very similar to what Jennifer describes as listening to win.

Through the decade I spent building Katzenbach Partners, our competitors were the largest and most sophisticated firms in the world: McKinsey, BCG and their brethren. We worked hard to articulate in clear, compelling terms how we were differentiated from these firms. We listened hard for anything that would help us bring that differentiation to life.

The curse of sophistication grows best in exactly those conditions. Unlearning that curse was learning to pay attention to more basic, fundamental things – not worrying so much about what I could see that no one else could, as worrying about how the other person needed to be seen. Often what's most important in a situation is something many people can see. Differentiation isn't so important as careful, steady, welcoming attention to whatever matters most.

Almost every failure that could have gone otherwise is a failure to listen well. We fail when we listen wrongly to the world, or when we listen wrongly to ourselves, held in thrall by the parts of us "arguing to preserve their existence." Often those two go together. The parts of ourselves clamoring to stay in the story pull our attention away from what we need to see outside us.

Listening comfortably affirms us. Listening fully is unsettling.

Marc Roudebush, in this series of conversations *On Listening* has taken up a word most of us think we understand, and helps us see how none of us understands it well enough. As I listened again to our conversation, I felt a little like I did three decades ago in Lucie's classroom: reflected back to myself as someone one step closer to becoming the listener and the thinker I wish to be.

Here is our conversation.