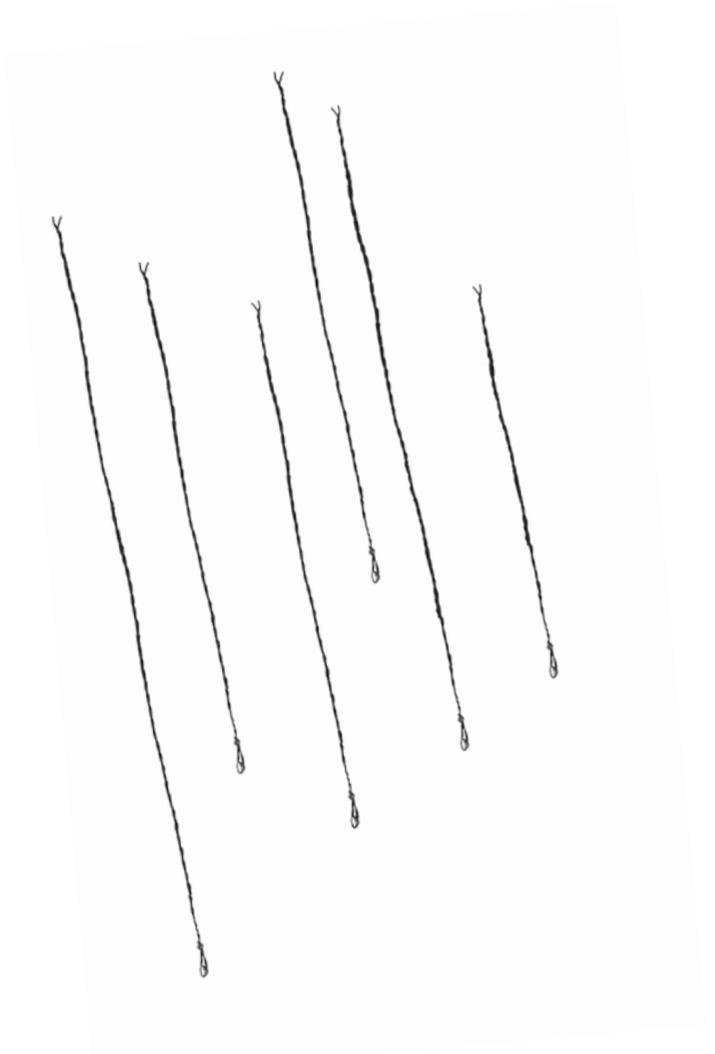


ALT / OPTION



Fearless Speech, Fearless Listening

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I was cleaning my room. One by one, I shifted all the things out. I took the posters off the wall, the cooking pots off the shelf, shifted out of the room the television set and the refrigerator, the fish tank and all the gifts that had been kept on it. The room became as still as a picture and entirely soundless. Without the toys and gifts, it looked incomplete, like a 'thing'. My eyes roamed the room, from one corner to the other. I imagined faint outlines of the objects that were no longer there, and tried to remember when they had been brought home, who had brought them; I wondered about who would have made them. But even as I thought about the things that had been in here, all my eyes could see were the different corners of the room, now no longer concealed by those objects. Bare now, it was as if the room was looking back at me. As if it wanted to reveal to me something about itself. I felt an unknown feeling, something akin to happiness, brimming up inside me. But more recognisably, I felt a fear. I felt as if I was standing not in one, but in two rooms.



A friend of mine from childhood had recently started working. When I met her, I asked her, “Do you like it? Are you enjoying the freedom that comes with stepping out of the house everyday?” She looked at me for a long moment, then smiled and said, “The strangest thing about going to work is that everyone wants me to talk about it, but it seems to me no one really wants to listen”. When she saw I was a little confused about how to tell her I sincerely wanted to know, she elaborated:

One person asks me about freedom, another about exhaustion, someone else about the difficulty of working, and yet another about the exhilaration of finding my own way in the world. It is as if the frames through which I can speak are outside of me. I keep talking, but it seems to me that whatever I say to someone, he or she already knows it. Moreover, if I become inward at home for a few hours, my family thinks I'm hiding something, and if I intervene confidently in any debate in my own house, my visiting relatives object and say that I've become a loud-mouth ever since I started working. So, if there's one thing I can say with absolute certainty about my going out to work, it's this: it has affected and changed what I can say and how much I should speak.

It seemed to me my friend was telling me something very fundamental – that whenever we start something new, or make a departure from our routine in even small ways, the first thing that happens is a shift in how we encounter speech. This set me thinking. *Are there thresholds of speech in daily life that we are not permitted to cross? What would happen if we crossed them?*

I started paying attention at home. I filled notebook after notebook transcribing conversations; I wrote down everything anyone said. Simple conversations my mother had with us, conversations between us and our guests, what someone said after a visit to a doctor or to her son's teacher at school, at weddings, when someone was born, when a stranger knocked at the door, when people gathered to offer condolences for someone's death. Months passed. My notebooks, and my mind, filled with words.

It was festival season. One evening, my friends and I stepped out into the streets of the neighbourhood to watch the magic that travelling magicians were performing. Everywhere, the audience stood mesmerised; many requested the magicians for certain tricks, each more difficult than the last. It suddenly struck me: *A magician can't say, 'It's impossible!' My mind raced through my notes from the last few months. I thought: My mother can't say to me or to my brothers and sisters, 'I forgot'. A doctor can't say to her patient, 'I don't know, I'm still learning'. A teacher can't say to her student, 'I don't understand'.*

As I turned back home, I remembered how once there had been a bitter fight between my mother and my eldest brother, and he had said, “I would have told you, but you wouldn't have been able to bear it”. Things didn't remain the same at home after this. Hadn't my friend poignantly said, “...it seems to me no one really wants to listen”?

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me we create thresholds of listening which determine what and how much we will hear, and, in turn, what speech we will allow around us. *What is my capacity to listen?* I wondered. *How and when is it challenged?* As I lay in bed, I thought, *Are there people around me who might want to say something to me but hesitate because they think I don't have in me the capacity to listen?*

I switched on the light, opened my notebook to a fresh page and wrote:
Fearless speech requires fearless listening.



I would write everyday. I liked writing, liked the way my words would take shape, liked the way my hand looked as I wrote. I'd put *mehandi* on my hands or wear bangles, and then sit down to write. But very soon I would also want to stop thinking about the characters I was writing about. That is why each of my stories was half a page long – my characters would die in half a page.

I wasn't alone in this. I was with many others who were, like me, beginning to experience their forays into thinking through writing. And it took us some time to realise all of us were killing our characters – if not of an incurable disease, they'd die of heartbreak; if not in a road accident, they'd meet their end in a calamitous earthquake. The turning point came when we were trying to compose a text together, where each person contributed a line by turn to build the narrative. In this text, one character died after every three lines! It was as if we were all flinching from thinking, and so committing a sort of 'thought *hara-kiri*'. We resolved that day to stop killing our characters.

But then we started on a different track. We'd have long discussions every week about what we had written. Usually these resulted in the voicing of differing points of view, and examples – both from personal experience and from the experiences of those around us – would be cited to corroborate arguments. Slowly, everyone's texts started beginning with the refrain '*hamare yahan*', that is, 'this is how it is where I come from'. End of discussion. The fall in the decibel level of our discussions soon produced concerned enquiries from the neighbours, and so it can be said that circumstances forced us to ignore this repeated refrain, and eventually each of us was compelled to drop it altogether from our texts.

For some time, however, the more ingenious among us continued to invent and evoke different boundaries to restrict being pushed by others to think in ways other than the one we had chosen. I, for instance, continued to fight thinking by saying, "But I'm not permitted to think about this". And if I was still pushed, I'd get provoked and say, "*Meri marzi*" – I'll do as I wish. I did everything in my power to push thought away.

One day, Azra read out a beautiful text she had written about a cycle rickshaw ride. It was elegant in its description. Yashoda still says, after so many years, that she was very inspired by it, and it changed the way she approached writing. But I was moved by it for an entirely different reason. After Azra finished reading out her text, someone asked her to read again the lines she had written about the rickshaw puller. They were:

He was a handsome young man. So fair, that he may have been Kashmiri. He also looked educated. 'Poor thing!' I thought to myself. 'Surely he can get a better job than this...'

"Do you remember anything else about the man?" we asked Azra.

But Azra didn't. She was quiet for a long time. We were all waiting. Then she looked up from her notebook and said, "By calling him 'poor thing', I pushed him away from my thought. Maybe he attracted me, and I used those words to produce a gap, a kind of thought full-stop".

I think now that if each of us had set out in search of our 'thinking self' alone, it would have been a tall order indeed. But in the co-presence of many others, this search started finding a language and a craft. Babli says that her repeated encounter with others – all of us – in a search similar to her own caused a loosening of her 'I'. From this emerged an inchoate search to produce a new 'we'. That's probably how it was for us all. For many of us, thinking started with this 'I' which was fearful of thinking, fearful of how we thought and how we would be received by others. But as time passed, this 'I' got complicated and, I would even say, started searching for a deeper relationship with the world.



Everyone had started telling me to emerge out of myself and write. I had taken to saying to everyone that I had no thoughts, that nothing came to my mind. It was true; that's how I really felt. But, after repeatedly hearing from everyone "emerge out of yourself", I slowly wondered if I was really in self-love after all.

I opened my notebook to a fresh page and wrote:

I am in self-love.

Then I leafed through some blank pages and wrote again on a new page:

Listen to others.

That week, I made time to get together some people for tea and snacks at my house. Instead of constantly deprecating my own self, I would praise others. Therefore, there was to be a simple rule for this evening of storytelling. I explained it:

Someone will begin by telling a story. Everyone has to listen carefully. After he or she finishes, the person next to her will praise her by saying '*Wah! Wah!*' (Bravo! Bravo!), and then tell a story which follows from the story she has just heard.

There was a slight restlessness in the room. But then Faisal began. His story was about skipping class to go watch a play. "Bravo! Bravo!" said everyone. Soon there were stories about running away from the village to come to the city, "Bravo! Bravo!"; someone's travels through the city ticketless, "Bravo!"; getting out of home to look for someone in the middle

of the night, “Bravo!”; taking help from a postman to locate the address of a long-lost friend, “Bravo!”; long-distance phone calls by a young girl to her mother telling her of the new places she went to every day since she left home...

I was listening carefully. With every story told, there was anticipation for the next story one would hear, and also a challenge to oneself to find a story which matched and built on the daring pitch of the previous story. I realised that without intending for it to be that way, everyone’s stories were about one question – how far would you go to listen to me? In a flash, I remembered a woman I knew in my neighbourhood, who had taken in and raised a girl who had wandered away from her elders during a rally. After that evening, I went and met her several times.



For some days, Shamsher had been meeting and holding long conversations with Babu Baba, a man who travels a lot, who is famous in the neighbourhood for his fearlessness, a soothsayer, a practitioner of black magic. Shamsher would come back from his conversations thoughtful. There was something about these conversations which went beyond storytelling. Shamsher would say, “Babu Baba doesn’t talk about his life at all. He doesn’t think of his life as a series of events, or something that needs to be narrativised”. It seemed to me Babu Baba was challenging Shamsher to rethink how people narrate themselves, and this is what drew Shamsher to him day after day, and that Shamsher was struggling to find a way of narrating his encounters with Babu Baba back to us. But every day, there would be one image or the other of Babu Baba that Shamsher came back with. One day, he said Babu Baba had said to him:

Do you see my hands? With these hands, I can hold someone I love close to me. With them, I could kill someone. If I raise my hands, I can reach god. If I spread them out, I could make the entire world my own, travel from here to anywhere.

With a gesture of his hands, Babu Baba could extend himself from where he stood to infinity.

This set me wondering. Writing and sharing with others what I had been thinking, for days, weeks, months and years, knowing that others had been reading and listening to me, my words, for very long, I had slowly begun to feel a strange fear taking hold of me. A fear of proximity. I feared my listeners may hold on to one or a few of my words and define me through them. I feared that someone, after reading what I had written, might say one day, “I have understood you”. I feared being caged forever in my own words. I feared I might soon begin to feel fearful of my own words, begin to distrust them.

But like Babu Baba, am I too not limitless, constituted by infinite things, small pieces that don’t seamlessly join to make a whole? If that’s how I perceive myself, how will it affect what

I write, how I write it? I decided to do an experiment with myself. Starting that day, I would write not long texts but small pieces, of one paragraph or two, on index cards. I'd write 500, no 1,000 index cards, then shuffle them up and make different sequences of them, to construct innumerable narratives that would be about myself, about others. I wondered if in this way, it would become possible to find an expression that does not exhaust surprises, for me and for others around me. I started that day. For my first entry I wrote:

I am not being stubborn when I say we must break the moulds that are made for us and demand that the limits of what is acceptable be pushed. I'm not being stubborn when I say we must participate in different contexts as if they were our own. I wasn't being stubborn when, some years ago, I refused to leave the job I had in hand for months, even though every passer-by made promises to me about getting me a better, bigger job. I'm not being stubborn when I refuse to see myself the way everyone else says they see me. I'm not being stubborn when I continue to do that which everyone around me, near me, thinks is dangerous for my future, because I believe in it. I know I must test myself in terms I choose myself.

⊙

One morning, I pasted a sheet of paper on the door of the room in which we meet to discuss our questions and thoughts and share our notes. I had intended it as a kind of announcement about what our meetings were about. A sort of self-definition. Everyone stopped at the door to read it before entering, and really appreciated it. But I noticed that Nasreen was spending the longest time reading my text. Her face was very thoughtful. I went up to her to ask her what she was thinking. Then I saw she had cut out some words in the text and replaced them with others.

She travels *herself* *she*
~~We travel~~ from place to place, trying to connect people to ~~us~~. And sometimes ~~we~~ as
curls *hides* *her* *her* *She doesn't*
 if ~~curl~~ up and ~~hide~~ in a corner hoping someone will find ~~us~~, discover ~~us~~. ~~We don't~~ have
 any fixed social definition, that is why ~~we~~ *she* can take on different roles. Sometimes ~~we~~ *she* can
 be like a bright shower of lights that sparkles up the night sky. And sparkles in the sky
 belong to no one; in the sky no one can tame them or claim them as their own. Stitching
 together myriad scratches of images of different people around ~~us~~, ~~we try~~ *her she tries*
 life into them through thinking them. ~~We aren't~~ *She isn't* some scrap of paper that has accidentally

blown into this context with a gust of wind. *She is* We are part of our environment. And *she seeks* we seek
nurturing from our environment. *She is* We are like a membrane rather than a door we attempt
to keep destabilising separations between ideas of 'inside' and 'outside'. *She tries* We try to keep
the threshold of entry of others into *her life* our midst simple and welcoming.

She turned to me and said, "I was thinking that to all the puzzles that personalities around us are, we must add this personality too, to think with".

