

**“Already Always Listening”**  
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After class last week, Rose and I went to lunch. During lunch Rose proceeded to tell me about what she observed while I was reading my story, “The Bathroom Police.” She said that she needed to tell me, because no one else would. Using terminology I was unfamiliar with (but which I later researched) she talked about people who don’t listen when I read because they have already judged me as someone they are certain is going to say something offensive or otherwise unworthy of being heard. This included some eye-rolling and otherwise shutting down of listeners as I began to read. Although I thought my story was hilarious, others didn’t think it was funny, she told me, because many people are turned off by scatological humor. When she told me what scatological meant, I was really surprised, because that wasn’t what I had written. But that seems to be how it was taken.

We went on to talk about how in class, the reader has no way of knowing how the rest of the group is reacting, because the reader is looking at the page being read from, not at the listeners. What a disadvantage that is. It had been a year since I got the “talking-to” about avoiding certain graphic descriptions. I guess it never occurred to me that it might include public bathrooms.

We talked about the problems of being in a writing group that is unsupportive of one’s writing and the issue of being censored before one even begins. We talked about starting a different writing group, and whether it would be wise for me to continue in the group I’m in.

At home alone, I wanted nothing more than to talk to someone about this. But there was no one to call. The people who really understand me and will be honest with me were not available. I found myself wondering once again, how is it that I seem to always end up offending. I’d really rather be told I said or did something wrong than to be left in the dark. I find it hard to believe that it took a year of being in the group for another member to tell me that a certain thing I had read was offensive to someone else.

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On Wednesday Rose and I got together again. I had already done the research to try to understand what “already always thinking” was about. Apparently this is a psychological term to describe what the modern “fight or flight” response has evolved into. In this day and age when we no longer need to worry about lions and tigers (and bears, oh my), our biochemical

filter system has changed from evaluating the safety of our environment to creating filters through which we judge everything we sense. These filters are created by the values of the culture in which we grew up. Our filters are the little voices inside each of us which react to what we see, hear, taste, and so on.

The trick, Rose says, is to learn to recognize the filters as soon as they pop up, and own them. How do we own our filters? As soon as you notice one, she says, write it down. Then contemplate it. And as you contemplate, ask yourself these three questions: 1) how does it serve me; 2) what does it cost me; and 3) what does it cost the people around me.

These filters are really about being judgmental, I realize, and I've always hated how judgmental I can be. I learned this from both of my parents, whose judgmentalism disgusted me, and yet I turned out the same way. My mother practically beat it into me that pregnancy before marriage is SO sinful it's very nearly a crime. And I've had my share of trouble for speaking up about this issue to the wrong people. I'm still adjusting to a world in which pregnancy outside of wedlock has become the norm. I recognize that the world is changing, though not always to my liking. I am changing too as I learn and grow. Yet I can't help but regret the lessons not learned, either because I learned a false lesson, or the blockages in my mental processes prevented me from getting the lesson in the first place.

Rose tells me that this writer's workshop does not serve me, since so few can actually hear, or want to hear, what I have to say. "Why do you keep going back," she wants to know. "You don't need these people's approval."

"No," I tell her, "but I want their friendship."

And perhaps this is the real crux of the issue. After 7 years in Spokane, I still feel like I have hardly any friends. And in a way, this rejection by the writers mirrors the rejection by the book club I was in for just one year. It seems that I'm okay in the eyes of others as long as I keep my mouth shut. But no matter how hard I've tried over the years, I just can't stop being who I am, and I am a VOICE, a course and reactive one.

Always already listening. Always always listening. Is there a difference, or do they mean the same thing? It doesn't matter. What matters is to recognize what's happening and move on.

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It always helps the mind to open when one reads. I am no exception. I want very much to both respond to the written word as well as share the interesting pieces that I read. I'm so intrigued by an item in the *Christian Science Monitor* about women in the mountains of Albania who live as men, not because of sexual preference, but so they can inherit land from their

families. The medieval law being followed specifies that “the only way for a woman to inherit property is to become a celibate *burmesha*.” I love this concept. It would make such a great novel. I hope someone will write it so I can read it. I know I’m not going to write it myself — I have too many other projects to finish. I am someone like my mother, who is really good at starting new projects without ever finishing the old ones. Hah! Maybe I should just throw the mending away!

Now there’s a filter for me to grapple with — hard to name in only one word, but a clear line of sight in my mind takes me back and back and back in time to the roots of this filter: Waste Not, Want Not.

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2023

In 2020, I began keeping a list of all the writings I had read in the Writers Workshop. In my journals dating back to when I first started attending the class, I have the information but had never put it into my computer. The instructor had already changed from Lisa to Lou, and I was growing more dissatisfied with the class, even though we were now meeting on Zoom because of the Pandemic. I was enjoying the class less and less. I wasn’t as compatible with Lou as I had been of Lisa, and I didn’t think she was as good a teacher. She also chose what I considered some really lame freewrite topics; I began to write less and read more of my older essays. When I tipped into political topics, Lou scowled at me, and though she seemed to appreciate my contributions at first, as time went on she got more and more short with me.

Every quarter when we introduced ourselves to the newcomers, I would indicate that I led Not Your Mother’s Writing Group, and occasionally I would ask if anyone wanted to join. Then Lou accused me of poaching her students. When I finally reached the end of my rope, I wrote a scathing letter—much of it about the need to teach people how to use Zoom—to the administrators of the program. I never sent it, in part because I ended it with bragging about my own abilities as a writers workshop leader; after talking it over with the members of Not Your Mother’s Writing Group, I came to my senses. I already had a questionable reputation with the program; in previous quarters I had been both a troublesome student and a teacher who created issues at the facility where I was teaching. I realized that, like the workshop members from those early classes, the administrators too were always already listening.