

from John Durham Peters
"Speaking into the Air: A History
of the Idea of Communication"
U of Chicago - Chicago 1999

Conclusion:

A Squeeze of the Hand

Come; let us squeeze hands all around; nay, let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. HERMAN MELVILLE, *MOBY DICK*

Communication is a trouble we are stuck with. Other people and other times may be immune from such worries. Even today, many dwellers on the planet find it easy to live without any such concept. But for the chattering classes of the world's rich societies—and the fact that these words have reached you makes you a member, if only honorary, of such classes—the worry about how to connect with people, near and far, has become a given of our daily doings. In this conclusion I can only tie some threads together. The full working out of the book's implications for thought and life awaits another day.

The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made

To think and speak in fragments of dialogue has become our lot. As Raymond Williams says of the drama of Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg,

I heard, as if for the first time, what was still, by habit, called dramatic speech, even dialogue: heard it in Chekhov and noticed now a habitual strangeness: that the voices were no longer speaking to or at each other; were speaking with each other, perhaps, with themselves in the presence of others. . . . no individual ever quite finishing what he had

begun to say, but intersecting, being intersected by the words of others, casual and distracted, words in their turn unfinished.¹

Williams's syntax mimics the discursive sprawl he has in mind. Failed synapses are a major resource in modern dialogue and life. Twentieth-century drama, from Beckett and Ionesco to the Marx Brothers and Woody Allen, exploits these gaps to disquieting and comic effect, as do the sociological studies of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. The distortion of dialogue of course is as old as theater—malfunctions in turn taking, miscues extrapolated into gigantic webs of faulty assumptions, the slightest gestures taken as portents and the most obvious signals missed, all with comic or tragic consequences. But the key word in Williams's description is "habit." Broken conversation has become as habitual as it is strange. Twist a radio dial or rustle a newspaper, and you will encounter bits of discourse that never quite connect. Public communications have grown increasingly miscellaneous. As James Clerk Maxwell once asked, What if the book of nature were really a magazine? Crosscutting between distinct lines of plot has become a mark not only of public speech in the newspapers, but of private conversation as well. Whatever dialogue might mean, today it is largely a wash of many sounds. Bakhtin was right to understand dialogue not as a particularly privileged form of ethical and political life, but as a jumble of voices.

That face-to-face talk is as laced with gaps as distant communication is a proposition I take to be both true and historical. The linguistic practices by which we humans caress and harass each other are enormously variable, and those who worry about "communication" belong to a world in which particular forms of talk and relationships have made questions of coupling urgent. But the delay of dialogue was long a potential in letters, prayers, and devotions to the dead. Neither is physical presence assurance that "communication" will occur. You can read poetry to a person in a coma, never knowing if the words are "getting through," but the same doubt is just as relevant in other settings, as any teacher or parent knows. Electronic media have taught us the chasms in all conversation. Conversations, after all, consist of single turns that may or may not link successfully with following turns. [To put it a bit archly, dialogue may simply be two people taking turns broadcasting at each other.] We tend to resist acknowledging the gaps at the heart of

1. Raymond Williams, "Drama in a Dramatised Society," in *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan O'Connor (London: Routledge, 1989), 12.

everyday interchange, even though negotiating them is an accomplishment at which most competent language users are quite expert. But let a pause in a conversation go on too long and the din of the universe starts to fill the spaces, the air pressure mounting rapidly, threatening to suck everyone into the abyss. The gap between sending and receiving is simply made obvious by settings that bar a second turn of response (such as receive-only radio or public address) or in which the central exchange is subject to technical difficulties (such as the telephone or, indeed, the face-to-face). If nineteenth-century historicism and spiritualism took reading as communion with the author, in late twentieth-century poststructuralism interaction with a person has become a reading of textual traces. The image of conversation as two speakers taking turns in order to move progressively toward fuller understanding of each other masks two deeper facts: that all discourse, however many the speakers, must bridge the gap between one turn and the next, and that the intended addressee may never be identical with the actual one.

The Privilege of the Receiver

The other, not the self, should be the center of whatever "communication" might mean. An episode from the life of William James captures the problem well. He had been given charge of a turtle's heart for a popular lecture on physiology by one of his Harvard Medical School professors. The lecturer was demonstrating that the heart would pulsate when certain of its nerves were stimulated, and the pulsations were projected onto a screen in the front of Sanders Theatre. Halfway through the lecture, James realized the heart was not responding, so he took it upon himself, in a sudden and almost automatic response to the emergency, to make the proper motions on the screen by manipulating his forefinger such that the audience would not fail to gain a true understanding of the heart's physiology. Writing many years later—in a final essay on psychical research that was centrally about the balance of fraud and faith in what we can know—James admits that such simulation could be disdained as shameless cheating.² Had he acted otherwise, however, the audience would have been cheated of an understanding of physiology. His forefinger had performed humbug in the service of understanding. Confessing his prestidigitation or the demise of the heart would have offered only a secondary truth: the flaws of the appa-

2. William James, "Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher" (1909), in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 787-99.

ratus rather than its capacity to project truth. All our knowledge, he suggests, may rest on strategically concealed frauds—or rather, what would be considered frauds by those who still hold to a copy theory of knowledge. The criterion for knowing should not be accurate duplication of the world, but the ability to make our way through with the best aids we can get.

James's scenario in Sanders Theater is enormously rich with central themes in communication theory: projection, verisimilitude, the staging of life, what is good to believe. James stages a primal scene of communication, a crafty counterpart to Plato's cave, that nervously undercuts the long-standing faith that debunking the representations is the road to liberation from the chains. Rather than offering, say, a formula for mass mystification, James has lighted on something morally valuable: where we cannot know the original, we might as well take the best image we can get. More pointedly, communication involves not the direct sharing of truths but the manipulation of effects. Such language sounds ignoble, so let us be clear: James shifts the crux of communication from fidelity to an original to responsibility to the audience. (In this, at least, he is quite close to Socrates' notion of a philosophical rhetoric.) The representation of supposedly unvarnished truth can be just as reckless as outright deception. The dream of angels is dear to anyone who has ever been badly misunderstood, and the spiritualist tradition takes the wishes of the sender as the criterion of happy communication. Herein lies its moral deficiency: the hope of doubling the self always misses the autonomy of the other. Authenticity can be a profoundly selfish ideal.

James proposes the harder task of speaking in such a way that the other person understands rather than that we express the raw truth of our interior. Indeed, as in the mass communication situation of Sanders Theater, so in that of person-to-person: one must often sacrifice the dream of fidelity in representing one's own feelings and thoughts in order to evoke the truest image of them for the other. James offers a higher law: not a social physics of thought transportation but a risky universe in which any speaker must take responsibility for something one can never master—the way one's words and deeds play before the soul of the other. The authentic representation of self or world not only is impossible, it is also never enough. Needed instead is a stoic willingness to go through the motions that will evoke the truth for others. The problem of communication is not language's slipperiness, it is the unfixable difference between the self and the other. The challenge of

communication is not to be true to our own interiority but to have mercy on others for never seeing ourselves as we do.

The Dark Side of Communication

The quality of mercy is often absent in popular discussion of communication. There is a kind of righteous tyranny about "communication" that I find troubling. The term can be used to browbeat others for "failing to communicate" when they are opting out of the game. *Bartleby*, Emerson, and Kierkegaard were all failures at communication—to their everlasting credit. To be accused of "not communicating" is often to be scolded for not providing someone with the response to their demand. Sharing is not a benign concept only. Many have invoked the Latin *communicare* as the origin of a long tradition of sharing talk. The more rarely cited, but equally relevant, Greek term *koinōō* offers a harsher lesson. Like *communicare*, it means to make common, communicate, impart, or share; it also means to pollute or make unclean. Communication crosses the border of inner and outer and can thus be common, just as meaning can be mean. The brutal rigor of this insight is found in a *logion* of Jesus concerning the purity of foods: "Whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile [*koinōsai*] him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach. . . . What comes out of a man is what defiles [*koinoi*] a man. For from within, out of the heart of a man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft," etc. (Mark 7:18–21 RSV). "What comes out of the heart" is not a bad definition of communication as sharing. But such disclosure is here figured as the release of iniquity. To think of the sharing of inner life as an unmixed good rests upon a rather unrigorous account of the human heart.

Communication is a risky adventure without guarantees. Any kind of effort to make linkage via signs is a gamble, on whatever scale it occurs. To the question, How can we know we have really communicated? there is no ultimate answer besides a pragmatic one that our subsequent actions seem to act in some kind of concert. All talk is an act of faith predicated on the future's ability to bring forth the worlds called for. Meaning is an incomplete project, open-ended and subject to radical revision by later events. As Charles Sanders Peirce puts it, "A sign is objectively *general*, in so far as, leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself." Since all signs are general to varying degrees, person-to-person converse is like dissemination, closure taking

place at the receiving end. Peirce puts it bluntly: "No communication of one person to another can be entirely definite."³ That we are destined to interpret, and that interpretation will always involve our desires and their conflicts, does not signal a fall from the supposed grace of immediacy; it is a description of the very possibility of interaction. There are no sure signs in communication, only hints and guesses. Our interaction will never be a meeting of *cogitos* but at its best may be a dance in which we sometimes touch. Instead of being an unbearable problem of lonely minds and ghostly apparitions, communication should be measured by the successful coordination of behaviors. All we know, see, hear, and feel of inner life takes shape in words, actions, or gestures, each of which is in some significant way public. The question should be not Can we communicate with each other? but Can we love one another or treat each other with justice and mercy? In our relations one with another animal solidarity is prior to interpretive surety. We can trade words but cannot share our existence. At best, "communication" is the name for those practices that compensate for the fact that we can never be each other.

In this book I have argued that we mispend our hope in seeking some kind of spiritual fullness or satisfaction in communication. The history of thinking about our mutual ties, as well as the history of modes of connection, from writing to the development of electrical media, shows that the quest for consummation with others is motivated by the experience of blockage and breakdown. Once we are stung by miscommunication, it is tempting to imagine communication as an escape from mortal modes. That people long for transcendence or ways to avoid the hurt of misunderstanding is only natural. The danger, rather, is that the immanent work of love and justice will be disdained as nothing but wreckage and refuse. Communication is ultimately unthinkable apart from the task of establishing a peaceable kingdom in which each may dwell with the other. Given our condition as mortals, communication will always remain a problem of power, ethics, and art. Short of some redeemed state of angels or porpoises, there is no release from the discipline of the object in our mutual dealings.⁴ This fact is not something to lament: it is the beginning of wisdom. To treat others as we would want to be treated means performing for them in such a way not that the self is authentically represented but that the other is caringly served.

3. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Critical Common-Sensism" (1905), in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 295.

4. Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object" (1969), in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Elke Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 499–500.

This kind of connection beats anything the angels might offer. Joy is found not in the surpassing of touch but in its fullness.

To the therapists and technicians one must concede some things. Certainly errors and mistakes happen in dealing with other people. Certainly people can improve in suaveness, coping, and sensitivity. But the conceit that techniques can correct the painful and happy fact of our mutual difference not only is misguided, it is based on rare scenarios in which the ambiguity of signs can be fatal. Most of the time we understand each other quite well; we just don't agree. The story of Theseus tells us all we need to know. Returning from slaying the Minotaur, Theseus neglected to follow the code he had prearranged with his father, Aegeus. A black sail was to indicate his death, a white one his triumph. Aegeus, seeing a black sail on the horizon and thinking Theseus dead, hurled himself from the cliffs into the sea (thereafter called the Aegean). The moral: Build redundancy into messages on which life and death depend. Communication sometimes masquerades as the great solution to human ills, yet most troubles in human relationships do not come from a failure to match signs and meanings. In most cases except for the most minimal contact, the situation and syntax make the sense of words perfectly clear. Conditions of deprived presence such as letters, the telephone, or electronic mail do, as Kafka knew, provide a breeding ground for the ghosts. But in relations among friends, colleagues, and loved ones, what might be called failure to communicate is more often a divergence of commitment or a deficit of patience. Communication, again, is more basically a political and ethical problem than a semantic or psychological one. As such thinkers as Hegel and Marx, Dewey and Mead, Adorno and Habermas all argue, just communication is an index of the good society. We ought to be less worried about how signs arouse divergent meanings than the conditions that keep us from attending to our neighbors and other beings different from us.

The Irreducibility of Touch and Time

A major theme of the book has been the "condition of infinite remoteness" (Emerson) between people. But because souls cannot touch does not mean that the same sentence rests on bodies. No real community endures without touch. Of all the senses, touch is the most resistant to being made into a medium of recording or transmission. It remains stubbornly wed to the proximate; indeed, with taste, it is the only sense that has no remote capacity (unless eros be such). Touch defies inscription more than seeing or hearing, or even taste or smell (cooking and

perfumes are their recording media). Though materializing mediums, telephone promoters, and radio performers all tried to transport touch, their efforts at such cloning always fell eerily short. A very different stance toward touch is found in the argument of some poststructuralists that the body is itself is a text. As fruitful as this insight can be, it risks missing the skin, hair, pores, blood, teeth, eyes, ears, and bones of these texts, and more important, their short life span. Eurykleia's rebuke of Penelope in book 23 of the *Odyssey* holds for those who see the presence of the other as either a wall or a superfluity:

How queer the way you talk!
Here he is, large as life, by his own fire,
and you deny that he will ever get home!

(FITZGERALD TRANSLATION)

Odysseus ultimately proved his identity to Penelope by revealing the scar on his thigh and the privileged knowledge of the bed he had once built her. As a message out of the past and arriving from distant places, he faced all the troubles of authentication. Odysseus's testimonies rested in the parts of his person most resistant to fabrication: scar, personal history, knowledge of intimate places outside circulation. Their singularity attested to their truth. He offered not tropes but trophies.

To view communication as the marriage of true minds underestimates the holiness of the body. Being there still matters, even in an age of full-body simulations. Touch, being the most archaic of all our senses and perhaps the hardest to fake, means that all things being equal, people who care for each other will seek each other's presence. The quest for presence might not give better access to the other's soul, *per se*, but it does to their body. And the bodies of friends and kin matter deeply. The face, voice, and skin have a contagious charisma. There is nothing so electric or unmanageable as touch: we feast our eyes on each other, kiss, shake hands, and embrace. Whether any of these gestures is a token of affection or constitutes harassment is a matter of interpretation subject to all the same problems as any other signifying act. Touch is no cure for communication trouble: it is more primal, but equally intractable. With his war on "the metaphysics of presence," Derrida is right to combat the philosophical principle that behind every word is a voice and behind every voice an intending soul that gives it meaning. But to think of the longing for the presence of other people as a kind of metaphysical mistake is nuts.

Touch and time, the two nonreproducible things we can share, are

our only guarantees of sincerity. To echo Robert Merton, the only refuge we have against communication fraud is the propaganda of the deed. No profession of love is as convincing as a lifetime of fidelity. Despite all the stretching done by recording and transmission media, there are important boundaries to the scale and shape of communication. That our capacity to communicate is limited is a sociological truth; it is also a tragedy. True love—among mortals at least—is communicatively marked by smallness and partiality: it does not parade about publicly or waste itself in gardens of Adonis. The mark of an intimate message is the exclusiveness of its address. (Why else do we feel violated when someone breaks a confidence?) There is no such thing as equal intimacy for all. Amnesty International assigns each local chapter a *single* prisoner of conscience to petition for: philanthropy in general somehow seems false. "Poster children" are a pathetic tribute to our crazy love for individuals.⁵ In love, said Kierkegaard, the particular is higher than the universal. The paradox of love is that a neighbor in need exerts a stronger claim on your help than all the hungry orphans in the world. ("One death," in Stalin's brutal insight, "is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.") The face of the other is the strong force. A person late for a meeting on saving the orphans would not be right to walk past the bleeding person in the gutter. The profoundest ethical teachings command love for all people indifferently, and yet time allows genuine intimacy and care for only a few of the planet's inhabitants. We can spend time only with a relative few in the course of a lifetime. We mortals really love only personally, and yet not to love all people is unjust. The paradox of love is its concrete boundedness and the universality of its demands. Because we can share our mortal time and touch only with some and not all, presence becomes the closest thing there is to a guarantee of a bridge across the chasm. In this we directly face the holiness and wretchedness of our finitude.

5. Luc Boltanski, *La souffrance à distance: Morale humanitaire, médias, et politique* (Paris: Éditions Métailié, 1993).