ALSO BY BRENDA UELAND

If You Want to Write

ME

Mitropoulos and the North High Band

STRENGTH TO YOUR SWORD ARM:
SELECTED WRITINGS

BRENDA UELAND

INTRODUCTION BY SUSAN ALLEN TOTH

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In protesting against censorship nobody points out that works of sexual freedom, of pornography, are often so extraordinar­ily ugly. And ugliness is an infection, pestilential thing. It invades people, just as Beauty heals and lightens them. It depresses them, lowers them, muddies them, changes them for the worse. Ugliness is Devil Worship. This should be a test for modern art and music. Much of it should be prohibited.

My final admonition in making choices is: Study especially what you think is your goodness. Is it self-sacrifice? Being meek, long-suffering? Watch it. It may be cowardice. And the meek do so much harm. A docile, put-upon wife ruins the nature and soul of her husband. Better to knock him out with a lead pipe. There would be no tyranny if nobody would put up with it. Or do you consider your greatest virtue a piercing critical sense? Watch it. It may be self-praise, or an inability to love, or a pervading hate. Are you doing work that is profitable but ugly and shoddy and a deceiving of the public; and do you explain it by saying, “One has to live.” Ask yourself: “But do you?”

And never rest in any rule. No stereotypes are allowed. There is no resting place down here. George Herbert in a poem tells how at Man’s birth God gave him Beauty, Courage and so on, and at the bottom of the cup was Rest. God started to give him that but put it back. “No, he can never have rest. Eternal restlessness will at last throw him to My Breast.”

My conclusion is then: Avoid in your choices all cruelty and lying. After that, I say to my children, “Be Bad or Good whichever is best for you.”

And here endeth the First Lesson.

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I want to write about the great and powerful thing that listening is. And how we forget it. And how we don’t listen to our children, or those we love. And least of all—which is so important too—to those we do not love. But we should. Because listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. You can see that when you think how the friends that really listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us good, like ultraviolet rays.

This is the reason: When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. You know how if a person laughs at your jokes you become funnier and funnier, and if he does not, every tiny little joke in you weasens up and dies. Well, that is the principle of it. It makes people happy and free when they are listened to. And if you are a listener, it is the secret of having a good time in society (because everybody around you becomes lively and interesting), of comforting people, of doing them good.

Who are the people, for example, to whom you go for advice? Not to the hard, practical ones who can tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners; that is, the kindest, least censorious, least bossy people that you know. It is because by pouring out your problem to them, you then know what to do about it yourself.

When we listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other. We are constantly being re-created. Now there are brilliant people who cannot listen much. They have no ingoing wires on their apparatus. They are entertaining, but exhausting, too. I think it is because these lecturers, these brilliant performers, by not giving us a chance to talk, do not let us express our
thoughts and expand; and it is this little creative fountain
inside us that begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and
unexpected laughter and wisdom. That is why, when someone
has listened to you, you go home rested and lighthearted.

Now this little creative fountain is in all. It is the spirit, or
the intelligence, or the imagination—whatever you want to
call it. If you are very tired, strained, have no solitude, run too
many errands, talk to too many people, drink too many cocktails,
this little fountain is muddied over and covered with a lot of
debris. The result is you stop living from the center, the creative
fountain, and you live from the periphery, from externals. That
is, you go along on mere will power without imagination.

Well, it is when people really listen to us, with quiet
fascinated attention, that the little fountain begins to work
again, to accelerate in the most surprising way.

I discovered all this about three years ago, and truly it
made a revolutionary change in my life. Before that, when I
went to a party I would think anxiously: “Now try hard. Be lively.
Say bright things. Talk. Don’t let down.” And when tired, I would
have to drink a lot of coffee to keep this up.

Now before going to a party, I just tell myself to listen with
affection to anyone who talks to me, to be in their shoes when they
talk; to try to know them without my mind pressing against
theirs, or arguing, or changing the subject. No. My attitude is:
“Tell me more. This person is showing me his soul. It is a little
dry and meager and full of grinding talk just now, but presently
he will begin to think, not just automatically to talk. He will
show his true self. Then he will be wonderfully alive.”

Sometimes, of course, I cannot listen as well as others.
But when I have this listening power, people crowd around and
their heads keep turning to me as though irresistibly pulled. It
is not because people are conceited and want to show off that
they are drawn to me, the listener. It is because by listening I
have started up in them their creative fountain. I do them good.

Now why does it do them good? I have a kind of mystical
notion about this. I think it is only by expressing all that is
inside that purer and purer streams come. It is so in writing.
You are taught in school to put down on paper only the bright
things. Wrong. Pour out the dull things on paper too—you can
tear them up afterward—for only then do the bright ones
 come. If you hold back the dull things, you are certain to hold
back what is clear and beautiful and true and lively. So it is with
people who have not been listened to in the right way—with
affection and a kind of jolly excitement. Their creative fountain
has been blocked. Only superficial talk comes out—what is
prissy or gushing or merely nervous. No one has called out of
them, by wonderful listening, what is true and alive.

I think women have this listening faculty more than men.
It is not the fault of men. They lose it because of their long habit
of striving in business, of self-assertion. And the more forceful
men are, the less they can listen as they grow older. And that
is why women in general are more fun than men, more restful
and inspiring.

Now this non-listening of able men is the cause of one of
the saddest things in the world—the loneliness of fathers, of
those quietly sad men who move among their grown children
like remote ghosts. When my father was over seventy, he was
a fiery, humorous, admirable man, a scholar, a man of great
force. But he was deep in the loneliness of old age and another
generation. He was so fond of me. But he could not hear me—not
one word I said, really. I was just audience. I would walk
around the lake with him on a beautiful afternoon and he
would talk to me about Darwin and Huxley and Higher Criti-
cism of the Bible.

“Yes, I see, I see,” I kept saying and tried to keep my mind
pinned to it, but was restive and bored. There was a feeling of
helplessness because he could not hear what I had to say
about it. When I spoke I found myself shouting, as one does to
a foreigner, and in a kind of despair that he could not hear me.
After the walk I would feel that I had worked off my duty and I
was anxious to get him settled and reading in his Morris chair,
so that I could go out and have a livelier time with other people.
And he would sigh and look after me absentmindedly with
perplexed loneliness.

For years afterward I have thought with real suffering
about my father’s loneliness. Such a wonderful man, and
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"Yes, I see, I see," I kept saying and tried to keep my mind pinned to it, but was restive and bored. There was a feeling of helplessness because he could not hear what I had to say about it. When I spoke I found myself shouting, as one does to a foreigner, and in a kind of despair that he could not hear me. After the walk I would feel that I had worked off my duty and I was anxious to get him settled and reading in his Morris chair, so that I could go out and have a livelier time with other people. And he would sigh and look after me absentmindedly with perplexed loneliness.

For years afterward I have thought with real suffering about my father's loneliness. Such a wonderful man, and
reaching out to me and wanting to know me! But he could not. He could not listen. But now I think that if only I had known as much about listening then as I do now, I could have bridged that chasm between us. To give an example:

Recently, a man I had not seen for twenty years wrote me: "I have a family of mature children. So did your father. They never saw him. Not in the days he was alive. Not in the days he was the deep and admirable man we now both know he was. That is man's life. When next you see me, you'll just know everything. Just your father all over again, trying to reach through, back to the world of those he loves."

Well, when I saw this man again, what had happened to him after twenty years? He was an unusually forceful man and had made a great deal of money. But he had lost his ability to listen. He talked rapidly and told wonderful stories and it was just fascinating to hear them. But when I spoke—restlessness: "Just hand me that, will you? . . . Where is my pipe?" It was just a habit. He read countless books and was eager to take in ideas, but he just could not listen to people.

Well, this is what I did. I was more patient—I did not resist his non-listening talk as I did my father's. I listened and listened to him, not once pressing against him, even in thought with my own self-assertion. I said to myself: "He has been under a driving pressure for years. His family had grown to resist his talk. But now, by listening, I will pull it all out of him. He must talk freely and on and on. When he has been really listened to enough, he will grow tranquil. He will begin to want to hear me."

And he did, after a few days. He began asking me questions. And presently I was saying gently:

"You see, it has become hard for you to listen."

He stopped dead and stared at me. And it was because I had listened with such complete, absorbed, uncritical sympathy, without one flaw of boredom or impatience, that he now believed and trusted me, although he did not know this.

"Now talk," he said. "Tell me about that. Tell me all about that."

Well, we walked back and forth across the lawn and I told him my ideas about it.

"You love your children, but probably don't let them in. Unless you listen, people are weaned in your presence; they become about a third of themselves. Unless you listen, you can't know anybody. Oh, you will know facts and what is in the newspapers and all of history, perhaps, but you will not know one single person. You know, I have come to think listening is love, that's what it really is."

Well, I don't think I would have written this article if my notions had not had such an extraordinary effect on this man. For he says they have changed his whole life. He wrote me that his children at once came closer; he was astonished to see what they are: how original, independent, courageous. His wife seemed really to care about him again, and they were actually talking about all kinds of things and making each other laugh.

For just as the tragedy of parents and children is not listening, so it is of husbands and wives. If they disagree they begin to shout louder and louder—if not actually, at least inwardly—hanging fiercely and deafly onto their own ideas, instead of listening and becoming quieter and quieter and more comprehending. But the most serious result of not listening is that worst thing in the world, boredom; for it is really the death of love. It seals people off from each other more than any other thing. I think that is why married people quarrel.

It is to cut through the non-conduction and boredom. Because when feelings are hurt, they really begin to listen. At last their talk is a real exchange. But of course, they are just injuring their marriage forever.

Now, how to listen? It is harder than you think. I don't believe in critical listening, for that only puts a person in a strait jacket of hesitancy. He begins to choose his words solemnly or primly. His little inner fountain cannot spring. Critical listeners dry you up. But creative listeners are those who want you to be recklessly yourself, even at your very worst, even vituperative, bad-tempered. You are mentally saying as you express these things: "Hurrah! Good for you!" and they are laughing and just delighted with any manifestation of yourself, bad or good. For
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true listeners know that if you are bad-tempered it does not mean that you are always so. They don’t love you just when you are nice; they love all of you.

Besides critical listening, there is another kind that is no good: passive, censorious listening. Sometimes husbands can be this kind of listener, a kind of ungenerous eavesdropper who mentally (or aloud) keeps saying as you talk: “Bunk... Bunk... Hokum.”

In order to learn to listen, here are some suggestions: Try to learn tranquility, to live in the present a part of the time every day. Sometimes say to yourself: “Now. What is happening now? This friend is talking. I am quiet. There is endless time. I hear it, every word.” Then suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piece-meal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole.

Then watch your self-assertiveness. And give it up. Try not to drink too many cocktails to give up that nervous pressure that feels like energy and wit but may be neither. And remember it is not enough just to will to listen to people. One must really listen. Only then does the magic begin.

Sometimes people cannot listen because they think that unless they are talking, they are socially of no account. There are those women with an old-fashioned ballroom training which insists there must be unceasing vivacity and gyrations of talk. But this is really a strain on people.

No. We should all know this: that listening, not talking, is the gifted and great role, and the imaginative role. And the true listener is much more beloved, magnetic than the talker, and he is more effective, and learns more and does more good. And so try listening. Listen to your wife, your husband, your father, your mother, your children, your friends; to those who love you and those who don’t, to those who bore you, to your enemies. It will work a small miracle. And perhaps a great one.

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Dear Brenda: I am reading all the columnists in this land of ours, but none I find come up to your standard. But you have a deplorable fault. Why are you using such high-sounding words and leave us standing here and gasping when you swing up to higher regions? What do you take us for? Learned Professors at Oslo University?

Come down, dear Brenda. Mend your steps so we poor creatures can follow you. We could easily race you around Lake Harriet and win, but when it comes to language’s foggy labyrinth, we are regular Mutts and Jeffs. Yours, Agapetus.

No, Agapetus, you must look up the words, write them down with the derivation and then use them every day until they are a part of you. Now new and perfect words are a wonderful thing. They need not be long (I don’t like them long) but apropos. And you see the secret of being interesting is to be continually shocking the reader as he goes along with tiny shocks of surprise. When you are interested in talk, or in something written, there is a pull-along every second. You wait for each word, each phrase—because of the tiny shock of surprise in it—gratefully and eagerly as it comes.

And here is another reason you must look up new words: See how children (and tens of millions of adults) have only two adjectives “dumb” or “keen.” But how sad that is. How little they can express!

I read once that a little South American bird that biologists are studying because the bird seems to utter actually three syllables, and the theory is that it is speech that develops the brain, and not the other way around.

Well I think it does work that way. The more words you know, the better, the more delicately, opulently you can think. Shakespeare, I was once told, used 39,000 words. Goethe was
STRENGTH TO YOUR SWORD ARM:  
SELECTED WRITINGS BY BRENDA UELAND

This richly varied collection brings together both previously published and unpublished articles and essays from the author's last four decades. Passionate and iconoclastic, Brenda Ueland's work represents an entirely original view of the moral, social, and political issues of Midwestern, and American, life. Here are insightful portraits of such contemporaries as Robert Penn Warren, Paul Robeson, and Carl Sandburg; pleasing evocations of daily life in the author's native Minneapolis; and challenging pieces on the seeming everyday issues of childrearing and diet and exercise. Ueland's essays on feminist and spiritual matters are nothing short of visionary, and her writing on animal rights is as forceful as anything ever produced on the subject.

“To read Brenda Ueland is to feel you are in her presence, talking to her, arguing with her, and listening, half-mesmerized, with a mixture of admiration and irritation, curiosity and amusement, and laughing-out-loud pleasure.”

—from the Introduction by Susan Allen Toth

Brenda Ueland was born in Minneapolis in 1891. She earned her living as a writer, editor and teacher of writing, living an active and vital life until her death at the age of 93, in 1985. She was the prolific author of short stories, articles, and essays, and two books, If You Want to Write and ME.