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Silence Speaks

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Silence Speaks

by

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Report

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Dedication

" ... the words we find

are always insufficient, like love,

though they are often lovely

and all we have ..."

Stephen Dunn, "Those of Us Who Think We Know"

"To sing is either praise

or defiance. Praise is defiance."

Margaret Atwood, "Orpheus"

For my grandmothers,

Helen Walker Shirar

and

Grace Cochrane Appell

and my mother,

Jennifer Lee Appell.

I come from a long line

of strong women.

Acknowledgements

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by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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This paper represents an attempt to account for two projects completed during the course of the fall semester of 2009. It will ground and illuminate the projects, my experiences while completing them, and the program-space in which they were completed. Relying heavily on the narrativizing and working through of intimate personal experiences, the paper will conclude by suggesting that we rethink the value of silence in communication.

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Introduction: Silence and Stories

On the evening of August 4th, 2009, my paternal grandfather called my parents' house in Fort Worth, Texas, on his cell phone from a hospital room in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I had driven the three hours north to my parents' house from my home in Austin the day before, under a bright Texas sun. My grandfather held his phone up to my grandmother's ear. Fighting back my tears, I told my grandmother that I loved her, and I missed her, and I'd see her soon. She was on a respirator. She couldn't respond. Silence and the gentle crackle of static filled the phone's earpiece. I still don't know if she heard me, or if she understood my words. The next day I turned twenty-three, and my grandmother died.

Three weeks later, my family and I flew to the small village in Michigan where my father's family has lived since the 1950s. In the newly-built gymnasium addition to the Methodist church my grandparents attended for over half a century, the smells of casseroles and floor polish and the perfumes of my grandmother's friends intermingled. My grandmother's college roommate told me what she remembered of my grandparents when they were just another nursing student and pre-med student pairing up at the University of Michigan. Her former next-door neighbor told me about the time my grandmother, a consummate gardener, informed her that the beautiful plant her son, a friend of my father's, had put in a planter on her back porch was actually marijuana. I perused a lifetime's worth of photographs unearthed for the occasion of her memorial and listened to story after story that hinted, in a way I had never

before experienced, at the limits to which any person can ever know or be known to another person.

The day after my grandfather placed a single red rose — the same gift he'd given my grandmother on every one of their fifty-seven anniversaries — beside my grandmother's still headstone-less grave, I flew back to Austin. Classes in the second and final year of my masters program in media studies at the University of Texas began the next day.

This paper is an attempt to account for two projects completed during the course of that year. The projects loosely engaged with the themes of silence and communication. This paper will ground and illuminate the projects, my experiences while completing them, and the program-space in which they were completed using an admittedly hodgepodge theoretical and methodological framework drawn from the works of Walter Ong, Paolo Freire, and Allucquére (Sandy) Stone. While I will here interweave their thoughts with my own, implying conversant simultaneity, I had not yet seriously engaged with some of their works until after the projects were completed.

This paper relies heavily on the narrativizing and working through of intimate personal experiences. It makes no claims to objectivity. Silence and communication are personal. No one can speak for me in my voice, and no one can be silent for me. Silence is the ever-present/always-absent twin of communication, which is, after all, the foundation of all learning and transmission of knowledge. I believe an earnest and multi-faceted exploration of silence could have value for a variety of academic disciplines.

Chapter One: A Space of Possibility

In order to fully situate my projects and experiences in the academic and creative environment from which they arose, I must introduce the ACTLab and its pedagogy, without which these projects and experiences would not have been possible. When I say "possible," I'm not speaking in a practical way; I don't mean that the ACTLab supplied skills or supplies or time or funding. What I seek to convey is the sense that, without the ACTLab, I would not have been led down the academic, creative, and personal paths of exploration and experimentation that ended in my projects and this paper. The ACTLab makes new thoughts possible, and then gives students the tools to bring such thoughts out of the realm of the hypothetical and into the realm of the actual.

According to ACTLab founder and instructor Allucquére Rosanne "Sandy" Stone,[1] "The ACTLab is a program, a space, a philosophy, and a community," "an embodiment of Trans practices writ large," and "absolutely grounded in oppositional practices."[2] A full account of ACTLab pedagogy is available on the ACTLab website.[3]

For the purposes of this paper, it will suffice to say that the ACTLab teaches "new media" to undergraduate and graduate students, and anyone else from inside or outside the University of Texas who happens to stop in to a class. Theoretically, the ACTLab does this by enabling students to learn

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[1] Stone publishes under the name Allucquére Rosanne; in class, she is always Sandy.
[2] Stone, "ACTLab Pedagogy.".
[3] You can access the site at http://home.actlab.utexas.edu.

in a communal environment where the role of the de-privileged instructor(s) is to function primarily as a facilitator of learning rather than a bestower of knowledge, and by requiring students to ascribe personal meaning to the process and products of the work. In practice, each ACTLab course is constructed around "dynamic topic frameworks which function by defining possible spaces of discourse rather than by filling topic areas with facts;"[4] course topics include *Death*, *Postmodern Gothic*, *Weird Science*, *Dream/Delirium*, *The Uncanny*, *Trans: Dangerous Border Violations*, *Extreme Freestyle Hacking*, and *When Cultures Collide*.

Over the course of a semester, students complete and present three "projects," a word deliberately chosen for its vagueness and lack of specificity. The only guidelines students are given when creating their projects are to "make stuff," "take risks," and "be awesome." Behind the scenes, instructors work to achieve the ACTLab principles of refusing closure, insisting on situation, seeking multiplicity, and encouraging innovation, creativity, and play.[5] Students are required to use the tools available in the room itself during their presentation, such as a professional light grid, a stage, a projector screen, and a surround sound system; this often results in highly performative presentations. They are also required to "document" their work on websites hosted on ACTLab servers, in part to satisfy university requirements for academic work.[6]

A student's experience of an ACTLab semester is loosely informed by Joseph Campbell's notion of the hero's journey: departure, initiation, and

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[4] Stone, "ACTLab Pedagogy."
[5] Ibid.
[6] A mostly complete list of ACTLab student websites is available at http://home.actlab.utexas. edu/peopletable.shtml.

return.[7] At the beginning of the semester, students participate in unstructured play/exploration activities that encourage creativity and personal engagement. Over the course of the semester, they learn new skills and explore new discourses to facilitate personal work. The semester culminates in an entire day, usually a Saturday or Sunday, spent presenting final projects. It has been my experience that the communal nature of this journey can foster fairly intense personal connections between students, such that the final presentation day becomes a kind of celebration, a physical manifestation of the gift-giving that takes place during the hero's return.

Another way of thinking about ACTLab pedagogy is to employ some thoughts that multidisciplinary theorist Walter Ong introduced in a discussion of primary oral cultures, "those untouched by writing in any form," and literate cultures.[8] Ong writes that people in primary oral cultures "learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not 'study,'" because studying, loosely defined as "extended sequential analysis," is made possible only by reading and writing.[9] Ong later elaborates on the place and development of knowledge in oral cultures, musing that in them, "learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known," whereas in a literate culture, "writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity,' in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing.[10] In fact, the communal learning and privileging of the personal that happens within the ACTLab is deliberate; its goal is the

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[7] Stone, "Introduction to the ACTLab Framework (lecture, ACTLab at The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, September 4, 2009).

[8] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 8-9.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 45-46.

creation of a learning environment that destabilizes and calls into question notions of literate objectivity.

This is because the ACTLab's pedagogy draws heavily from conditions described by Paolo Freire in his highly influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this work, Freire describes two models of education, the banking model and the revolutionary problem-posing model. In the banking model, teachers and students exist in an object-subject power relationship, the goal of which is the perpetuation of the oppression of human consciousness. Specifically, in the banking model, the teacher's task is:

> to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration — contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity. The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power.[11]

In the problem-posing educational model,

> through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.[12]

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[11] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71. For a detailed account of the banking model, see ibid. 71-78.
[12] Ibid., 80.

The goals of the problem-posing educational model are the emergence of human consciousness, the perception of reality as a process able to be transformed, and the desire and sense of obligation to commit to that transformation.[13]

While the primary contrasts between the banking model and the problem-posing model are their antithetical goals and the power relations that exist between teachers and students, these contrasts also manifest themselves in the two words Freire uses to describe communication in each model: narration and dialogue. Narration can be accomplished orally or through a written medium, but true dialogue, as understood by both Freire and Ong, can only exist orally, because, as Ong explains, a written text cannot respond to a reader, but can only repeat itself.[14]

ACTLab pedagogy accomplishes dialogue through what Freire and Ong might call a problem-posing educational model for the age of secondary orality. Secondary orality is a term Ong employed to describe the communication technology of the twentieth century.[15] (Ong specifically named the telephone, radio, television, and sound recordings.) Unlike the primary orality of Homer, Ong describes secondary orality as "based permanently on the use of writing and print," and says that it has the ability to generate a sense of group identity "for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture."[16] Furthermore, while members of primary oral cultures "turned outward because they [had] little occasion to turn inward," in secondary orality, "we are turned outward because we have turned inward."[17] This outward turn as the result

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[13] Ibid., 81-83.
[14] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 77-78.
[15] Ibid., 134-135.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

of an inward turn describes the quintessential ACTLab project, which is the creative embodiment and externalization of a student's personal engagement with the discourse and dialogue of the class. It is this environment of dialogue, creativity, personal engagement with discourse, and play that enabled me to conceive, develop, and carry out the projects described in the following sections.

ACTLab methodology reflects a sensitivity to issues of orality and literacy in two other ways. First, as mentioned earlier, all ACTLab students create and maintain websites on the ACTLab server, on which they "document" their projects. While this might superficially appear to be a concession to the contemporary academic preference for all things textual, students are actually encouraged to make their websites as multi-modal as possible, incorporating sound, photographs, and video as documentation equal to if not superior to text.

Second, in the year and a half that I've spent in the ACTLab, I've observed the repetition of key phrases by both students and instructors. Primary among these are, of course, the ACTLab directives: "Make stuff," "take risks," "be awesome." But over the course of a semester, others emerge as well. "Let your work push back at you" is something Professor Stone will introduce and return to several times; the phrase has to do with difficulty and flexibility during the creative process. I believe these phrases serve the same purpose as what Ong — summarizing decades of Homeric studies by Havelock, Parry, and Bynum — calls Homeric cliches or formulas.[18] They provide shorthand touchstones of shared meaning for students and teachers alike. As in an epic poem, the reader's

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[18] Ibid., 22-26.

(or listener's, or speaker's) relationship to them changes over the course of the narrative. Thus, rather than (en)closing meanings, formulaic expressions in the ACTLab are both open and serve to enable openness in the ideological space itself.

Both of the projects discussed in this paper were completed to satisfy the requirements of the ACTLab course called *Trans: Dangerous Border Violations*, in which I was enrolled during the fall semester of 2009. One of my goals in writing this paper is to bear witness to the academic and humanist value that a program like the ACTLab can have within a university environment. I also hope that these accounts of my projects will inspire further work and creative critical thinking.

Chapter Two: The Silence Project

My first project began as a thought experiment. What would it be like to not speak for an extended period of time? Could silence — the absence of speech — be "stuff," in the ACTLab-lexicon sense of the word?[19] What would not speaking, but not distancing myself from every day life, actually entail? What changes would I need to make in my life in order to accomplish this? And what would be the effect on me?

After enthusiastic and thought-provoking reactions from my friends and fellow grad students, in and out of the ACTLab, I decided to pursue the project. I spent several weeks developing behavioral guidelines, potential goals I wanted my experiences to accomplish or enable, and strategies for documenting my experiences. A full account of the experiences, including what could be called my field notes, is available on my ACTLab website.[20]

During my silence[21] I did not speak or produce avoidable sound with my vocal chords, including laughing, singing, vocal yawning, and so on. I communicated via hand gestures, a pre-prepared index card explaining my project, and spontaneous hand-written or typed mediated methods, like a pad

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[19] ACTLab instructors are fond of saying, "We say 'Make stuff,' because if we knew what 'stuff' was, we'd just tell you to make that."

[20] You can find these notes at http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~sesquipedalian/?page_id=450.

[21] I found myself referring to the period during which I didn't speak as "my silence" — note the possessive — shortly after it ended. For me, the possessive implies a sense of personal ownership and agency I feel is important, considering that in many parts of the world, female silence is not accompanied by similar luxuries. I also dislike the religious connotations of the phrase "vow of silence." While my experiences of silence were certainly revealing, intimate, affecting, and perhaps even spiritual, I would not identify myself as a member of any particular religious tradition, and I don't want to imply the presence of religious dimension to my silence.

of index cards, a scrap of paper, my cell phone, a computer linked to a projector screen, email, and online instant messaging. I also posted live "field notes" to the blog section of my ACTLab website, which was publicly accessible. While I had intended to be silent for a period of two weeks, I was forced to speak after a little more than a week due to an unforeseen situation.[22]

During my silence, I had two discrete experiences that contributed significantly to the way I presented and reflected on the project. In the first, I attended the *Trans* class on the fourth day of my silence. Not all of my classmates knew about my project, so as students trickled into the classroom, one student pulled up my ACTLab website on his laptop and read aloud the first entry in my blog, where I'd written what I was doing and why. To hear words I'd written spoken aloud by someone else in my presence when I couldn't speak — letting my words speak for me, but without my own voice — was a strange and disconnecting experience.

To fully describe my second experience, I must introduce the space of the ACTLab, because the experience itself is possible only in this space or something very similar. The ACTLab is essentially a film/TV production studio. At the front of the room, opposite the two doors, is a large projector screen (D); the computer that projects to this is located at the back of the room (G). When I had this experience, students were seated around the large table in the center of the room (A), such that some had their backs to the screen. During the

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[22] My car broke and I had to call a mechanic.
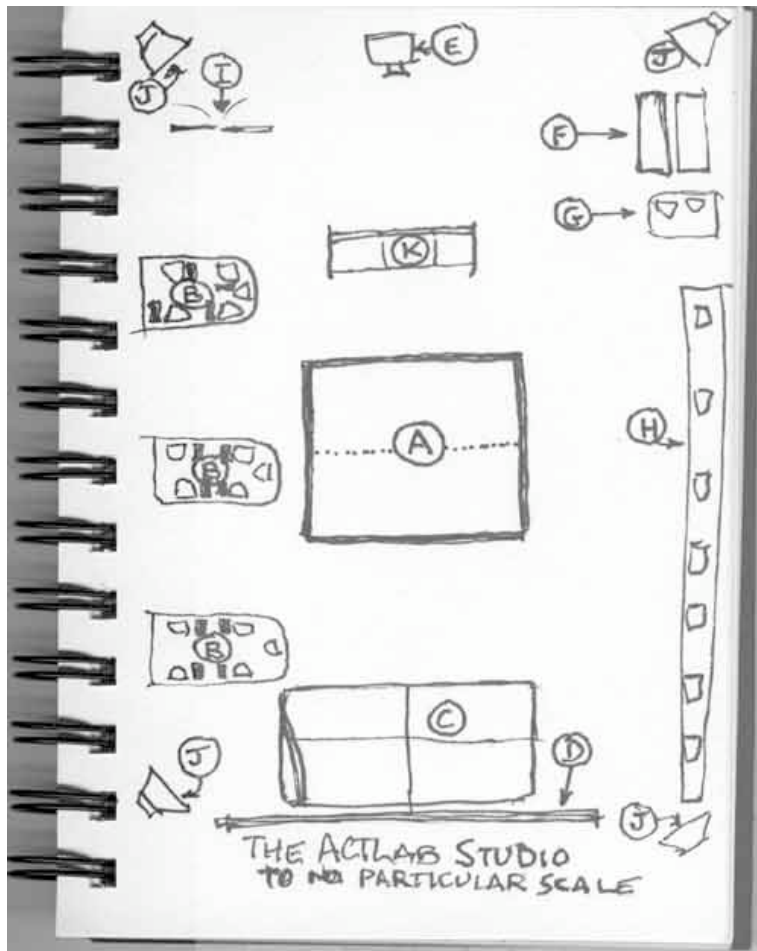
Illustration 1: A diagram of the ACTLab. Image
courtesy of Allucquére Rosanne Stone.

course of the discussion happening among the students around the table, the

subject of which was beginning to interrogate the language of the discussion

itself, I got on the computer and called up an entry in an online etymological

dictionary so that it was projected onto the large screen. I quickly realized,

however, that I could use the screen to communicate in a very elementary

way. I did this by opening a simple word processing program, called Stickies,

increasing the font size so that it was easily legible on the projector screen, and

quickly typing my 'responses' to the discussion to which I was listening but in

which I could not verbally participate. That night in my notes, I wrote:

my "speech," situated at the front of the room on a giant glowing screen, had both unfair authority and the potential to be quite subversive. What would have happened, for example, if I had just started typing "LOLOLOLOLOLOL" (which I didn't do)?[23]

I recognized that the text I was writing in place of speech, either because of its traditionally authoritative location in the room or its textual nature, might have had the ability to derail the purely oral interactions taking place around the table.

Ong's work on oral, manuscript, and print cultures provides some insight as to why this could have been the case, though my particular experience challenges his conclusions. Ong theorizes that the simple act of writing "presents utterance and thought as uninvolved with all else, somehow self-contained, complete."[24] While the marginalia of manuscripts maintains "a dialogue with the world outside their own borders," print cultures "feel a work as 'closed,' set off from other works, a unit in itself," and having a definite sense of finality.[25] This explains why I felt my electronic text might have been disruptive to the oral conversation taking place around the table, but does not fully account for the nature of the media I was using, nor the attitudes the students and instructor had toward them.

For example, as the words I typed rapidly filled up the screen, because I was typing in a very large point size, I highlighted what I'd typed and deleted it to make room for more words, undermining the permanence of my writing.

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[23] "LOL" is the online colloquial abbreviation for "laughing out loud." Typing it repeatedly gives the impression of uncontrollable laughter.

[24] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 130.

[25] Ibid., 130-131.

Because of my ease with typing, I could participate in the conversation fairly well, responding to points made by fellow students; my print was anything but "uninvolved." Finally, nearly every person in the room had used online instant messaging technology and cell phone text messaging, in which typed communications are sent and received instantaneously between two or more people. These forms are purely textual, with the speed of communication limited only by a user's ability to type, and they merge orality and literacy in a way Ong could not have possibly accounted for in 1982. While they bear some similarities to the telegaph, that medium required users to learn a new alphabet, adding a step in both the transmission and receiving of messages.

I'd now like to discuss two experiences I had as a consequence of the effects of cumulative silence. The first was something I encountered constantly over the course of the project, namely, that the undertaking of the project disrupted and exposed the place of communication in my life as a student. Put very simply, I realized that while being a student enabled me to be silent in a way that other "jobs" would not allow, in being being silent, I could no longer entirely perform the requirements of the role of "graduate student," which involves considerable verbal participation in seminar-style classes. Not only could I no longer fully participate in enacting this role, but my fellow students and professors — whether or not they realized it — were also deprived of the ability to achieve their full potential experiences in the classroom, since they could not engage with me in any significant way during a discussion. Other than in the ACTLab, an environment where the kind of exploratory play that led me to communicate using the projector screen is encouraged, and a physical space that makes such communication not only possible but practical, none

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of the classrooms I entered during my silence were open to or equipped to enable extended non-verbal communication without significantly undermining the professor's authority. In a space with a de-privileged instructor and a problem-solving community-based pedagogy firmly in place, however, such communication presents less of a challenge to the norms of the classroom.

The second set of experiences I'd like to discuss are the physical and emotional effects of not speaking, of relying only on mediated and gestural communication for an extended length of time. Throughout *Orality and Literacy*, Ong creates what I feel is a false dichotomy between 'natural' speech and writing as 'technology.'[26] Given that the view of writing as technology was, at the time of its publication, relatively novel, this dichotomy is understandable. However, my personal experience of speaking after a week of silence made evident to me the extent to which speech is also a kind of technology, in that it is a learned skill that involves tools, albeit anatomical and psychological ones. Less than an hour after I began to speak again, I wrote in my notes that I was

> having trouble connecting my brain to my mouth. There's just no other way to put it. Talking isn't an automatic thing at the moment. I have to concentrate on forming sentences. It's kind of a similar feeling to when you're drunk and you have to do something intricate like tie your shoe ....

Although I was writing in a very impromptu and informal way, I believe the metaphor I reached for is instructive, since the act of tying a shoe involves the learned manipulation of physical objects.

I'd like to add one final observation that came about as the result of

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[26] See, for example, pages 77 to 84.

completing my silence project. Shortly after completing my project, I attended a roundtable discussion sponsored by *FlowTV*, a publication within my department of Radio-Television-Film, entitled "Hacking the Ivory Tower: The Intersections of New Media, Academic Scholarship, and Pedagogy." At the discussion, the opinion was put forward that online media are not the ideal forum for academic work because they favor glibness and spontaneity, and the rapidity with which one can publish online discourages slow, patient contemplation, which is necessary for high caliber academic work. While I disagree with the assertion that the internet is not an appropriate means for academic publishing, I found myself agreeing with the underlying and undeveloped idea about the value of contemplation. Dialogue, which Freire has made clear has the power to transform the world, is not two people talking simultaneously. It is one person talking and one person listening. To listen, we must be silent. By listening, we can learn to speak in new ways. The three projects I completed after the silence project are all, in some senses, experiments into new ways of speaking.

Chapter Three: Gifts

This is undeniably the most complex project I've ever attempted. It was motivated from the most dispersed set of inspirations, took the most amount of work to accomplish, and is the best embodiment of the ACTLab principle of holding multiple discourses in productive tension. The best way to account for this project and its process is a simple chronology, the story of the project from beginning to end.

As mentioned earlier, this project was completed for the *Trans: Dangerous Border Violations* class. This class explores broad concepts of transitions, borders, and liminal spaces, with an emphasis on issues of identity. Over the course of the semester, in discussion and in student projects, the idea of the box became a recurring motif that gained new meanings as a concept the class explored collectively. While brainstorming ideas for my final project, I began to think that somehow using a box would, because of our shared history with the idea, be a powerful way to forge an emotional connection between my project and my classmates.

The idea developed further when I began thinking about a previously mentioned lecture in which Sandy explained how an ACTLab semester parallels Campbell's hero's journey. While describing the end of the journey, when the hero returns to the place they began with a gift gained along the way, she said that what a final project ideally asks of students is, "What gifts do you bring?" This question embedded itself in my mind, and as I mulled it over, I realized my project could take the question literally, while combining it with the box

motif. I could put a gift in a box. And while the box had been predominantly been used to represent limitations and restrictions, I could attempt to turn our understanding of the box on its head. I could try to make the box itself a gift.

Having thought the project through to that point, I purchased twenty small, square, papier mâché boxes, craft paints, and some decorative, patterned paper from a craft store. I decided that I'd collage the tops of each box with the paper, and use the craft paint to mix a custom color for each box, while painting the inside of each box silver. It was a tedious and time-consuming process, but one that gave me a lot to do with my hands and thus a lot of time to think about how to take my project "to the next level" (another ACTLab phrase).

The next breakthrough came while pondering what, if anything, I ought to put *in* my boxes. In preparation for another class's final paper, I was continuing to read Walter Ong and other scholarship related to his ideas. During this research, I came across Thomas J. Farrell's highlighting of Ong's notions of presence and the depersonalization of the word, and their relationship to one of Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. Acknowledging that Ong's treatment of these ideas comes across as "highfalutin," Farrell explains that Ong is concerned with "how larger patterns of cultural conditioning influence our ability to experience one another's presence and ... the depersonalization of the word."[27]

Farrell turns to Martha Kolln to define the depersonalization of the word as writing without a personal voice, sentences that do not "sound like something one person might say to another person."[28] Heavily influenced by

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[27] Farrell, *Walter Ong's Contributions*, 9.
[28] Ibid., 2-4.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Ong explains presence in a roundabout way:

> To be present to himself, man must find the presence of another or others ... The presence of other persons fills man's consciousness, as objects cannot. Situated among objects, a person may indeed find them interesting, but he responds only to other persons, other presences, who are not objects.[29]

For Ong, the concepts of depersonalized language and presence are linked. The solution to depersonalized speech is presence. Presence is a recognition of the Other within the self that enables genuine communication with the Other outside the Self. This new communication is called "I-Thou" communication, which is the opposite of and solution to the depersonalized word.[30] Since Ong was a Jesuit, Farrell observes that he probably conceived of the inner-Other as divine, but notes that Ong would not have universalized his own perception:

> Every word [of expression] implies not only the existence — at least in the imagination — of another to whom the word is uttered, but it also implies that the speaker has a kind of otherness within himself. He participates in the other to whom he speaks, and it is this underlying participation that makes communication possible. The human speaker can speak to the other precisely because he is not purely self, but is somehow also other.[31]

Thus, only by re-personalizing the word can we communicate genuinely with

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[29] Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 295.

[30] For an extended discussion of "I-thou" communication, see Farrell chapter five, which summarizes and interrogates Ong's essay collection *The Barbarian Within* and his book *In the Human Grain.*

[31] Ong, qtd. in Farrell, 107-108.

one another as human beings.

Farrell linked presence and "I-thou" communication to Ignatius Loyola's "Contemplation to Attain Love," part of his *Spiritual Exercises*, with which Ong would have been very familiar. The exercise, Farrell explains, is "not a contemplation on explicit biblical passages, but rather on our surrounding world."[32] It asks the participant to conceive of the world as a divine gift, and, once this perception is attained, to engage in "I-thou" communication with others, cognizant of the divine Other within them.

In processing these ideas, I wanted to foster a sense of community and intimacy among my classmates through my project. This desire guided me through the completion of the project and its presentation. I decided to put handwritten excerpts from poems in the boxes, choosing excerpts that dealt in what I felt was a direct and personalized tone with the topic of love. I selected excerpts that used first- or second-person narration, and tried to avoid gender-specific address. Inspired by the experience of having had someone else read my words early in my silence project, I hoped that speaking words of intimacy and love written by another person might alleviate anxieties about such things in the students' own voices.

I also wanted to engage with the presence of the physical space of the ACTLab itself during my presentation; to this end, I wrapped clear Christmas lights around the light grid and played soft music with thoughtful, affectionate lyrics. I hoped this environment would help break down barriers that existed between the students and between each student and the words on their slip of paper.

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[32] Farrell, *Walter Ong's Contributions*, 8-10.

During the presentation, I asked students to enter the space one by one and to select a box from the table. Once each student had a box, I invited them to read aloud the excerpt it contained, if they were willing. By asking the students to read the words aloud to one another, I hoped to re-personalize the texts, to transform them from abstract objects to intimate "I-thou" addresses. More than half of the students participated in reading their excerpts.

Illustration 2: The boxes on the table during the presentation. Image courtesy of Brian Ledden.

Illustration 3: Shayna Hill reaches for a box. Image courtesy of Brian Ledden.

Illustration 4: Monti Pal reads as classmates look on. Image courtesy of Brian Ledden.

My project thus constituted several gifts: the tangible and purely visual gift of the box itself; the tangible but literate gift of the poem inside; the oral gift of the students reading to one another; and the experiential gift created from the lighting, sound, and sense of intimacy in the space.

Conclusion: Silence, Communication,
and the Future of Learning

One of my best friends from high school is a lanky blonde named Sarah. Sarah is a swimmer. She joined our school's swim team in junior high, swam throughout high school, and got a swimming scholarship from Goucher College in Maryland. Sarah once told me that she only felt like a complete person in the pool, that the way her body knew how to move in the water and the way she felt when she was swimming were was more natural to her than anything she'd ever done out of the pool.

It took being silent for a week for me to realize that the page is my pool. I didn't learn to read at an abnormally early age — I was about five — but once I did, it was as if I'd spent every day of those five years waiting to start and now I had to make up for lost time. I disappeared into any book I could get my hands on. My parents realized the way to teach me about money was to make me save my allowance to buy books, and my mother once took away my library card to punish me for not cleaning my room. "Writing is often regarded at first as an instrument of secret and magic power," says Walter Ong, but for me, the same was true of reading, and at a very primitive, almost instinctive level, I still know this to be true.[33]

It's probably not surprising that, for me, writing followed quickly after reading and came just as easily. I have participated in enough creative writing workshops and read enough of my peers' papers to know that many

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[33] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 92.

intelligent, insightful, and well-spoken people come across uncomfortably on the page. Words flop around like fish gasping for air on their pages; I just open my nets and release my words into the sea. I'm often told my writing has an easy, conversational quality to it, whether I'm writing about postmodernism or the way my mother folds laundry. I say thank you, but the truth is that I don't know any other way to write. For me, words on a page aren't any less accessible than words in the air, and I have a hard time obscuring mine in the act of translation.

I don't think a period of my life as brief as the week in which I was silent has ever continued to affect me for as long as that period has. It deeply influenced the projects I completed in *Death*, the ACTLab class I took the following semester. In the first project, I navigated an intersection of writing and image and played with the idea that words *are* images in a photography project. Prompted by a freewheeling class discussion that, among many other topics, involved what happens to tattoos after death, I used eyeliner pencil to write my grandmother's name in various places on my body, and asked Brian

Illustration 5: A photograph from "The Grace Project"

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Illustration 6: A photograph from "The Grace Project"

Illustration 7: A photograph from "The Grace Project"

Ledden, a photographer friend, to help me compose some images. In the second

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project, I began to explore recording and oral narrative, producing an intensely personal oral testimony about my experiences growing up in a conservative Christian home.

While it's possible I might have produced these projects regardless of my experience of silence, that experience and the reading I've done since shaped my approach to their subject matter. The photography project required a great deal of emotionally draining introspection and planning before the actual shoot, and I often found myself reaching for the sense of patience I discovered within myself and for myself[34] during my silence to use as motivation to continue the difficult work. While I wrote the text I recorded for the oral testimony project, I paid even more than my usual attention to language, fully cognizant of the perception differences between listening and reading and wanting to connect to my listeners to the best of my abilities. I tried to use simple vocabulary with concrete description, to write for the voice and not the page. I would have done none of these things had I not completed my silence project and the research that followed.

My silence project also continues to foster interest from those around me, and has even inspired another student's work. In the spring of 2010, Peter Petrzala, my classmate in *Death*, spent three days in self-imposed social and technological isolation, without television, music/radio, and his computer. During the period, he sketched, painted, and wrote, and the isolation both raised

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[34] I realize the phrase "patience for myself" is oddly worded. Language has its limitations. By this phrase, I mean a sort of kindness toward myself, an acceptance of my own limitations. The phrase is a variation of the concluding lines of Dorianne Laux's poem, "Music in the Morning," from her collection *Facts About the Moon: Poems* (New York: Norton, 2006): "I like to think he survived / in order to find me, in order to arrive here / ... But I know it's only luck / that delivered him here, luck and a love / that had nothing to do with me. Except / this is what we sometimes get / if we live long enough. If we are patient / with our lives."

and helped him process some personal issues.[35] In the course of the discussion that followed his presentation of this project, several other students in the class, who did not know me when I completed my silence project, expressed enthusiastic interest in trying out their own experiences of silence.

Six months after the silence project, I remain modest and realistic about the conclusions I can draw from it. I fully acknowledge that an extended period of verbal silence is simply not possible for a large majority of people. That my silence was both possible and voluntary speaks volumes about my privilege as a young, white, educated American woman from a middle-class family. However, I don't want to diminish what I learned as a result of my experience and the research that followed either, because I feel it could have applications and implications across a broad spectrum of fields and situations, inside and beyond the academy.

To be very blunt: In being silent, I learned to listen. When I learned to listen, I learned a new way to speak. When you cannot speak, when you are in a situation where you would normally either be obligated to speak or feel a desire to respond verbally, but you cannot — and when this is the case for more than a few days — first you are frustrated, then you are bored, and then you begin to listen. It's become common to blame a large number of problems on "failures of communication," but I wonder what we might learn if, instead of trying to improve our ability to speak to one another, we decided to improve our ability to listen to one another. When you cannot speak, you realize the extent to which the desire to speak impedes this ability. After all, why listen to someone else when you are too busy worrying about what you're going to say

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[35] For a full account, see his ACTLab page at http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~petrzala/?p=3.

when it's your turn to talk? But imagine if, instead of defining a conversation as "two people who take turns talking," we defined a conversation as "two people who take turns being silent, listening to one another?" What would we say to one another?

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Vita

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This report was typed by the author.