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## It is important that we speak

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## **“It is important that we speak.” (hooks 18)**

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For some people, food is love. My depression-era father fed all creatures—dogs, children, horses, friends, relations, birds and deer—until they could hold no more or even imagine ever wanting more again. My old friend Lisa can whip up a multi-course Indian meal with a mandala-like fruit tart to finish if she even suspects someone she loves might be in some sort of distress. It was in a conversation with Lisa many years ago that I realized that for me, it is not food through which I love, but talk. Talk about something, talk about nothing, talk about why there is something rather than nothing. In his essay “Philosophy—What Is It?” Martin Heidegger writes that the voice of Being appears in many guises, and that it is our task as sentient beings—particularly as beings aware of our own Beingness—to become attuned to that voice, and to correspond with it. In this way of attunement and correspondence, Heidegger writes, we strive toward the *sophon*, toward wisdom (506). Philosophy, the academic west’s quest for what is wise, good, just, and beautiful, is grounded in dialogue. *Dia*=two. *Logos*=speech. Two talkers. Plato loved dialogues. Cicero. Augustine. Shakespeare. Galileo. Descartes dialogued with himself: that’s called a meditation. In the Buddhist tradition, where meditation is central, we find Right Speech on the Noble Eightfold Path to Enlightenment: it is partnered always with compassionate listening. We talk with ourselves in silence that we may better hear what others say aloud (Hanh 92). The simple daily practice of talking with and listening to each other is one of the ways we break bread with the good, the transcendent, the sacred.

Most human communities—at least the admirable ones—are designed to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of participants. This is the fundamental principle of democracy. John Milton observes in his 1644 *Areopagitica*, his appeal for free speech to the Parlement of England, that we find the truth by searching through falsehoods. Describing the English national character as “subtle and sinewy to discourse,” Milton reminds Parlement that “Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making” (36). Dialogue helps us seek and find the truth: that’s why democratic societies are as committed to free speech as tyrannies are afraid of it. Contemporary Milton and legal scholar Stanley Fish, however, notes that “speech, in short, is never a value in and of itself but is always produced within the precincts of some assumed conception of the good to which it must yield in the event of conflict” (104). In other words, free speech is designed to further the goals of the community of which it is a part. Free speech is a democratic means to a democratic end. Free speech is goal specific, and its goal is the greater good.

Immanuel Kant extends Milton’s argument and anticipates Fish’s: “The scholar, speaking to the world through his writings, has an unrestricted freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own voice. ...But... any such agreement which aims to prevent the enlightenment of mankind is null and void. One generation cannot enter into a contract to stifle the intellectual and moral development of a later generation by making it impossible for the latter to expand its knowledge. ...To do so would be to commit a crime against human nature, whose destiny is to grow and progress” (58). What Kant begins to make clear here is that human communities—and human nature itself—has a goal: we develop intellectually and morally as individuals and as a human community to fulfill our



positive destiny of growth and progress. We don't talk for talk's sake; we talk for our community's sake. We are not unrestricted in what we say until we are unrestricted in our use of reason, and our reason is designed to gain knowledge of the good so that we may act on behalf of that good.

In a book called *Silences*, contemporary writer Tillie Olsen explores the different ways that writers are prevented from finding and expressing their full voice: "Do not forget," her chapter begins, "The overwhelmingness of the dominant./ The daily saturation./ Isolations./ The knife of the perfectionist attitude./ The insoluble./ Economic imperatives"(256). If we are not brave enough, we silence ourselves. If we are not mindful enough, we silence each other. "Speech is the way for our thinking to express itself aloud," writes Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. "Our thoughts are no longer our private possessions. We give earphones to others and allow them to hear the audiotape that is playing in our mind. ...Our words are very powerful. They can give someone a complex, take away their purpose in life, or even drive them to suicide. We must not forget this" (85). Words matter. Words matter because "Speech," as Stanley Fish reminds us, "always seems to be crossing the line into action, where it becomes, at least potentially, consequential" (105).

It is not easy to come to voice. It is not easy to speak your piece. But it is our mission to encourage each member of this community to reach enlightenment, to use the visual metaphor; or to come to voice, to use the aural. The mission of Roger Williams University is the "creation and delivery of ...programs... that are characterized by an ethos of inquiry and civic responsibility" (Undergraduate 12). We ask questions in the spirit of responsibility for each and all of us who study, work, and live in this community now, as well as for those who might follow. My title might mislead: hooks writes it is important that we speak, but her next sentence reads "What we speak about is more important." Free speech is not just talk for talk's sake. It is not junk food: cheap, pointless, decadent, fun to roll on the tongue but poisonous to the body's internal workings. Free speech is the nourishment of a healthy body politic of which the voice of each member is a vital sign.

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