

Now it's your turn

“Now its your turn”, said the leader. I stood and faced my partner.

We were taking part in a course on improving our listening skills. A dozen others were in the room, and I was asked to describe a place which mattered to me, a place that was special in some way. My partner was simply to listen without comment.

I told him about the farm belonging to my aunt and uncle in South Wales. Set inland on the Gower peninsular, it was high up, exposed. “It’s the wind I don’t like” my aunt used to say. A wide open track divided the hundred acres, with open fields on either side. The track ran down to a forest and in the late summer, my father would go into the forest to gather blackberries, while we would stay on the farm and get purple hands in the safety of the hedges. The forest seemed a fearful place to us children.

I told him how our family would pile into the car on a Saturday, my father driving, my mother sitting in the front, and my older brother, younger sister and I in the back. We never arrived at the right time. My aunt always expected us the previous week – or the next week – never today. For they had no phone, nor indeed electric power.

I told him about the things that scared me as a child. The barking sheepdogs which rushed around us when we arrived, the geese which set up a cacophony of warning if you got too near, and the large cows, many of them horned. I was too scared to walk down the track on my own.

But there was a safe place outside, and my partner listened as I described it. There was a garden beside the house, surrounded by stone walls and hedges and sheltered from the wind. You entered it through an iron gate, painted dark green, which clanged shut after you. In Spring, wild daffodils, pale and low, grew there, and in summer it was turned over to vegetables. In the corner was a deep well, covered over, where churns of milk were lowered to keep cool. Martins nested under the eaves of the house and swooped over the farm where food was plentiful

Even when I was with my family, there was always a sense of relief when we opened the gate and entered the garden. But one day – my partner became more alert, the listening more intense – I lost the family, and found myself on my

own on the farm track. And the herd was being brought in for milking, and the dogs were around the herd, and I was in the way. I backed into the hedge and flattened myself against it. Slowly they passed. And I was still there. I hadn't been trampled, or kicked, or bitten or even touched. The geese were round the pond at the side of the track, the gander keeping watch. I pretended not to notice him, gave him a wide berth, and reached the green iron gate.

It clanged shut after me. I didn't need to tell my partner how safe the garden felt, the happiness of being there. His face showed his understanding. In later visits to the farm, the cows, the geese and even the dogs held no more terrors. The garden remained a place of delight.

"Thank you" said the leader. "Now its your turn" to my partner. My partner told his story, but when he finished, the leader changed the rules and invited me to ask him questions about his story. But I hadn't listened. I'd tried to look as though I had, but I hadn't been able to leave the sound of those green clanging gates of the farm garden, and all the childhood memories that had flooded back. It was all too powerful, and I was still there.

I couldn't listen to the present, while I was listening so hard to the past.