

*Julie Gordon*

## Learning to Listen

an excerpt

I turn off the island highway onto the unpaved logging road that heads west toward Zeballos, a tiny fishing village at the mouth of the inlet that shares the same name. I have been driving for almost six hours now and although this last stretch of the drive is only 40 km, it feels the longest. I hadn't anticipated the giant potholes, exaggerated after a long rainy season. Eventually, the road becomes Macquinna Drive, Zeballos's main street, and winds its way through town to the base of the inlet. When I arrive, the sun has faded and the streets are empty, a heavy mist

hangs in the air, and it seems as though this part of the world is forgotten or somehow suspended in time.

In the morning I wake early and head to the dock to meet Victoria Wells. Victoria belongs to the Ehattaseht First Nation. She is a language activist and learner who has made it her life's work to revitalize her language as well as that of the neighbouring Nuchatlaht Tribe. The two communities share much in common: they have an overlapping territory, a common history, and many shared traditions. They also speak similar dialects of the same language, and those languages can therefore be archived as one. I am here on behalf of a client—First Nations Foundation—that funds the language archiving project, to observe and record Victoria's progress.

Victoria has a striking beauty that seems to derive from her grace—bronze skin over wide cheekbones, straight black hair streaked with grey stretching down her back, and deep-set, clear eyes. She tells me to call her Vicki as I climb into her little aluminum boat, and soon we are underway, heading for Espinoza Inlet and the village of Oclucje.

Oclucje is a traditional village site of the Nuchatlaht people, and it's also the official reservation. It houses about twenty of the two hundred or so members year round. Others live off-reserve in Zeballos, Campbell River, or further afield. We are heading there to meet Alban Michael, who, at eighty-two, is the oldest living member of his Nation. He is also the only remaining one to speak his language fluently, and that makes him critical to Victoria's archiving work.

The boat ride reveals what is perhaps the most pristine coastal environment I have ever witnessed. Its wild beauty takes my breath away. Giant conifers tower over a rugged coastline. Deserted white sand beaches and endless fjords and inlets define the shore. The ocean is calm and clear; diamonds sparkle on its surface in the early light. Aside from the steady drone of the motor, the only sound comes from birds, the plaintive cries of gulls overhead, a high-pitched *chip chip* of a passing eagle, and an occasional squawk when a heron takes flight.

We arrive at a lush and verdant enclave dotted with a dozen or so homes. Alban's is a short walk up from the shore. Waiting

for us in the open doorway, he greets us with a wide grin that changes the direction of the weathered cross-hatching on his face. Alban lives alone now—his wife Rose passed away a couple of years ago—and I get the impression that he welcomes visits from Vicki and the language volunteers. It gives him a chance to speak the words of a language he loves but no longer uses day to day.

We head upstairs to the kitchen, where Julie Smith, one of Vicki's volunteers, is waiting with a pot of strong, hot tea. Vicki has brought lunch and I help her lay it out on the table. Cold cuts, buns, lettuce, apples, store-bought cookies—these offerings are a gesture of appreciation for Alban's time, and as I unpack them I silently wish I had thought to bring something as well. While we eat, we make small talk. "How was the boat ride?" "About time that rain let up." "They really need to pave that Zeballos road." Alban speaks only in Nuchatlaht. Vicki and Julie switch between their language and English, translating for me from time to time. When I speak, Alban watches me shyly from the corner of his eye.



After lunch Vicki cleans up while Julie sets up the recording equipment. She places a microphone on a stand in front of Alban. Across the table from him she opens a laptop, connects the mike and computer with a small box that she tells me is an audio interface, and then sits down facing Alban.

Thinking that this is the moment I have come for, I get out my camera and take a few pictures while they set up. I am expecting Alban and Julie to simulate the language-recording process while I observe and document it. Instead, Alban begins to speak in a soft, low tone. His pale eyes stay focused straight ahead; his voice is steady and clear, his tone serious. Julie stops fiddling with the recording equipment and, together with Vicki, sits back in her chair to listen intently. Following their lead, I set my camera down and wait.

Alban speaks in Nuchatlaht for a very, very long time. I try not to glance at the kitchen clock, but after about twenty minutes, I start to get restless. With the lunch and small talk, we are already well beyond the time I had allotted for the visit, and we have still not begun to record the process. I am not staying in

Zeballos overnight and I need to make it to Alert Bay. I don't like driving in the dark and am not looking forward to navigating that road again, but I know it would be disrespectful to interrupt, so I try to listen too. Eventually, I start to relax. Alban's voice is calming and the sound of his language has a hypnotic quality. I soon find myself immersed in the moment, and although I can't understand anything he's saying, it becomes a meditation of sorts.

Finally, Alban stops talking and nods his head forward subtly to indicate he's done. The room fills with silence, and Vicki puts her hand on top of his and squeezes lightly before she turns to me. "I think he has just told you his life's story." She translates as best she can what Alban has spoken about. Vicki is not fluent, so she repeats his story in fragments. She tells me he talked of his childhood here, of what life was like before colonization, and how his family lived in a traditional way. He also spoke about how life changed afterwards. He talked about being taken away to residential school in Tofino, what it was like there, and how happy he was to return home. And he spoke with gratitude

about his ancestors, especially his mother, who spoke only in Nuchatlaht with him when he returned. “This,” Vicki explains, “is why he retained his language while many did not.”

Vicki’s tone is one of astonishment and her eyes are moist. It’s clear that she is deeply moved by what has just happened. I also see that she was not expecting it any more than I was. “I think he has been waiting for this,” she says. “I think he has wanted someone to listen to this story for a very long time.”

We wrap the day up with a brief simulation of the language-archiving process so I can make notes and take pictures, but the exercise now feels more like a formality than the main reason for my being here. Julie speaks a series of simple English words off a list—mother, house, kitchen—and Alban repeats each one into the microphone in Nuchatlaht so they can be uploaded into the digital archive. These recordings will help a future generation of Nuchatlaht people communicate in their own language. But they don’t tell Alban’s whole story, the story he shared with us and that we did not record that day.

When I leave Zeballos that evening, it’s nearly sunset. I drive the potholed gravel road while the light fades and the sky turns to the deepest blue. As I drive, I go over the events of the day and think about everything that happened. Mostly, I think about the gift that Alban has shared with me. And I think about how my own impatience nearly got in the way of being able to give back the only things I had to offer: my time and my desire to listen.