Faith’s Shifting Subjectivities: Her Awareness of Herself as Artist

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Among the numerous heroines peopling Grace Paley’s fiction (Anna Kraat in “The Pale Pink Roast”, Alexandra in “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute”, Virginia in “An Interest in Life” and “Distance”) Faith looms largest. She appears as a character in seventeen stories, all included in Paley’s four collections The Little Disturbances of Man (1959), Enormous Changes at the Last Minute (1974), Later the Same Day (1985) and Long Walks and Intimate Talks (1991). Brought together and aptly rearranged according to the unfolding events of Faith’s life, they form what can be called a short-story sequence, that is to say a sequence of concatenated stories which for a number of reasons tend to form a coherent, relatively homogeneous whole. The basic thread running through the “Faith stories” is of course Faith’s development as a character. Though different in many respects from the heroine of a novel, Faith (being a fictional stand-in for the author herself) follows a Bildungsroman pattern. Her life, depicted in the form of brief sketches or episodes, is gradually padded out as we progress from one story to the next. Starting out as a thwarted wife and single mother of two boys, Faith progresses from personal to social awareness and eventually develops into a writer. Thus, the Faith stories can also be read as a Künstlerroman, as a portrait of the artist as a young woman.

The purpose of this essay is to trace Faith’s development as a writer in five stories which best exemplify her artistic evolution: “Faith in a Tree” (Changes), “The Long-Distance Runner” (Changes), “The Story Hearer” (Later), “Listening” (Later), and “Friends” (Later). In creating the Bildung of the female artist, women writers often find themselves confronting a
tradition that is essentially male, a tradition which, as Meier suggests, "relegates female creativity to an ancillary position" (115-116). Women writers have responded to this situation in various ways. What remains a constant, however, is their attempt to reject and subvert dominant stereotypes. In this respect Paley's central heroine, Faith, follows the pattern drawn by other women writers. She not only breaks through the stereotypes, thus dissociating herself from a male literary tradition, but in the later stories, when she becomes a mature writer, she also develops a style that is distinctively female and opposed to the "Father-artist aesthetic" embodied in male-authored texts (Meier 115). However, this process of progressive 'liberation' from dominant literary conventions is fraught with difficulties. Before reaching artistic maturity, Faith has to pass through different stages which proceed along a path of conflict, seeming 'defeat' and triumphant affirmation. Starting out as an egocentric "writer of private journals", Faith (the female counterpart to the traditional figure of the artist as an isolated genius and social outcast) eventually becomes a responsible writer, aware of the ethical and moral function of her art (Baba 45).

Although references to Faith's artistic genius are already present in the early stories, it is only in "Faith in a Tree" that her newly acquired identity as a writer begins to assume a more definite shape. The story describes a moment when the protagonist is rather depressed and bewildered. Faith has just divorced from her first husband Ricardo. As a single mother of two boys, she is trying to come to grips with the realities of single-motherhood, and to overcome her sense of frustration and discontentment. The story itself is based on Faith's recollection of a particular day she spent in the park with her friends and their assorted children. It is interesting that the first story in which Faith speaks of herself self-consciously as a writer should be set in a park, a traditional gathering point for mothers and children. Already in "Faith in a Tree" Faith chooses to write from a woman-centered perspective and it is indeed as a frustrated mother that she presents herself to the reader. She begins her narration by saying:

Just when I most needed important conversation, a sniff of the man-wide world, that is at least one brainy companion who could translate my friendly language into his tongue of undying carnal love, I was forced to lounge in our neighborhood park surrounded by children. (77)
As the story opens Faith is sitting in a sycamore tree and from that strategic position she surveys the whole scene. Her vantage point is full of interesting implications. By placing herself a little above ground level, Faith is physically separated from the world too. Her privileged position is important in terms of her development as a writer. Her “arboreal vision” (vaguely reminiscent of that enjoyed by Calvino’s protagonist Cosimo Piovaschi in *Il Barone Rampante*) enables her to expand “her vision geographically, zoologically, astronomically, and theologically”, while at the same time it frees her from narrative conventions (Baba 45). The opening five pages of the story consist almost entirely of moments of interior monologue. While she is in her tree Faith lets her thoughts wander; she reflects on the present and returns to significant moments in her past.

The third paragraph of the story plunges the reader directly into Faith’s mind. Her monologue begins with a series of visual images. Sitting in her tree, Faith is looking above and below. Defining her range of vision (which is also her scope of vision as an artist), she makes an amusing comparison between God’s celestial perspective and her own bird’s eye view, commenting:

He sees south into Brooklyn how Prospect Park lies in its sand-rooted trees among Japanese gardens and police, and beyond us to dangerous Central Park... But me, the creation of His second thought, I am sitting on the twelve-foot high, strong, long arm of a sycamore... and I can only see Kitty, a coworker in the mother trade - a topnotch craftsman. (77-78)

These words can be read as a defiant re-elaboration of the male’s point of view. Here, Faith, the would-be writer, would seem to be making a claim both to literary significance and to a woman’s world view. By playfully comparing her powers of reverence and observation to God’s (of whom - as a woman - she is the “second thought” after Adam), she is implicitly defining herself as a creator on a smaller scale (lowercase ‘c’). Her allusion to God and Adam is charged with symbolic meaning. The passage above can be read as an attempt to subvert the myth of the Father-artist, which “permeate[s]... the tradition of the novel” (Meier 115). As Meier explains, “the artist is male because he is in the image of God, the father, who created the world and secondly in the image of Adam, the first father, who named all the animals” (115). The foundation of this phallocentric myth is powerfully dismantled as
Faith reevaluates women's role as childbearers and creators of life. By defining herself as mother-author, she subverts the metaphor of the artist "fathering" a literary text, and appropriately enough, she replaces it with that of the "mother" giving birth to a work of art.

The awareness of herself as artist emerges even more startlingly in the following section, where Faith tries her hand at describing young mothers and passers-by lounging in the park. The scene is transformed into a rich and elaborate seascape. From her privileged perspective at the top of her tree Faith sees:

Mrs. Junius Finn, my up-the-block neighbor and evening stoop companion, a broad barge, like a lady, moving slow - a couple of redheaded cabooses dragged by clothesline at her stern; on her fat upper deck, Wiltwyck, a pale three-year-old roaring captain with smoky eyes, shoves his wet thumb into the wind... Along the same channel, but near enough now to spatter with spite, tilting delicately like a boy's sailboat, Lynn Ballard floats past my unconcern to drop light anchor, a large mauve handbag, over the green bench slats. (78-79)

Here, the reader is given a fascinating glimpse of Faith, the artist at work. What is significant is the subject she has chosen to describe. By focusing her attention on women with children, Faith anticipates her future concerns as a writer. Her decision to illuminate a part of women's lives, and to place it in the public context of literature poses a challenge to dominant literary canons. The life of women, always confined to the privacy of the kitchen, is here elevated and turned into a literary subject.

However, in "Faith in a Tree" Faith does not seem to have managed to dissociate herself completely from dominant literary modes. Although it may be true that she defines herself as a mother-author and articulates a woman-centered perspective in her work, her retreat up a tree renders her authorial position highly problematic. This contradiction is dramatized in the final scene of the story when Faith finally returns to the (common) ground. Tempted like a modern-day Eve in reverse by the arrival of an eligible man, she descends from her tree, "Oh, I said and left the arm of the sycamore with as delicate a jump as can be made by a person afraid of falling, twisting an ankle, and being out of work for a week" (91). Despite her obvious interest in him, her attempts to attract his attention prove fruitless. Just when Faith is
about to go back up her tree, a group of anti-war protesters (the story was written during the Vietnam War) appears: “four or five grownups ... pushing little go-carts with babies in them, a couple of three-year-olds hanging on” (97). Her response to the demonstration is rather insouciant. When the local cop orders the demonstrators to disperse, she remains indifferent and her passivity (“‘They look pretty legal to me’, I hollered after Doug’s blue back” 99) causes her nine-year old son Richard to react. Disgusted at his mother’s and her friends’ behavior, he bursts out, “I hate you. I hate your stupid friends. Why didn’t they just stand up to that stupid cop and say fuck you” (99). He then acts directly himself and “in a fury of tears and disgust” reprints “on the blacktop in pink flamingo chalk - in letters fifteen feet high” the message of the parade, “so the entire Saturday walking world could see” (99).

Richard’s reaction has a profound effect upon Faith, so much so that she describes this moment as a turning point:

And I think that is exactly when events turned me around, changing my hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling. Then I met women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by my children’s heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world. (99 - 100)

In “Faith in a Tree”, then, Faith lays the foundations for a kind of moral conversion, although this shift in awareness is only partly due to her children’s “heartfelt brains” (100). The mental preparation for this step has long since been made; her Jewish parents with their sense of ethical humanism and social responsibility (which Faith, at this point, has not yet made an essential part of her being) have raised her to acquire her own, different sense of purpose in her own day. Most significantly, in this passage Faith establishes a connection between her verbal artistry and a social and political conscience which she is beginning to develop. Indeed, she determines to change “her style of living and telling.” At the end of the story, she herself acknowledges her flaws and failings. In her encounter with the demonstrators, she fails to act on her sense of responsibility, thus showing how much she still has to grow both as a person and a writer. The role she has chosen for herself as artist, that of articulating women’s previously silenced experiences, requires a set of qualities which Faith at this point seems to lack. While marking her
superiority as artist, her apartness also defines her isolation from other people and therefore becomes a sign of excessive self-involvement. Strangely enough, in this story Faith does not seem to be very different from the image of the artist as an isolated genius which we find in so many male-authored texts. In “Faith in a Tree” she is still suffering from an egocentricity that mars her capacity for communion and empathetic involvement, a set of feelings usually womanly in nature, which are essential to her art. As long as she remains detached, and “privilege[s] one voice”, Faith won’t be able to ‘listen’ to the voices of other women; nor will she succeed in ‘telling the truth’ about their lives (Daly and Reddy 6). In short, to find artistic maturity and to become the spokeswoman for the female community, Faith will have to transcend her crippling self-absorption and move towards community with others.

Her moral development continues in the “The Long-Distance Runner”, a story marking yet another step in her artistic evolution. In “The Long-Distance Runner” Faith literally ‘runs back to the past’, returning to her old neighborhood in Coney Island, to the house where she spent her childhood. Her journey is invested with a gendered meaning and is experienced as specifically female. Guided by another woman (who can be seen as the female equivalent to the traditional guide figure accompanying the hero on his quest), the black girl scout Cynthia, Faith returns to her childhood home and finds her personal identity by recognizing that she is part of a family of mothers. Her journey back to her childhood home (an introspective journey in search of her mother) symbolically represents a return to the maternal womb, to the realm of the mother, to the world of female authority.

In “The Long-Distance Runner” Faith’s mother does not actually appear, but her presence is felt throughout and Faith truly becomes her mother’s daughter for the first time. In “Faith in the Afternoon” and “Dreamer in a Dead Language” (two other stories of the sequence which from a chronological point of view preceded “The Long-Distance Runner”), their relationship emerged as highly problematical. Her mother appeared as hovering, overprotective and patronizing, and Faith was unable to identify with the model of femininity her mother proposed. In “The Long-Distance Runner” Faith enters into a mother-daughter surrogate relationship with Mrs. Luddy (the black woman now living in her old apartment), and by so doing she “achieves the reparenting necessary to her second birth” as a daughter (DuPlessis 94). But the assessment of the mother-daughter bond
enacted by the story is also important in terms of Faith’s development as a writer. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains:

There seems to be a specific biographical drama that has shaped Künstlerromane by women. Such a narrative is engaged with a maternal figure and, on a biographical level, is often compensatory for her losses ... The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal and elaborate her mother’s often thwarted talents ... The younger artist’s future project as a creator lies in completing the fragmentary and potential work of the mother”. (93-94)

For Faith too, the quest for her mother’s “story” serves as an enabling act (Lidoff 400). There is a moment in “The Long Distance Runner” when Faith thinks intensely of her own mother. It is when she sees Mrs Luddy’s living room that she muses:

The living room was something like ours, only we had less plastic ... My mother had set beautiful cushions everywhere, on bed and chairs. It was the way she expressed herself, artistically, to embroider at night or take strips of flowered cotton and sew them across ordinary white or blue muslin in the most delicate designs, the way women have always used materials that live and die in hunks and tatters to say: This is my place. (189)

In the above passage there is no trace of the old conflict that marred their relationship in the past. Earlier in the story, Faith told Cynthia a lie and said her mother was dead. Here we see how this ‘death’ has helped Faith see her relationship with her mother in a new light. It is almost as if through language she had tried to kill her own mother in order to escape from the crippling, paralyzing figure that frustrated her growth. For the first time she expresses admiration for her mother and her voice is clearly a female mother-daughter’s voice. The negative aspects of her maternal heritage are laid aside and Faith chooses (and is able) to emphasize the useful part, the maternal values of love, nurturing and care (DuPlessis). In psychoanalytic terms, of course, she has reestablished a connection with the good mother, by ‘murdering’ the bad one.

Most significantly, her shift of perspective is essential to her maturation as an artist. Her mother’s handicraft work, the art of sewing and embroidering
cushions, which the dominant culture dismisses as trivial and unimportant, is here elevated and considered a medium of artistic expression. Faith says, “It was the way she expressed herself, artistically” (189). Earlier on in the story Faith has referred to her own profession as a writer - “That’s how she [Mrs. Raftery] got liked by me, loved, invented and endured” - and in this passage the woman of genius recognizes her mother as her inspiring muse (180). By mentioning her mother’s handicraft work (which is here embedded in another work of art, the story which Faith, the daughter artist has written), Faith not only celebrates her mother’s creativity but also sees herself as part of an essentially female tradition. Faith, the reborn daughter, becomes the recipient and inheritor of her mother’s talents and her task is to complete and extend her mother’s work and that of all the other mothers who have come before her (DuPlessis). While in “Faith in a Tree” Faith kept herself at some distance from the other mothers in the park and was only half committed to her subject, women’s day-to-day living, in “The Long Distance Runner” she abandons her posture as a superior, alienated being and immerses herself in the concrete, practical realities of women’s existence. In tracing the sources of her art to her mother’s sewing, she finally sees herself as part of the world she has set out to describe. Only now can Faith begin to ‘listen’ and become the spokeswoman for the community of women, the historian of their lives.

When she appears in “The Story Hearer”, Faith is a totally different woman, and it would seem that in this story the change in her “style of living and telling” announced at the end of “Faith in a Tree” has finally taken place. (100). Although “The Story Hearer” is essentially about the telling and making of a story, the thematic focus is, as its title suggests, not so much on telling as on hearing and listening. The story consists principally of a conversation between Faith and her life-long companion, Jack, a dialogue in which she reports several other conversations to him. In other words, she is telling a story and Jack (the story hearer) is her immediate audience. In the frame narrative Faith is talking to Jack (and teaching him). In the inner story, she talks to three other men (Eddie, Jim and Treadwell Thomas), and of course she is also addressing the reader, who is therefore hearing three different stories: the frame story describing their conversation, the story Faith tells Jack, and most important of all, the story of the telling.

In “The Story-Hearer”, “listening” is also central to the role of the writer-storyteller and thus the person who does most of the “hearing” in the
story is Faith herself. Before becoming a storyteller, she herself has played (and is still playing) the role of story hearer. She has listened to the stories of Edie, Jim, Treadwell Thomas and Orlando, and then has retold them to Jack in her own voice, a polivocal, dialogic voice capable of embedding a multiplicity of perspectives. Time has gone by and Faith has matured. By now she has made her Jewish heritage an essential part of her being. No longer paralyzed by private interests, she has finally adopted an active social creed. Her belief in social justice and her sense of responsibility towards her fellow men, which finds expression in her social activism, has also begun to affect her writing. She herself is aware of her change of perspective. Reflecting on what she sees as a turning point in her life, she begins her narration by saying:

I am trying to curb my cultivated individualism, which seemed for years so sweet. It was my own song in my own world and, of course, it may not be useful in the hard time to come. So, when Jack said at dinner, What did you do today with your year off? I decided to make an immediate public accounting of the day, not to water my brains with time spent in order to grow smart private thoughts. (133)

Here again Faith establishes a connection between her art and her social-political conscience. As a writer she has pre-announced her story as a public accounting, thus revealing a significant shift in her artistic perspective. While “Faith in a Tree”, a story written when she was still too involved in her own misery to move beyond herself to others, consisted primarily of interior associational monologues, “The Story Hearer” is defined as a public performance. Therefore, while in the first story Faith privileged a monologic voice, here she speaks with a polivocal voice that favors “the practice of dialogue”, a style that, appropriately enough, is often identified by critics as “a maternal mode” (Daly and Reddy 6). At the same time, by stressing the public nature of her accounting, Faith is reinforcing her commitment to community values. In fact, just as in her political life, in her own writing too, we see public and private merging. Her story consists of her account of an ordinary day she spent out shopping in her local neighborhood. In recounting her day, she portrays it as a public performance and a work of art at the same time. Besides, her belief in the importance of community ties and values is affirmed through the very act of telling, since telling is by definition a public act. Faith’s story is a conversation and contains all the typical qualities of oral storytelling.
The shared intimacy between Faith/narrator and her reader recreates that sense of community and communal bonding that characterized the relationship between the storyteller and his live audience in the old tradition of storytelling.

This opening serves as an introduction to the story and presents the reader with all the preliminary information necessary to understand it. Curiously enough, this long, introductory passage is not followed by Faith’s account of her day (the story she herself announced), but by a brief exchange between Faith and Jack, which further delays the beginning of the story,

Shall we begin at the beginning?
Yes, he said, I’ve always loved beginnings.
Men do I replied. No one knows if they will ever get over this. Hundreds of thousands of words have been written, some freelance and some commissioned. Still no one knows. (133)

The reader’s attention is immediately drawn to the act of storytelling, as Faith reflects on the problem of story beginnings. Most significant is how issues relating to literary form (in this case “beginnings”) are invested with a gendered meaning and serve to highlight the difference between women and men. Jack’s preference for beginnings is identified as a typical male predilection. In fact, as Taylor suggests, “[T]his search for beginnings dominates patriarchal thought” (37). Male pride (or rather, as Faith seems to suggest, their fundamental insecurity) expresses itself in the need to create myths in which men are the origins, the “beginning”, of everything that is real (Taylor). Within these stories of origins women are placed at the margins and exist only as objects of representation.

Faith, however, is no longer prepared to remain passive and has now begun to react against the numerous strategies adopted by the dominant culture to silence and exclude women. Only now do we understand why she has delayed the beginning of her story. In fact, by procrastinating she subverts the traditional emphasis on beginnings, thereby calling into question and disrupting its phallocentric foundation. When Faith finally begins to tell her story (the stories of her day), her beginning is no longer a beginning in the traditional sense of the word. As she herself says, “Therefore I want to go on with the story. Or perhaps begin it again” (134). Therefore, in “The Story Hearer” Faith presents the reader with a story that lacks a standard
beginning. While on the one hand, her disruption of the narrative convention of
to her newly-awakened feminist consciousness, on
the other, it provides the reader with some useful information about her
aesthetic principles and most specifically about the story that we are now
going to read. By deviating from dominant narrative patterns, Faith dissocia-
herself from a tradition which she sees as essentially male. She too has now
become a writer and teller of stories, but her female identity constitutes a
positive mark of difference, a difference that affects the form and the content
of her stories. Since Faith speaks in a woman’s voice and her stories are
rooted in the concrete, daily reality of women’s existence, her materials
necessarily differ from those traditionally used by men. In the passage above,
Faith names this difference and her words seem to be addressed directly to
the reader, who is here invited to ignore conventional reading expectations
and develop different strategies of interpretation.

Her awareness of the irreconcilable difference between male and female
discourse emerges even more startlingly in the story “Listening”. Faith (here
appearing again in her double role of storyteller/storybearer) has just finished
telling Jack about a couple of conversations she overheard in her local res-
taurant, the Art Foods Deli. It is at this point that the reader discovers
surprisingly that one of the men in the restaurant was Jack. But when Faith
tells him, “one of those men was you”, he is not particularly impressed (202).
“Well, ... I know it was me”, he replies, “You don’t have to remind me. I saw
you looking at us. I saw you listening” (202-203). Jack has not appreciated
“her two little stories” because, as he explains, “all those stories are about
men” and he is “more interested in women” (203). But when he asks Faith to
tell him her stories of women, she refuses. “Those are too private”, she
replies (203). Faith does not think that men can appreciate the stories women
tell one another. The implication is that these stories (Jack calls them the
“stories told by women about women”) can only be told to women (203). Men
have their “own woman stories” (203). As she explains, “You know
your falling-in-love stories, your French-woman-during-the-Korean-War
stories, your magnificent-woman stories, your beautiful-new-young-wife
stories, your political-comrade-though-extremely beautiful stories... “ (203).
Faith’s list is meant to call into question a whole series of stereotypical
definitions of women. In fact, in men’s “woman stories” (and in dominant
narratives in general) women tend to be reduced to sexual objects (203).
Instead of being represented as subjects, they are objectified and end up being a kind of non-presence. These stories are illusory; they distort reality and falsify women’s existence. In Faith’s “woman stories”, on the other hand, women exist as subjects, rooted in the concrete reality of daily life. In “Listening”, then, Faith not only perceives herself as cut off from the dominant literary tradition, but she also realizes that in “dominant narratives” women “are seen through a romantic and objectifying lens that is so powerful that it would profane and distort the woman-centered stories [she] could tell” (Taylor 18).

But although Faith now seems to be more aware of her role as a writer, and insists on the importance of “telling the truth” about women’s lives, here too she betrays her limited perspective. In fact, in the final scene of the story, she discovers that “no narrator ... is immune to the dangers” of silencing and “excluding voices different from her own” (128). Faith has just attended a meeting and is now driving down the West side with her friend Cassie. Catching sight of a young man, apparently headed for home, she impulsively lets out a mute cry, “Oh Man ... why have you slipped out of my carnal sentimental grasp?” (209). However, when she expresses her feelings, expecting sympathy from her friend, she gets a surprising response. Cassie has a complaint to make:

Listen, Faith, why don’t you tell my story? You’ve told everybody’s story but mine. I don’t even mean my whole story, that’s my job. You probably can’t. But I mean, you’ve just omitted me from the other stories and I was there. In the restaurant and the train, right there. Where is Cassie? Where is my life? It’s been women and men, women and men, fucking, fucking. Godamnit, where is the hell is my woman and woman, woman-loving life in all this? And it’s not even sensible, because we are friends, we work together, you even care about me at least as much as you do Ruthy, Louise and Ann. You let them in all the time; it’s really strange, why have you left me out of everybody’s life? (210).

In this passage, Cassie challenges Faith’s status as a listener/storyteller. She accuses Faith of excluding her from her stories, of silencing her voice and that of other “woman-loving” women. In fact, Faith has not just failed to tell Cassie’s story but she has actually omitted her from stories in which she was present. The train and the restaurant are the specific setting for two stories, “Friends” and “The Expensive Moment”, both of which appear in
Paley’s collection *Later the Same Day*. Faith’s sin of omission, however, does not just undermine her authority as narrator in “Listening” but her authority as a writer. With her friend Cassie, Faith has behaved just like the oppressive narrator of male-authored texts. Her writing should be based on a poetics of inclusion but is not. Since she is speaking with a woman’s voice and writing about women’s muted realities, Faith should not be excluding the voices of other women. She has to learn to speak and listen without silencing difference. By omitting Cassie from her stories, she has denied the existence of lesbian women, failing to attribute importance to their lives. In a sense she has undermined the validity of her own literary project; to illuminate women’s existence. Most significantly, in this passage we also learn that in all the stories she has written, female friendship and love among women (including lesbian love) are placed in the margins. Despite her efforts, Faith is still imprisoned in conventional modes of thought. Her development (as a woman and a writer) will be complete only when men (and heterosexual relationships) no longer take center stage and women (and love among women) take their place.

Faith’s immediate response is real shock. At first she is unable to take full responsibility for her sin of omission. Shifting some of the blame onto society, she tries to defend herself by saying, “But it’s not me alone, it’s them too” (210). Her friend Cassie, however, remains silent and Faith cannot but acknowledge her mistake, “Oh, but it is my fault... How can you forgive me” (211)? But pardon is impossible. Cassie’s comment is:

> You are my friend, I know that, Faith, but I promise you, I won’t forgive you, she said. From now on, I’ll watch you like a hawk. I do not forgive you. (211)

With her friend’s penetrating eyes fixed on her (a reminder of her failure as a listener), Faith will find it difficult to ignore her (Cassie’s) and other muted realities in the future. However, Faith’s encounter with Cassie in “Listening” is not to be seen as a total failure. By mentioning her sin of omission, Faith has included a radical criticism of herself (and has internalized the criticism) in the story, thus transcending her former blindness.

How Faith manages to amend her ways and becomes a faithful and appreciative listener is shown in “Friends”. In this story Faith describes the journey she and her two friends, Ann and Susan, took to pay a farewell visit to their dying friend Selena in her New England apartment. Here Faith appears
a completely different woman. In “Friends” Faith is no longer described in individualistic terms but is portrayed in terms of her relationship with the other women. By now she has gone beyond self-absorption and has refined her relational capacity. While in “Faith in a Tree” she privileged a monologic voice and referred to herself in the first-person singular (a mark of self-involvement), here she identifies with the female community and her subjective “I” merges into a transindividual “we”, a “we” that includes herself and her three friends, Susan, Ann and Selena. Although Faith is the teller here, she speaks for the group and the “we” of her narration defines their collective identity. What we hear in this story is not the voice of a single narrator but different voices speaking in dialogue. Faith finally cedes some of her monologic power; she begins to listen and lets her characters find their voice as storytellers. The boundaries between narrator and characters fade away and characters respond to narrative digressions, even though the narrator’s thoughts occur in discourse-time (Taylor). The result is a collaborative narration embedding multiple (and conflicting) points of view. Although Faith tells the story, she and her friends seem to function as a kind of collective narrator. By using strategies that enhance “empathy and identification”, Faith not only exhibits a new-found artistic maturity, but also reinforces stylistically the central theme of the story, female bonds and women’s longstanding friendships (Taylor 108).

In “Friends” Faith finally severs her link with the withdrawn, self-centered person she was and is increasingly self-conscious about her role as a writer. Most significantly, for the first time she openly acknowledges her responsibilities as artist; the obligation to “listen”, “bear witness” and “record” (Aarons Talking Lives 21; A Perfect Marginality 35). At the end of the story, just after her son has provided some reality-testing corrective to her unabashed optimism (wondering “how” Selena could have been deceived by the destructiveness of her — by now dead — daughter’s misspent life), Faith, now older and wiser comments,

He was right to call my attention to its suffering and danger. He was right to harass my responsible nature. But I was right to invent for my friends and our children a report on these private deaths and the condition of our lifelong attachments. (89)
Although Faith respects the realistic view of her son which alerts her to the dangers and sorrows existing in the world, she affirms her belief in the importance of personal relations. Although she acknowledges her responsibility to the world, she also feels another (no less important) kind of obligation, and that is her responsibility towards her friends. Here Faith speaks of herself self-consciously as a writer, as an artist converting her own life (and the lives of her friends) into a work of art. Not only does she claim authorship for the story (thus calling attention to the process of writing itself), but she also offers an estimate of the storyteller’s responsibilities and goals (Arcana 228). Her use of the words “invent” and “report” are “an indication of her intention” to write her stories as a “means of commemorating” her friends and “the condition of our lifelong attachments” (Baba 51). In “Friends” Faith finally succeeds in responding to the “writer’s dual obligation, to listen before telling and to tell the truth” (Arcana 228). The story is written in memory of her friends and in particular of her friend Selena and her daughter, Abby. By the end of the story, Selena and Abby are dead but their lives go on in the telling and “are preserved” in the “language [and] memory ... of others” (Aarons Marginality 38). In “Friends” then, Faith finally succeeds in changing her “style of living and telling”, and in her role of “truthful” listener, she becomes the spokeswoman of her circle of friends, so much so that we might imagine her saying along with Paley:

It is the poet’s responsibility to learn the truth from the powerless...  
It is the responsibility of the poet to sing this in all the original and traditional tunes of singing and telling poems  
It is the responsibility of the poet to listen to gossip and pass it on in the way story tellers decant the story of life...  
It is the responsibility of the poet to be a woman to keep an eye on this world and cry out like Cassandra, but be listened to this time. (“Responsibility” 56)