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We Get To Listen

by Stephen Haff

This article is based on my personal experiences. Whenever I assert a universal truth, please take it with a grain of salt.

You may have seen a flock of birds, maybe starlings, thousands of them, flying wing-to-wing in breathtaking formations, folding in on themselves, then flowering, blossoming out, like a rose opening layer after layer; they swirl like a tornado, then spread into a long skinny string and alight along a power line. The flock is a being, a being that makes decisions without a leader. How do they know when to go this way or that way, up or down, spin or fly straight, land or take off?

You may also have seen a school of fish, say mackerel, doing the same kind of thing, forming, disbanding, reforming, hundreds of silver flashes moving swiftly as one, finding food, avoiding predators; no one is crashing into anyone, and no one is giving orders. How can this be?

My understanding is that the individual starling or mackerel responds to the movements of neighbors left, right, above, below and in front; according to their movements, a basic algorithm or function in the brain of the starling or mackerel processes what to do, and it's instantaneous--there's no real thinking going on, apart from the algorithm doing its work. They're just BEING--in relation to their neighbors.

Over the years of my career as a teacher, in classrooms and rehearsals and now in the meetings of Still Waters in a Storm, I have preached compassion. When schools generated oppressive lists of rules and standards, and mind-crushing rubrics for grading everything children do, I threw those charts and lists in the garbage and asked young people to follow only one rule: LOVE EACH OTHER. I believe that if we respond to our neighbors according to this rule, everything's going to be all right.

But what does it mean to love each other?

I don't know.

I do think that part of love is respect--not in the typical school sense of obedience to institutional authority, but in the sense of making room for our neighbors to be who they are.

I also believe that trust is a big part of love. If we're to become who we really are, our best beautiful self, we need to trust each other, to know that we're allowed to be us.

In my experience, the single most important part of love is listening. Real listening, with patience, requires compassion, builds trust, and demonstrates respect.

The group I started two years ago in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn is called Still Waters in a Storm, and we operate on this algorithm: everyone hears everyone. That's it. We meet, no more than 12 people at a given meeting, ages 6 to 52, with most in their teens and 20s. We eat pizza, and we write, about anything, in any style or genre, any number of words. Then, we take turns reading our writing out loud and listening to each other. After each reading, the group responds, not by judging or grading or liking or disliking, but by saying what we noticed, what we felt, what we related to, and by asking questions that encourage fullness and precision of expression. These responses say that we are listening with care.



We are practicing love.

During a recent meeting, while we were all composing our thoughts and feelings, a 16-year old girl passed me a note on a folded piece of paper.

It said, "Can I call you Dad?" I wrote back (passing notes in class!) that I hoped I could live up to this honor. She wrote back, saying, "You already have." She and her usually absent biological father have been attempting a reconciliation ever since.

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Models for this group include Alcoholics Anonymous, Quaker meetings, the one-room schoolhouse, our pre-agricultural tribes, the wolf pack, group therapy and all-night conversations with good friends.

In public school classrooms, where I worked for 10 years, I would often go bananas trying to make students "listen." Now, having left the big system, the New York Department of Education, I understand that this was a struggle because the school system values control, and the silence of students is evidence of their being under control. So of course the kids rebelled. It's cruel and inhuman to put a group of highly social primates in an enclosed space, elbow to elbow, and forbid their free communication. It hurts them.

The title of this article, "We get to listen," quotes a statement by the youngest member of the group, 6-year old Angie. "We GET to listen." What in school was oppression, here is privilege. "We GET to listen." We're LUCKY.

Why lucky? Because if we think of ourselves as the Stone-Age beings we are when we're born--we haven't evolved since the Stone Age; same body, same brain--we're wired for interdependent life in a village or extended tribe, and we naturally want and NEED to know what's going on inside those around us, so that we can all be synchronized.

We need to need each other.

Children want to know what grown-ups are up to, and grown-ups have a real responsibility to guide and take care of the young ones. This is what we are, even now, despite the many separations that have unraveled our tribes.

It's unnatural to segregate children by age, robbing them of the full range of perspectives in their village, as unnatural as it is to put away our elders in "homes."

No wonder depression and other mental illnesses are rising and swallowing us like a dark tide. We're separated from each other and from our own true nature.

Schools, offices, hospitals, nursing homes, iPods and television all keep us from being together and listening to each other. Even if we don't know this consciously, our brain stem knows, our primal intuition knows, and we suffer.

What does this have to do with learning?

In my personal experience, deep learning happens in the context of loving relationships.

My grandfather, who passed away at age 95 eight years ago, told me a story about love and learning. At age 10, in 1917, he had won a bamboo fishing pole in a small-town raffle, way up in the mountains of northern Idaho. His father told him he would need to wrap the pole in thread, an intricate procedure. His father also told him that he, my great-grandfather, needed to re-wrap his own pole, too. They sat side-by-side on the porch and wound thread around bamboo. My grandfather added, at the end of the story, that, looking back, he suspected that his father didn't really need to re-wrap his own fishing pole.

Love isn't something that happens to you, like falling asleep in a hammock on a lazy summer afternoon. It's day labor. Every morning, before you're ready, you wake up in the dark and you're an immigrant, lining up for a day's work, with no guarantee that the job will be there for you when the sun comes up.

A recent study of monkeys revealed that a given monkey will exhibit loyalty not necessarily to blood relatives but to those monkeys who reliably groom him or her. Reciprocal altruism is a powerful bond, and I think it's the key to sustainable learning.

I say "sustainable" because I've put an awful lot of time and energy into curricula and lesson plans and the latest magical program with its mandatory buzz words--"accountable talk," "text rich environment," "literacy across the curriculum," "activating schema," "the new continuum," and on and on--the third magical program in one year that will fix everything. But one condition abides: almost none of the students want to be in school, and those who do are often seeking refuge from unhealthy homes. It's so familiar that it feels normal: kids hate school.

For years I made a spectacular effort in a Brooklyn neighborhood called Bushwick, at the infamous Bushwick High School, a grand old six-storey red brick tower that looks like a prison or an antiquated mental hospital, where students would set hallway bulletin boards on fire and once threw a dog out of a 5th floor window. On the way down, the dog struck a flagpole that was sticking out the side of the building, broke his back, then fell to his gut-spilling death on the sidewalk below.

In addition to my classroom teaching, I ran a collective called Real People Theater, or RPT, a group of neighborhood youth who rewrote Shakespeare, Milton and other classics, remixing the original text with Spanish and Street. The success, by every measure, was astonishing. Kids who otherwise refused to read or write were choosing to master Shakespeare. We received a lot of acclaim in the press and among renowned theater artists. The VILLAGE VOICE called us "Nothing less than a revolution," and THE BROOKLYN RAIL said we were "One of the most respected theater collectives in New York City." Graciela Daniele, a Broadway director and choreographer, thanked us for "bringing theater back to life." We were even adopted as the official apprentice company of the Wooster Group. We traveled the world. Kids who had been barely literate attended elite colleges.

Then, all of us had to live the next day.

And the day after that.

Now, taking inventory of that group today, a few have started families, work decent jobs, or are continuing their formal education. One young woman has lost her mind, two young men are drug dealers, one is a coke addict who has beaten at least one woman after sex, and another young man is locked up for a couple of years for riding around with a loaded gun.

Ours was a story that Hollywood loves – the ghetto kids rise up, overcome, and are happy. Except, well, no.

I had several successive major breakdowns and fell into suicidal depression when the young ones I had given my heart to turned on me, tried to take over and call the shots. Having lived powerless their whole lives, they were drunk on all the praise and their own surging confidence, and acted according to the ethos of the street, which told them to gun for the big dog, which was me.

You could also just say that I had unrealistic expectations.

Following about three years of recuperation in my native Canada, including lots of cognitive therapy training and Taoist meditation, I needed to go back to Brooklyn and make things right somehow.

After several teaching jobs in Bronx and Brooklyn schools, I finally left the system, burning bridges as I just walked away, admitting that my being did not belong there, as an agent of control.

I started something then that is growing now, a group designed to accommodate comings and goings, to be patient, a voluntary one-room schoolhouse, a neighborhood within the neighborhood, where people listen to each other. It's simple, deep and therapeutic, for all of us. The students say that this is what gets them through the week. But it's not easy.

Power struggles rise up, usually as challenges to my authority--natural authority, based on experience and expertise, but authority nonetheless--challenges from young men who argue that they should be allowed to do whatever they want. They call this "freedom," not considering how their unlimited freedom might affect the freedom of people around them, and that total license, like an asteroid heedless of what lies in its path, will collide with the planet of someone else's desires or needs.

For humans who've been trained away from reciprocal love, there needs to be a retraining before they can fly like starlings or swim like mackerel, simultaneously free and together, making decisions collectively.

I guess that many kids are sick of being bossed around by teachers and parents, and they're desperate to do as they wish. But that's not freedom--although television advertising tells them that doing as they please is their birthright and even their patriotic duty--it's not freedom any more than being "responsible" means doing your homework. Perhaps this is counter-intuitive, but I believe that real freedom is achieved by taking real responsibility for each other, that real freedom is a result of interdependence, of relationships, of love. I've kicked out three young men from the group already, for being narcissistic and having no conscience.

I used to take my 9th graders down the street every week to work with 1st graders; they would read and write stories together, and answer each other's questions. Grumpy teenagers who wanted to be home in bed and balked at mentoring small children were visibly happy when they saw the little ones waving at them and smiling, as they, the teenagers, awkwardly entered a room whose furniture they had long outgrown. The little ones helped the big ones belong somewhere, be needed by a real person, set them free from a life of abstraction, free from segregation, free from a donkey's burden of textbooks, free from competition with their peers, free from measurement, free from lovelessness.

Reminding myself daily to carry no agenda but love, I see my job as defending the sanctity of listening, against laziness and carelessness and a whole bunch of things that fall under the heading of "BS," and asking myself and my students to keep asking ourselves what it means to love each other. If we can keep the asking alive, petal after petal of the rose of our relationship opens. By caring for this flower, we make beauty, we make living art.

The day a real live arctic wolf came to our meeting, from [the Wolf Conservation Center](#)



We have adopted the Wolf Pack Credo:

*Respect the elders,
Teach the young,
Cooperate with the pack,
Play when you can,
Hunt when you must,
Rest in between,
Show your affections,
Voice your feelings,
Leave your mark.*



Photos:
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Art, be it painting, music, writing, acting, photography, sculpture, dance or architecture, makes room for us to know each other. Our imaginations meet. And no matter how much personal pain we carry inside us for reference, compassion always requires an effort of imagination. Art trains us in imagining each other's inner life. We get to listen, we get to see, we get to feel.

I believe that art is a human effort to re-enter paradise, to recreate universal understanding and universal interdependence. Artists are trying to get us back to the Garden, where the grace of being was installed in the gallery of nature, and everything was everything.

Maybe if we can see our relationships themselves as art, we might begin to treat each other with gratitude and reverence, begin to heal from the cutting of the umbilical cord that made us individuals and left us longing to be lost again in someone else, and begin to be not as lonely, after all.

The last words I leave to a student from my 9th grade English class at Bushwick High School eight years ago. She belonged to a gang called the Crips, so she wore all blue clothing and had her name tattooed on her neck in blue ink.

I had recently returned from visiting my 95-year old grandfather as he was dying in a San Francisco hospital, and I guess my grief was apparent.

The girl handed me a piece of paper folded in four, as it is here and now.

All I want to say before reading it to you is, THIS is what I'm talking about:

"Dear Mr. Haff,

Please try to be happy because you are my happiness in school. Even though you always smiling I can see. I know what is like to lose someone. One day they there, then they not. My aunt comes back at night to bother me but it's okay.

Love,

Lydia

p.s. Eat more fruits!"

Stephen Haff

For many years, Stephen taught English and Drama at Bushwick High School in Brooklyn, NY. He has also taught writing at Bennington College, Mount Allison University, Fordham University, the New School for Social Research, and the City University of New York.

Stephen and his Bushwick students have been running their world-renowned Real People Theater

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(RPT) for over 10 years. RPT has traveled the world with its productions of Shakespeare in Elizabethan English, Spanish and Street, as translated by the group. The VILLAGE VOICE called RPT, "Nothing less than a revolution," and the BROOKLYN RAIL described the group as, "One of the most respected theater collectives in New York City."

Stephen used to make his living writing for the VOICE, AMERICAN THEATRE, BOMB, and other publications, and now works as a consultant at the Center for Social and Emotional Education. In 1992 he received his MFA from Yale University.

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