

The Listening Project

Marta Donahoe

“Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could only see themselves as they really are. If only we could only see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”

~ Thomas Merton

Montessori teachers know that no matter how many books we read on child development and brain research, there is no substitute for observing children, seeing them, noticing them, and especially, in the case of the adolescent, being quiet long enough for them to talk. Wanting to know more about the hidden depths of the adolescent soul, I created, with another teacher, a course we called The Listening Project, and in that course I had a kind of slow burning epiphany that has softened me and informed my work as an educator.

The Listening Project was designed as a ten day, two week immersion course to give students various opportunities to develop better listening skills and to help them understand more about the enlivening quality and healing potential of listening to others. We planned for a variety of listening opportunities in the course that would lead up to the Big Interview. To prep for the Big Interview, students identified a profession they were fascinated by and designed and led an interview with a person in that profession. By the end of the course we had interviewed an array of people from such varied professions as wrestlers from The World Wrestling Federation to the mayor of the city.

In preparation for the course, my colleague and I set up how-to lessons and seminar readings, and, with guidance, the students themselves created surveys and interview questions, journal prompts, and rubrics for a final grade in the course. The goals and objectives for the course ranged from conducting an effective interview and writing a compelling article, to taking responsibility for the care of the community of learners in the course. The morning of the second day every student brought a letter, post-dated to the end of the course, stating why he or she had earned an A. In preparation for writing the letters, the students were to examine the rubric for the course and anticipate any difficulties they might encounter. In the letters, they imagined the strategies they would employ to handle those hard parts and get the A. Each student's letter was written from the perspective of their successful completion of the course and became an affirmation for the things they knew they would do well. It also became a vehicle for coaching because we teachers knew better how to stand near them as individual learners and support them as they worked to overcome their roadblocks. It was my best teaching tool because I knew more about who was worried about writing a good paper, who was too shy and worried to conduct an interview alone, who needed encouragement to get along with others in the group.

With the parameters set for the course, and a plan for the possibility that every student would do well as a scholar and member of the community, we were excited about our work together for the next ten days. The students chattered with anticipation about interviews with local celebrities and argued with one another, bent over maps of the city, about the best way to navigate the way from

school to an interview. Every step of the process was an adventure for all of us. In the end, the greatest gift was not the interviews with the famous people, but the tenderness that emerged within our group of eighteen students and two teachers.

On the ninth day of the course, the Listening Project was drawing to a close. It was fall, a perfect day for our walk to the town square. We strolled along, commented to one another on the colors of the trees and the crisp promise of winter in the air. After the students set off on their own for this part of their project, I sat in a neighborhood coffee shop. I was comfortable, pleased with the way the course was winding up, warmed by my tea and the sun beaming through the big window, when one student, a big, tall African American sixteen-year-old kid, came bursting into the coffee shop. “That’s a bunch of crap!” he blurted out.

I sat up straight, catapulted from my self-satisfied dream state. “What’s crap? What are you talking about, Max?” The couple in the corner booth looked over.

“I am never coming back to this square again. These people are racist!”

I squirmed and whispered, “What makes you think they’re racist?” I hoped he would calm down, so I made him sit next to me. I put my hand on his shoulder and I listened. Well, I sort of listened. Even though I was supposed to be a listening expert for the listening project, it was hard to pay attention when we were in the middle of the very community Max was accusing of racism.

The students in the Listening Project had decided that to fulfill the course’s social service commitment, they would walk down the street from our public high school and, with the naiveté and enthusiasm of adolescents, they intended to (their words) “make people’s day” by talking to folks on the street and encouraging them to talk about themselves. The kids wanted to infiltrate the neighborhood of upper middle class white citizens, who mostly send their children to private schools, and let them know the local high school was producing civic minded, excellent students. How could I refuse an adolescent idea like that?

When we arrived at the coffee shop, I prepped the students on grace and courtesy matters when approaching strangers. Introduce yourself and the project. Smile. Open your hearts. Reflect your genuine curiosity and allow that and the look on people’s faces to guide you. Always shake hands and say thank you. We lingered a moment over hot chocolate before they headed out onto the square in groups of three, mixed by race and gender. I watched from the window as they set off with their own makeshift version of the Welcome Wagon.

“These people are racist because they won’t talk to me,” Max continued.

“Crap is right,” I thought. I didn’t do a good enough job of explaining that people might not be able to take the time to talk to them. Now, because we were in a white neighborhood, it had become a matter of racism. I explained that people are busy. They’re going to work. They’re on lunch breaks. That even I, a person who enjoys a moment of pleasant conversation, would probably blow off someone who, out of the blue, wanted to talk to me. As a matter of fact, I almost always avoid strangers who want to strike up a conversation. So far I had not done much listening.

On the way back to school Max walked alongside me. “It’s my fault,” he said. “I’m not dressed good enough. I should have on a suit and tie.”

“You look great, Max. It’s not about you. It’s about busy people.”

“No, it’s me. I should look better. You know - more professional.”

I told him again that he looked great. He did. He actually looked like a regular teenager – a well-groomed, handsome, teenager. “Believe me. I’m an authority.” I said to him, “I’m a white person. I used to live in this neighborhood. You look great. And if people have any other reason not to talk to you besides being busy, then they’re just miserable and self-absorbed. *You* should feel sorry for *them*.” Then we both laughed and he went on up the sidewalk to talk to his friends walking ahead of us.

When we got back to school we sat in our usual circle. We passed the stone and went around one-by-one to say what struck us about our experience with the Listening Project on the Square. We were all a little hesitant and politely honest. I cringed when the white students admitted they had been responded to in a more friendly way than the black students had been. Finally my co-teacher, more courageous and a much better listener than I, said, “OK. I think it’s time to quit pussyfooting around the issue and get to it. It’s clear that some of you believe you have just experienced racism. I think you need to talk about that. Who needs to say something here?”

I took a very deep breath and exhaled slowly as, one-by-one, the African American students spoke.

One young man told the story of how a policeman had signaled his grandpa to pull his car to the side of the road. “He asked my grandpa for his driver’s license and called him ‘Boy’. Then he gave the license back to him and said, “Go on your way now, Boy.” And then he saw a tear run down his grandpa’s cheek.

Another student, Henry, took the talking stone and talked about another incident with a policeman in which he had been pulled over. “I was real confused,” he said. “ We were excited to be going to visit my uncle and aunt. We were going slowly. I couldn’t figure out why we were being pulled over.”

After being pulled over, the policeman ordered the father to open the trunk of the car. The police- man opened the suitcase and threw the clothes on the ground. “OK,” the policeman told the dad, “Pick it up and get back in the car.”

Henry stood up, “I looked at my dad and he started picking up the clothes off the ground. I couldn’t take it. I looked at the policeman and said, ‘We didn’t do anything wrong. You pick it up! Our clothes were all folded! You pick them up!’ The policeman told me to get in the car and my dad said, ‘Go on, Henry.’ So I did... because I knew he meant it.”

Other students had stories about internalized oppression, such as being treated badly by grandparents for being too dark skinned. There were stories about being told by a sales clerk to try

another, less expensive store. I knew these stories. I had heard them before. But something happened to me this time. This time I heard them in a different way.

That evening my brother came over and I told him about my day. "So what. We've all had it tough," he said.

"That's not my point," I replied. "It's like I understood *more* this time about racism."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like somehow, it's all our responsibility. I guess I knew that before. I'm not sure. I just know that I understand more than I did yesterday."

"Well, it's not my responsibility," he said. "Unless I actually witness an incident of racism and actually intervene, there's nothing I can do, is there?"

"I don't know. I think it has something to do with an open heart." I could feel my own heart beginning to wilt.

"Why not assume that every now and then you're going to run into a policeman who's a jerk."

"I guess it's just complicated," I mumbled, and changed the subject.

On the tenth day of the class, each student gave a presentation about what they learned from the course. The students were excited. Everyone stuck up a hand to share. The most quiet and inarticulate fellow stood up. "I'd like to go first," he said.

"My grandpa has lots of stories. I've never been interested in them because he sort of goes on and on. He tells me about how he worked for the post office all his life and about how in the lunchroom there was a rope down the middle. The black people ate on one side; the white people ate on the other. On the side where the white people ate there were windows and he would eat his lunch and wish he could see outside. I never had anyone to talk to about racism before." His voice began to shake and his eyes welled.

"Sometimes I'd think I'd talk to my grandpa, but I was afraid I'd just get a lecture. But now after this class I know how it feels to be listened to. And I think maybe now I'll listen to my grandpa. I think he has a lot of wisdom and a lot to say to me. I'm grateful for this class. Thanks everybody," he said.

I wiped my face, blew my nose, and clapped all at the same time. I looked at my co-teacher, her wisdom and courage such a beautiful mystery to me. Then I just sat quietly looking at each precious face in the group because, as Thomas Merton said, "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

"There is a part of a child's soul that has always been unknown but which must be known. With a spirit of sacrifice and enthusiasm we must go in search like those who travel to foreign lands and tear up mountains in their search for hidden gold. This is what the adults must do who seeks the unknown factor that lies hidden in the depths of a child's soul. This is a labor in which all must

share, without distinction of nation, race, or social standing since it means the bringing forth of an indispensable element for the moral progress of mankind."

~ Maria Montessori

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