

Presence: The Most Powerful Gift We Can Give

by Ardith Shirley, NBTA Staff Officer



“Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don’t have to do anything else. We don’t have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen.” Margaret J. Wheatley



A number of years ago, while working as a teacher facilitator in a federal government pilot project called Future to Discover, I found myself in a high school classroom in Miramichi on a warm October afternoon, sitting at a table with three high school students. As the tail of a very fat and very live rat curled around the eraser of the pencil I was holding, I made a mental note to place more

specific parameters on the homework assignment – to bring 3 ‘artifacts’ from home – when I worked with the St. Stephen cohort the following week.

We were about to embark on an activity called, “Finding Your Focus”, requiring each student to take turns sharing three ‘artifacts’ they had brought from home that they believed ‘represented’ who they were at their core. The process required each student to present their three items to the group and explain why they had chosen it as important or symbolic. As they presented, the remaining two students and myself would be completely silent and listen intently to each and every word the presenter was saying. We would take special note of any words or phrases we wanted to recall in the debrief. The rule was that we could not interrupt to ask any questions until the speaker was finished.

So now that you understand the assignment, let’s get back to the rat. As I tried to control my desire to scream and run out of the room, I noted that the young man – let’s call him Michael – who owned Anthrax (Ani for short) had two other artifacts: a set of nunchuks and a baseball bat. As he glared at me with his arms crossed defiantly from across the table it became clear that I was being ‘tested’. Never one to shy away from a challenge I recall meeting his gaze directly and mustering every ounce of courage I could find as I proceeded to act as though having Ani

scurry around my pencil and papers was completely normal. To my surprise the other two students (who I could tell were equally as horrified by Ani as I) pulled in their chairs and took my lead. I smiled at the group and asked which of them would like to present first.

By some miracle, we got through the ‘focusing’ of the first two students without incident and it was now Michael’s turn. As I invited him to begin, his body language told me that he hadn’t bought into this ‘stupid’ assignment and I found myself mentally preparing for how I would react when he stormed out of the room or his obvious temper flared.

Michael began by explaining that Ani was a birthday gift from his grandfather. Since that day, they had spent many evenings and weekends building mazes and games for Ani to be entertained. He went on to share some of the stories his grandfather had told him as they had built.

Michael continued with his second artifact, the baseball bat, by noting that it was a gift from an uncle. Just as he began describing his third artifact, the nunchuks, I noticed his voice soften and a couple of tears spill down his cheek. Despite his obvious emotion, he continued to share. Once he was done, the two girls and I asked many clarifying questions and were able to find words to describe his people and family oriented focus. When we were done, Michael seemed pleased and I saw his smile for the first time.

I should mention that it was not uncommon for students to demonstrate emotion during the activity and yet I hadn’t predicted this response from that rough and tough young man. As the session completed for the evening, I was able to pull Michael (with Ani peering at me intently from his shoulder) aside for just a second. I thanked him for sharing his stories with us and for bringing Ani to meet us. I then asked his permission to wonder what exactly had prompted the two tears I had noticed fall. (I was anticipating that he would tell me that either his grandfather or uncle had recently passed away.) To

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this day I can still hear Michael's voice and feel the visceral reaction I had when he said – **"No one has ever listened to me for that long before, Miss, for some reason it made my eyes wet."** Michael's words hit me so hard that I felt the wind knocked out of me.

I am not even sure how I responded to Michael in that moment, but I do know that as soon as the room was empty I sat down and shed tears of my own. What in the world were we doing in schools (and life for that matter) that the experience of simply being listened to for ten uninterrupted minutes could be so powerful that a tough high school kid could be reduced to tears?

I recently had the privilege of attending a course in Executive Coaching through Royal Roads University. Part of my course work involved analyzing the eleven core competencies of coaching as defined by the International Coach Federation:

A. Setting the Foundation

1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards
2. Establishing the Coaching Agreement

B. Co-creating the Relationship

3. Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client
4. Coaching Presence

C. Communicating Effectively

5. Active Listening
6. Powerful Questioning
7. Direct Communication

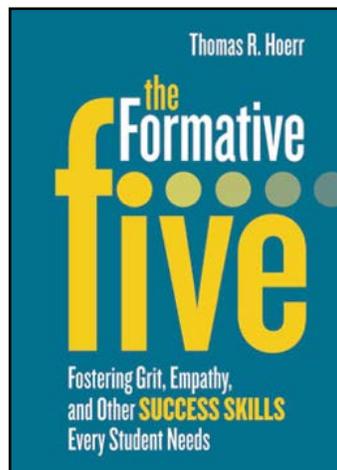
D. Facilitating Learning and Results

8. Creating Awareness
9. Designing Actions
10. Planning and Goal Setting
11. Managing Progress and Accountability



Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to Harriet Silliker of NSER in ASD-N who is the winner of our March Book draw! This month's draw is for *The Formative Five: Fostering Grit, Empathy, and Other Success Skills Every Student Needs* by Thomas Hoerr. Sound interesting? Send me an email with the subject line 'Book Draw' before June 23rd.



As I did so, I found myself comparing the coaching process to that of the teaching process. My current conclusion is that they two are more alike than different. I couldn't help but smile when I noted that competency four 'Coaching Presence' under the theme 'Co-creating the Relationship' is noted in the literature as being essential. They go so far as to suggest that without it, true coaching has not occurred. As I consider the many lessons Michael taught me those many years ago in a classroom in Miramichi that warm October afternoon, I am inclined to suggest that the gift of truly being present for our students is a requisite of great teaching as well.

As we wind up yet another school year, I wish for you many opportunities to be truly present for your students, colleagues, family and friends. When the many demands compete for your attention, recall that the experience of being seen, heard and understood without need of interpretation or interruption is such a rare and powerful human experience it is one of the best gifts we can give to others....and in turn ourselves.

Best wishes for a restful, relaxing and rejuvenating summer break. Here's to lots of growing, living and learning along the way!



May I Recommend?

Learning to Listen is a brilliant article written by Shane Safir and it appears in the May 2017 issue of Educational Leadership magazine on Pages 16-21. It is also available online at: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may17/vol74/num08/Learning-to-Listen.aspx>

The Summer Issue of Education Canada includes an article titled *Manitoba's Moratorium on School Closures: What has it achieved, what is next?* written by Brian O'Leary and Jon Young. This article discusses and analyzes that provinces very different and opposite approach to school closures compared to ours here in New Brunswick. Worth a read if this issue is of interest! (Available online at: <http://www.ce-aace.ca/education-canada/article/manitoba%E2%80%99s-moratorium-school-closures>)

Closing Quote:

"Coaching is not telling people what to do, it is giving them a chance to examine what they are doing in light of their intentions." Jim Flarety