

A Lesson on Giving a Lesson (Music, the Art of Conversation, and Social Justice)

Parker ran from his carpet square back to his dad before I had finished my instruction, but I resisted shouting at him. Instead, as gently as I could, asked him to return to the station so we could formally bow to one another — a Suzuki ritual to begin the lesson. He was my new three-and-a-half-year-old piano student and I, a brand new Suzuki teacher, even though I already had seven years of piano teaching experience. I switched to the Suzuki method after realizing that my traditional methods were far from being holistic. The disciplinarian style was effective in the short-term, but students never gained a love for music itself, and after a few years would give up learning altogether. They knew how to copy, follow directions, and even achieve at exams, but achieving artistry was difficult.

“Remember, the bow is the only thing you need to accomplish in the first lesson. You can play other music games with Parker, but give him only one goal each week. Then praise him when he follows through,” my mentor emphasized.

Her guidance made me nervous. How was I going to conduct a thirty minute lesson without letting him touch the keys? But I knew she was the child whisperer, not I. In fact, it took several lessons for him and I to lock eyes, let alone to bow to one another. I knew the pre-schooler couldn't comprehend the significance of our ritual. But it would be simplistic to say that Parker was the only one who struggled with it.

The bow is the sign of mutual respect. No matter how the lesson progresses, whether positively or negatively, it starts and ends with a bow. Listening practice then follows. In Suzuki, students are taught restraint and are not allowed to press a note until they have mastered the bow, silence, and listening. These must be the foundation for conduct. If these two elements are not

established at the onset, it creates a perpetual pattern of mistrust, negativity, and mistakes that will need repetitive correction later. Although I was the teacher, being too preoccupied with my dignity and control would blind me from seeing Parker's unspoken needs and emotionally drive us apart. This meant that it was harder to find successful solutions to the challenges at hand.

As this philosophy sunk deeper into my consciousness, I noticed how little I listened in my everyday spoken exchanges. I realized how myopic my perspectives were in every topic, even in my areas of expertise. With this newfound awareness, I began to ask, "What if the bedrock for every conversation was mutual respect and radical listening?" Listening then wouldn't be weaponized as a way to attack debaters. Social media posts would reflect principles and beliefs without being performative or needing validation from a particular tribe. Our communities would represent the melting pot that the United States is rather than the monolith we delude ourselves in wanting.

The goal in conversation should not be agreement but powerful empathetic exchanges. In the United States, there has been a recent increase of discussions regarding the nation's divisions in race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, and political party affiliations. Injustice occurs when we refuse to regard others as valuable as ourselves. People have been reduced to caricatures. Whites clutch their belongings when black neighbors walk by on an evening stroll. The local panhandler—a veteran with PTSD—is painted as a social welfare leech. LGBTQIA youth are forced into the streets by their religiously conservative parents. Members of the opposing political party are deemed uneducated and incapable of seeing truth at all. Misinformed judgments blind people from every affiliation from seeing how their choices can be self-interest driven. This results in a lack of accountability for oneself, a constant blaming of outside forces, and the inability to find solutions that could actually

better society. Always in the end, the most vulnerable will always take the worst punch while everyone is still shouting over the issues concerning them.

Honor brings about unlikely conversations. Derek Black, a former born-and-bred White Nationalist leader, converted to becoming a public anti-racist educator because his Jewish college friend, Matthew Stevenson, invited him to Shabbat dinners. Stevenson even defended Black when his Jewish colleagues wanted to oust Black from the group. Greg and Lynn McDonald wrote *Embracing the Journey* to share how they came to accept their gay son Grey Jr. and his now partner. They help other Christian parents navigate loving their gay children while maintaining their faith. The diverse religious leadership of the Interfaith Alliance comes together to protect religious freedom for all peoples, and they educate on how not to use freedoms to discriminate. Certainly, it takes effort to connect over a common vision; however, where there is honor for the other, improbable bonds can be created to heal society.

Imitation is necessary in the initial stages of learning but eventually students must hear and play music without a teacher's prompting. The ability to hear a sound in one's mind without its externalization is called audiation. Audiation is trained through consistent active listening and denotes musical comprehension. An idea must be heard before it is played, improvised, or composed. Students must not only hear in their minds past iterations, but must hear their own interpretation. Without this, students cannot create nor contribute to a musical conversation. The expectation that students should copy without giving new insight stunts real dialogue and educators who want this only make clones. They lose opportunities to learn from their apprentices, to engage a fresh expression, and to co-create a new reality.

Similarly, as I engage in discussions with counterparts, I have found it beneficial to step back from directing a conversation to a particular conclusion. Instead, I have learned more as the one who brings questions, observes cues, and allows for speakers to arrive upon their own revelations. When my conversational partners have expressed their perspectives without abrupt interjections, they are naturally inclined to hear my thoughts as well.

Parker and I have come a long way since our first lesson. Not only have we improved our bow, but he has surprised me by improvising his own ideas. He and I have just begun our conversation. We are still learning about honor and the art of listening. Currently, we may not fathom the other discussions we will explore. I may not even anticipate the other ways in which he will educate me. He may not know it now, but our lessons have already shown us values we all need inside as well as outside the classroom.