



Attunement and Teaching¹

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Attunement is a particular mode of the perceptive openness of our existence. The prevailing attunement is at any given time the condition of our openness for perceiving and dealing with what we encounter, the pitch at which our existence, as a set of relationships to objects, ourselves and other people, is vibrating. (Medard Boss, 1979, p.110)

Introduction: The Concept of Attunement

The concept of attunement exists in a broad spectrum of fields ranging from philosophy to education, from psychology to psycholinguistics. Its origins are clearly musical: to bring something into tune, more commonly to bring something into harmony or accord.

The term appears prominently among the 19th century English Romantic poets: Keats writes, “BYRON! how sweetly sad thy melody!/Attuning still the soul to tenderness.” In 20th century philosophy it is a concept that Martin Heidegger and his student Medard Boss refer to, most notably when speaking of *das Horchen* [hearkening]. In the study of childhood, it is a term used with respect to the attunement of the caregiver to the child; in psycholinguistics it refers to the attunement of the child to her mother tongue. In considering the theme of this conference—“The Educator’s View of the Human Being”—I would like to explore what this concept could mean in the fields of teaching and teacher education.

I – From Seeing to Listening

I would like to begin by considering the consequences of a concept based on listening, as opposed to seeing. It is typical that both the English and German titles of this conference

are based on a visual representation of this theme—“The Educator’s View of the Human Being” or “*Das Menschenbild in der Pädagogik.*” This ocular-centric perspective has deep roots: its philosophical origins can be traced to Ancient Greece, and the images and metaphors that one finds in different languages to express recognition, understanding, and knowledge are almost invariably visual—if you see what I mean.

This ocular perspective is often closely tied to what vision enables us to do with our hands; the visible world is also a *graspable* world. The fact that this image is then synonymous with understanding—we “grasp” something, just as in German *wir begreifen etwas*—illuminates, so to speak, this connection further. This also appears to correspond to the fact that those areas of the brain devoted primarily to vision and the use of our hands are extraordinarily large in comparison to those areas chiefly responsible for

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any other sensory and motoric modalities. It is the unquestioned dominance of an ocular-centric perspective that has led philosophers such as Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, and D.M. Levin to reflect critically on the “hegemony of vision.” (Levin, 1993) Each of them has also in different ways explored the consequences of what it would mean for our relation to the world if hearing became our primary mode of perception and consequently recognition and understanding were based more on what we learn to hear, rather than on what we learn to see.

An obvious starting point for such deliberations is that it is much easier for us to

shut our eyes than to close our ears. Even when we keep our eyes open, it generally remains easier for us to remain untouched by what we see as opposed to what we hear: what we see is kept at a distance; what we hear penetrates our body. The color we see is a part of a thing and that thing stays outside. Sounds do not stop at boundaries: the tone or voice that we hear traveling through space enters into us. Thus Dewey writes, "Vision is a spectator, hearing is a participation." (Dewey, 1927, pp.218–219)

In considering the dominance of the visual mode over the aural, it is striking that with respect to ontogenetical development the reverse is the case. The ear is the first sense organ and hearing the first sense which develop in the womb. The ear begins to be formed from the third week after conception. The cochlea is fully functional from the twenty-second week. Undoubtedly, the fetus in the womb *listens*. There has been research demonstrating that the newborn has highly developed aural capabilities of recognizing those sounds she previously heard in the womb. (Tomatis, 1987) The newborn's vision, in comparison, develops much later.²

Regarding their language-specific capabilities of listening, infants and small children can be considered universal geniuses responding to, later distinguishing between, and then articulating any speech sounds that any human language has ever produced. In the course of the first year, these universal capabilities become gradually attuned to the specific language or languages which the infant is actually hearing. By the time a child is nine months old, even if she can't speak, she already moves and babbles to the specific speech sounds and melody of that particular language. (Birdwhistell, 1970, p.9) Both neurologically and physiologically, she has in fundamental respects been formed by the language/s she

has been hearing. If experts watch a film of an 18-month-old child who hasn't yet begun to talk, they will, nevertheless, be able to tell from the distinctive linguistic-kinesic movements of the child, not only which language she has been hearing, but her region and economic class. (Birdwhistell, 1970, p.49) A child has thus attuned to and embodied the sounds, melodies, and movements of a language long before she begins to speak. This is perhaps attunement in its purest form.

II – Paradigms of Listening

Before we discuss teaching and teacher education, I think it can be very fruitful first to consider examples in which hearing, as opposed to seeing, appears to have become the primary sensory modality. There is that mysterious thought of Novalis' that every disease is a musical problem and its solution a musical solution (Novalis, 1798/1962, p.487), and perhaps this thought can be connected to the fact that in the fields of medicine and psychology one can find remarkable examples of the therapeutic qualities of listening.

In the various case studies reported by Oliver Sacks, the role which hearing plays is striking. (Sacks, 1990, 1995, 2007, 2010) This may be connected to his musical background and deep interest in music, but it also goes to the very core of his understanding of healing, which he describes as being based on "an act of deep listening, attending to the subtle harmonies and disharmonies in his patients' behavior." (Sacks, 2004, p.9) Sacks also describes this interaction between doctor and patient as "an ever-changing, melodic and living play of forces." (ibid.) He writes that it is through such listening and the "intuitive kinetic sympathy" of the therapist/doctor that the possibility is created to help "recall living beings

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into their own living being.” (ibid.) When one reads his moving studies of patients suffering from neurological impairments, the presence of Sacks as a highly attentive listener can be sensed continually. It is this form of listening that also seems to me to be connected to the intensity and extent of his commitment to his patients. These same qualities of attentive listening, coupled with lifelong personal engagement, also emerge clearly in the case studies by Sacks’ model and mentor, the Russian neurologist A.R. Luria. (Luria, 1987)

In attempting to further understand the therapeutic value of such processes, it is illuminating to look at the work of the psychologist Carl Rogers, who based his approach to psychoanalysis on a concept of deep listening as the basis for healing. For Rogers, deep listening means a form of listening that becomes attuned to the inner world of the person and perceives what can also lie below the conscious intent of the speaker. He describes what happens when this occurs:

When I do truly hear a person and the meanings that are important to him at that moment, hearing not simply his words, but *him*, and when I let him know that I have heard his own private meanings, many things happen. There is first of all a grateful look. He feels released. He wants to tell me more about his world. He surges forth in a new sense of freedom. ... (T)he more deeply I can hear the meanings of this person, the more there is that happens. One thing I have come to look upon as almost universal is that when a person realizes he has been deeply heard ... in some real sense he is weeping for joy. It is as though he were saying “Thank God, somebody has heard me. Someone knows what it’s like to be me.” In such moments I have had the fantasy of a prisoner in a dungeon, tapping out day after day a Morse code message, “Does anybody hear me?” And finally one day, he hears some faint tappings which spell out “Yes.”

By that one simple response, he is released from his loneliness; he has become a human being again. (Rogers, 1969, pp.222–227)

At the same time, Rogers also hears something else. This kind of deep listening opens up another dimension of human existence for him, and I think this aspect is also significant in the context of our work as teachers. He writes:

There is also another peculiar satisfaction in it. When I really hear someone, it is like listening to the music of the spheres, because, beyond the immediate message of the person, no matter what that might be, there is the universal, the general ... aspects of the awesome order which we find in the universe as a whole. (Rogers, 1969)

What he writes here echoes an aspect connected to listening and attunement that becomes apparent when we look closer at—or I should say, listen closer to—the relation between spirituality and listening.

III – Attunement and Spirituality

The ear has often been described as the most spiritual of organs. Among the Ancient Greeks the greatest prophet was Teiresias, a prophet whose predictions were always true—he couldn’t make a mistake—and who reached this stage only after becoming blind. He was literally a blind seer, and it is thus evident that it was the quality of his listening which was considered decisive. Once again, language is deceptive: we talk in such cases about a seer, a visionary, in German *ein Hellseher*, in French *un clairvoyant*, but when one reads reports of encounters with leading spiritual figures it is their manner of listening which is often most prominent. This is certainly the case when one reads the reports of people who met and worked with Rudolf Steiner, and it is also the case when one reads reports of people who have worked together with the Dalai Lama.

There is a wonderful book I read a while back, called *The Jew in the Lotus*, which describes how, after years of very complicated planning and negotiations, a group of leading rabbis in the world came to have an inter-religious conference with the Dalai Lama in his residence in Dharmasala, India. (Kamenetz, 1994) The Dalai Lama wanted to hear from the rabbis how to keep a folk together in exile and the rabbis wanted to hear from the Dalai Lama how to let go of pain and sadness and achieve more inner peace.

The book is written by a Jewish journalist who attended these meetings, and I would like to read you a passage of what he wrote about the very first meeting in which twelve prominent rabbis, coming from all over the world, sat together for the first time with the Dalai Lama and a large group of Buddhist monks:

In the course of three and a half hours the Dalai Lama was introduced to topics as challenging and various as kabbalistic angelology, contemporary politics in Israel, the response of the rabbinic tradition to the destruction of Jerusalem and evidence of early historical encounters between Judaism and Buddhism. Yet he followed them all. His normal attention was extraordinary, but it was clear when a subject wholly absorbed him. He would lean forward in his chair and seemed to magnetically draw from the speaker what he needed for his nourishment. Zalman Schachter [the rabbi who led the delegation] told me: "There were times I was close to tears just from the intensity of his listening."...

For those moments Dharmasala was Yavneh [Dharmasala is the capital of the exiled Tibetan government where the Dalai Lama lives and Yavneh in northern Israel was an important center of Jewish study for thousands of years] and I was powerfully moved that Jewish history could be so relevant to another people. All the

suffering, the martyrdom that had always been so bitter and difficult for me to accept, now appeared a lesson hard earned and a precious knowledge. (Kamenetz, 1994, pp.106–107)

It is striking in this account, and in reports of other encounters with spiritual leaders, that the profound effects they have on people are often less connected to what they say than to their entire presence, a presence imbued with extraordinary capabilities of listening. Exploring the broader relation between these capabilities and spiritual development would take us too far from the theme of this conference, but it is a connection worthy of consideration.

IV – Attunement and Teaching

In the above-mentioned examples from medicine, psychology, and religion, it seems to me to be appropriate to speak of attunement: attunement to individuals and to different aspects and dimensions of human existence.

What is attunement in teaching? What does it mean when a teacher is attuned to her pupils?

There is an obvious difference in comparison to healing a patient, or gaining cultural or spiritual insights; it is not simply an attunement to one, but to many. In what respects can this concept be realized in the framework of teaching a class of thirty to forty pupils? That is one question I would like you to consider. And then I would have you consider what the prerequisite capabilities of achieving attunement in teaching could be and whether they can be learned in the context of teacher education. [At this point in the speech, participants discussed these questions in small groups.]

There is clearly much that can be said here. In the remaining time, I would like to focus on two aspects.

V – Attunement and Silence

Whereas to see invariably requires light, listening in the deeper sense of attunement often requires an absence of sound—silence.

There are naturally very different types of silence; in some Buddhist teachings one refers to twenty-one different types of silence, ranging from the silence of darkness to the silence in which the body becomes filled with luminous light. The significance of silence often goes unrecognized. We forget that the most powerful forces in the world are, in fact, all silent: light, gravity, organic growth, magnetism, the forces of the moon moving the tides, the unseen and unheard spinning of the earth and cosmos, the forces of natural selection.

In the broader context of exploring attunement in teaching, different aspects of silence—particularly with respect to creativity, language, and empathy—deserve closer consideration.

V.1 – Silence, Attunement, and Creation

In an act of creation, the presence of silence is often essential. It is a most obvious precondition in the composing of music. Since we are here in Vienna, it seems appropriate to consider how the composers of the *Wiener Klassik* chose to compose: Beethoven liked to walk in the woods; Mozart preferred to be riding alone in a coach; Schubert woke up in the night to write down what he had just heard. What they all shared was their common need for silence in order to be able to listen to what they were hearing within.

This need for silence is similar to what poets describe as well. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney has compared the poet to a diviner using a forked stick to discover well water,

trying to make contact with what he senses moving silently beneath the surface of the earth. (Parker, 1993, pp.73–74) The Argentinian poet Octavio Paz writes:

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By a path...the poet comes to the brink of language. And that brink is called silence, blank page. A silence that is like a lake, a smooth and compact surface. Down below, submerged, the words are waiting. And now one must descend, go to the bottom, be silent, wait. (Paz, 1956, p.131)

V.2 – Das Schweigen

The philosopher Max Picard wrote a wonderful book about *das Schweigen*. A word that doesn't really translate into English, it is the silence or hush created by not speaking; it is also sometimes used in a poetic manner to describe an unexpected stillness in nature. Goethe writes in one of his last poems:

Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.

Warte nur, balde ruhest Du auch."

[The birds are silent in the woods.

Just wait, soon you will rest, too.]

[Picard] maintains that words and silence belong together, that the word "knows" about silence just as silence "knows" about the word.

Picard writes that although we normally only become aware of *das Schweigen* at those moments when speech ceases and a particular form of hushed silence begins, this dimension of silence doesn't actually begin because the words stop at this point—it only becomes apparent then. For him, silence is part of the very structure of language and of existence, and he argues that language suffers and decays when it loses its primordial connection with this underlying silence. He maintains that words and silence belong together, that the word "knows" about silence just as silence "knows" about the word. In a culture which he characterized as

being overwhelmed by continual noise and words, it is thus not only *das Schweigen* that is endangered, but language itself:

Wenn das Wort nicht mehr mit dem Schweigen verbunden ist, kann es sich nicht mehr regenerieren, es verliert von seiner Substanz. Wie von selber redend ist die Sprache heute, und, sich ausstreuend und sich entleerend, scheint sie auf ein Ende zuzueilen.... Man hat die Sprache verwaisen lassen, in dem man sie vom Schweigen wegnahm. Sie ist keine Muttersprache mehr, nur noch eine Waisensprache.... Nur in der Sprache des Dichters erscheint manchmal noch das wirkliche, mit dem Schweigen zusammenhängende Wort. (Picard, 1959, pp.37–38)

[When the word is no longer connected to this silence, it can no longer regenerate itself; it loses its substance. Language today is on its own, spreading itself out, emptying itself hurriedly to get to an end. ...Language became an orphan when it was taken away from silence. It is no longer a mother tongue, but only an “orphaned tongue.”...It is only in the language of the poets that the word that is real, that is still connected to this silence, sometimes appears.] (Article author’s translation)

This dimension of silence evidences existential qualities:

Es gibt keinen Anfang vom Schweigen und auch kein Ende. ... Wenn das Schweigen da ist, dann ist es, als habe es nie etwas anderes gegeben: immer nur es. Wo das Schweigen ist, da wird der Mensch vom Schweigen angeschaut; es schaut den Menschen an, mehr als der Mensch das Schweigen. Er prüft das Schweigen nicht, aber das Schweigen prüft ihn. (ibid., p.11)

I am convinced that the creation of times and spaces of silence has become an essential pedagogical task.

[There is no beginning of this silence and also no ending. ...When the silence is there, it is as if there were never anything else, only that. This silence perceives human beings. It looks at us, far more than we look at it. We do not examine the silence, but this silence examines us.] (Article author’s translation)

V. 3 – Silence in Our Times

It is undoubtedly the case that the experience of silence has become a rare occurrence in our times, far more so than Picard writing in 1948 could have imagined. It is also apparent that the constant presence of sound, whether from the iPod or in the supermarket, has diminished our capabilities of being able to listen. Our senses are dulled because they are bombarded.³ This raises essential pedagogical questions and challenges. How can we as educators create situations in which the presence and implications of silence can be experienced?

Although this may seem, at first glance, to be a quixotic task, it is important to note how a little can go a long way. Think of Enja Riegel’s work at the Helene Lang Schule in Wiesbaden, a school that has won numerous awards as being the most successful and innovative school in Germany. (Riegel, 2006) Perhaps the two most radical changes she introduced were the intensive theater projects, in which students worked exclusively on drama with

professionals, and the creation of a “room of silence,” to which students were introduced in their first year at the school (fifth grade). Learning to use and respect this space became an essential part of their entire school lives, and for those

educators from all over the world who came to observe the Helene Lang Schule, this room was often what impressed them the most.

I am convinced that the creation of such times and spaces of silence has become an essential pedagogical task. This will inevitably

require that in teacher education, teachers themselves experience the qualities and possibilities of such moments and are also given opportunities to develop those qualities of presence which will help them create such moments in their classrooms.

VI – Grasping and Touching

The last aspect I would like to touch on is the difference between grasping and touching. I spoke at the beginning of this lecture of an intrinsic connection between seeing and the hand; what we can see, we can also grasp. It is this fundamental connection which has created the basis for most of human technology and much of our technological progress.

In developing a culture of listening based on attunement, grasping is not the gesture that naturally results, but rather *touching*. That is a significant difference. This is clearly evident in music: How do you tune an instrument? Following the ear, one touches the instrument, delicately adjusting the length of a string, or with a wind instrument the length of a slide or a tube. While playing, there is the constant and immediate adjustment of the fingers' placement on the strings or, with a wind instrument, of the speed and the volume of air. The singer, always wholly dependent on her ear, will also make fine adjustments to the velocity of air passing through the vocal cords. Musical attunement invariably requires the most attentive listening and the appropriate movements; it is never a grasping, but rather a sensitive touch.

In exploring this relation between seeing and grasping, on the one hand, and attunement and touching, on the other, it is illuminating to look at the experiences of the blind. Jacques Lusseyran, whose books many of you surely know, tried to explain how as a blind person he knew to stop a few inches before he was about to bump into something,

or how, when he walked by a building, he knew when there was suddenly a space or a gap. He said that blind people will say they heard something—a movement of the air like the very slow approach of an object or resulting from a sudden gap. However, he said that this is because a blind person is trying to explain something in a way that others can understand him. In the end it was not hearing in the normal sense that occurred at such moments, but something more subtle:

He did not hear. He touched. Perhaps hearing and touch are the same sense perception. His ability to indicate the gap in the wall means that the area free of cement or stones had already taken possession of his whole body; with the whole surface of his body he had experienced its shape and power of resistance. It even means that he had already passed through the gap.

All our senses, I believe, join into one. They are the successive stages of a single perception, and that perception is always one of touch. (Lusseyran, 1973, p.30)

When we also consider in this context what Helen Keller wrote about what she was able to perceive of the world through her sense of touch, it becomes clear that there exist innumerable possibilities of developing attentiveness and attunement in realms that we generally don't even begin to consider. (Keller, 2004)

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VII – Attunement and Education

When we compare different views of the human being in education, we can see a clear contrast between those approaches in which seeing and grasping become the primary manner of encountering the world, reflected in the goals of effectiveness and efficiency and ultimately leading to standardization and measurability, and a way of being in the world,

characterized by the forms of attentiveness, listening, and attunement that Oliver Sacks, Carl Rogers, the Dalai Lama, Jacques Lusseyran, and Helen Keller embody, revealing a fundamentally different view of the human being and of education.

The Canadian educator Ted Aoki has written eloquently about this contrast between effectiveness and attunement in teaching:

In the first flush of thought, the notion of effectiveness has a seductive appeal of essential simplicity that suggests the possibility of a focus that can be grasped. It suggests, too, that effectiveness is mainly a matter of skill and technique, and that if I can but identify the components of effective teaching and if, with some concentrated effort, I can but identify the skills, maybe in a three- or four-day workshop, my teaching can become readily effective.

All of these scientific and technical understandings of teaching emerge from our interest in intellectual and manipulative grasp and control. But in so understanding we must be attuned to the fact that although those understandings that can be grasped are uncannily correct, the essence of teaching still eludes our grasp. What we need to do is to break away from the attitude of grasping and seek to be more properly oriented to what teaching is, so we can attune ourselves to the call of what teaching is.

...So placed, I may be allowed to hear better the voice of what teaching essentially is. The question understood in this way urges me to be attuned to a teacher's presence with children. This presence, if authentic, is being. I find that teaching so understood is attuned to the place where care dwells, a place of ingathering and belonging, where the indwelling of teachers and students is made possible by the presence of care that each has for the other. (Aoki, 2004, pp.190–191)

I would like to end with a report which seems to me to bring together many of the different thoughts about attunement that we have considered today. It is a report that shows how an act of deep listening became an act of teaching.

Rachel Remen describes an international conference on Jungian dream analysis that a psychologist friend of hers attended. During this conference, people were asked to write down their own dreams on cards that were then passed along to a panel of experts who were sitting in the front of the auditorium. Each member of the panel was then asked to give his or her own analysis of the dream. Among the experts sitting there was the grandson of C.G. Jung. She wrote:

One of these cards told the story of a horrific recurring dream, in which the dreamer was stripped of all human dignity and worth through Nazi atrocities. A member of the panel read the dream out loud. As she listened, my colleague began to formulate a dream interpretation in her head, in anticipation of the panel's response. It was really a "no-brainer," she thought as her mind busily offered her symbolic explanations for the torture and atrocities described in the dream. But this was not how the panel responded at all. When the reading of the dream was complete, Jung's grandson looked out over the large audience. "Would you all please rise?" he asked. "We will stand together in a moment of silence in response to this dream." The audience stood for a minute, my colleague impatiently waiting for the discussion she was certain would follow. But when they sat again, the panel went on to the next question. (Palmer, 2004, p.157)

Her friend at first didn't understand what happened; but later, through talking to one of her teachers, she had the chance to realize something very fundamental: namely that, in the words of her teacher, "there is in life a

suffering so unspeakable, a vulnerability so extreme that it goes far beyond words, beyond explanations and even beyond healing. In the face of such suffering, all we can do is bear witness so no one need suffer alone.” (ibid, p.158)

The lesson she was able to learn was based on listening and attunement, on those human qualities most fully revealed when everyone was asked to stand up and respond to a person’s suffering by entering into that shared hushed silence—*das Schweigen*. These are the capabilities of teaching and the possibilities of learning that I think we need to continually strive for in teacher education and teaching.

Endnotes

1. This article is adapted from a keynote speech given at the recent ENASTE [European Network of Academic Steiner Teacher Education] conference in Vienna, May 1–3, 2013. The theme of the conference was “The Educator’s View of the Human Being.” About two hundred participants attended from different Waldorf and non-Waldorf academic institutions.
2. Hearing is not only the first sense given to us; it is, curiously enough, often the last sense that leaves us. When one speaks with hospice nurses and with doctors, they will generally tell you that hearing appears to be the last sense that is intact in a dying person.
3. It is interesting in this context to realize that in the Middle Ages, Christian scholastics argued that the devil’s strategy was to bring human beings to a point where they are never alone with their God, nor ever attentively face to face with another human being. For those reasons, they were also convinced that the devil loved noise. (Maitland, 2009, p.133)

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