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Learning How to Speak Human

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Now Ling Tan took such heart as he was still pondering what his son had heard, that it seemed to him that he could go on forever against anything. He went out into the autumn night and looked at the sky and felt the earth under his feet and for the first time in his life he thought, 'This valley is not the world but only a part of the world, and there are others like me whose faces I have never seen.' It was deepest comfort to him. He was no longer alone. Elsewhere there were men such as he who loved peace and longed for good.

'If I could know them', he thought. If I could see them!' Then it came to him that their tongue would not be his, and how could they speak together? 'But we would not need speech,' he thought, 'if what we wish is the same, there would be understanding between us'. (Pearl S. Buck)

Pearl S. Buck suggested so many years ago, through her character Ling Tan, the possibility of mutual understanding between people who could not speak each other's language. This is the essence of speaking human. Spoken through actions louder than words, ways of being that represent kindness, gentleness, peacefulness, a smile, eye contact, all deeply human gestures toward the other, they convey meanings that need not be translated.

Learning a second language holds the potential to step outside of our world and into the world of the other to discover the one world we share together across languages, across cultures and continents. Yet Ling Tan, a humble farmer with no formal schooling, who spoke only his mother's tongue, had reached the deepest of human understandings. We can leave it to chance that consciousness will dawn upon people through the course of their lives, or, as teachers, we can take responsibility to promote the very ways of being that make peace a common goal for civilized, educated lives. The shift from print to a digitalized, televised reality has displaced the curriculum of the schools and rendered it irrelevant thus robbing entire generations of young people of any opportunity to learn lessons so essential that authors across the ages committed their lives to writing them down thoughtfully to be handed down to succeeding generations. The mindset these literary and artistic thinkers developed from a slower-paced world of printed words and quiet evenings immersed in books and thought, has been replaced by the instant messaging, image bombardment and a barrage of media that make it all but impossible for the clarity of thought necessary to solve the problems the modernized world has created.

Ling Tan could not read books, but the pace of his life was guided by the natural rhythms of the seasons and the weather, the rising and setting of the sun, and the star-cast skies of night. His literacy allowed him to read soil, crops, animals, clouds, and people. The microchip has accelerated our lives to a hyper-reality that distracts us constantly away from the ability to speak human. Friends can come and go as quickly as messages as we jump from one stimulus to another. Movie stars can rise to fame and vanish into oblivion overnight (remember Michael Jackson?). Nothing seems permanent as thoughts and images atomize before they can crystallize in our minds.

Teachers can do important cultural work through the printed words of wisdom from across the ages, but it seems there is no time for this as even the pace of schooling based on passing tests has stripped us of our ability to teach thoughtfully. What will become of a world where people are raised on Disney rather than Tolstoy? As teachers we need to set an example for those humans placed in our care. If we understand what is at stake we know that children need to develop a literate skill set to defend themselves from the hectic, disjointed barrage of daily living. Books can be vital tools in slowing down the pace. Literate encounters with texts as well as critical discussions of the confusing messages we all receive from electronic over-stimulation, can help to develop meaningful ways to be in the world. Good books and discussion of the human conditions and wrestlings found in them can provide a source of clarity and stability in an increasingly unstable world. Popular culture should not be ignored in schools either. Children are consumers of popular music, television programming, movies, and other media. Notice how quickly students learn the words to the latest song- even though this was never a school assignment- yet they struggle to memorize the assigned curriculum that represents just one more distraction from meaningful engagements they might have had. Teachers can guide critically literate discussions about the popular culture children consume.

As teachers, when has the importance of speaking human ever been a part of our learning? How much of our education has been dehumanizing, mechanical, or irrelevant to our interests? How many of our teachers do we remember with fondness and a deep sense of their humanity? How do you want to be remembered? A person can score well on a test and still do great harm in the world. In fact, most of the harm in the world comes from the actions of powerful people who are supposedly highly educated. I would assert that something fundamental was missing from their education. Perhaps something was also missing from the education of their teachers as well? Teachers can set an example by recognizing their potential to shape the world through their students. This project of transformation begins with transforming ourselves. We need to make room in our lives for

thoughtful deliberation of the problems of our day, for contemplation of the classics, for deconstruction of the daily living that robs us of our essence to be human. We can look for comfort, calm and wisdom in the pages of books, communing with great minds across time and space. In so doing we will become clearer about what it means to be human, and above all, what it means to teach. Through literature we can find the gems to teach the next generation how to live more peaceful and meaningful lives. We have seen in the past the dangerous potential of books to threaten those in power who work against humanity. On such occasions, books are set to flame, burned and banned. In contrast, televisions, computers, MP3 players, cell phones and other microchip products are promoted aggressively even in the most repressive societies. Could it be that they serve as a distraction away from books? Who benefits when teachers have no time to read? Who benefits if schools abdicate responsibility to popular culture for teaching our young? Who benefits if our society is filled with people who cannot see the difference between what people say and what they do -- between what kind of humans they say they are and the actions that contradict their claims? I wish to offer here some metaphors to capture even more deeply the complexity of language and literacy. The ocean shares an interface with the atmosphere to produce weather, an extremely complex and not so predictable exchange of energies that takes on a life of its own. Hydrogen combines with oxygen to produce water: two gases produce a liquid, a totally new substance that doesn't just sit around stagnant, but also flows, evaporates, condenses and flows again. Language and culture work in much the same ways, and ultimately, language and thought, language and mind, word and world magically intermingle in serendipitous ways. The poverty of traditional, reductionist approaches to "teaching" language and literacy reflects the bankrupt nature of the banking game (duckling stuffing) itself. How anyone in education takes this game seriously demonstrates how far we have strayed from intellectual educators to a form of technicism that dehumanizes teachers, students, and learning itself. This can only spell (pun intended) disaster for a society in decay, passively sitting by and allowing this to happen to their own children without even knowing something is wrong. If teachers are not prepared in ways to see the grave implications of negligence and ignorance, then who on earth is ever going to take responsibility for undoing the damage caused by greedy powerbrokers who represent the bottom feeders of humanity?

Critical pedagogical approaches that center on humanization offer a last chance to those of us who want more from our lives than an iron rice bowl of job security. We need to work to ensure security for future generations, a safer, less violent, less polluted world in harmony with nature. I have witnessed grace among the humblest people in the world. Cultures not yet absorbed by globalization still reflect a slower pace of life anchored

in nature. People of these cultures have never forgotten how to speak human. In Guatemala, the Quiche indigenous people greet their neighbors by asking, 'How are you inside of your heart today?' If the neighbor responds with 'big', they move on, but if the response is 'small', they stop to listen to their neighbor's worries or troubles. In Chinese, the verb to 'listen' is written through the combination of the radicals for the eyes, the ears, and the heart. Here ancient wisdom is embedded in a codification that would make perfect sense to the Quiche people. The Aztec people had a concept of a twisted heart to describe people who were antisocial, unkind, or selfish. They had the word 'yolmelagua' to describe a process of straightening a person's heart. It involved a series of sessions with the teachers of the community who were given the responsibility of teaching them to become healthy members of their society once again.

In my travels I have had encounters with Palestinian elders who have implored me, with tears in their eyes, to tell my friends, students and family that they love the American people, but that they hate our government. These humble people know the difference between the people and the oppressive policies our government supports. The American society may also be the most digitalized and MacDonalidized country in the world. Who benefits when the good people of America are poorly represented by the actions of their supposed leaders? Far too many places in the world are no longer safe to visit as an American. I personally regret this loss of freedom. Americans are the only population of people forbidden to visit Cuba. I have had the opportunity to visit this wonderful island nation three times through academic licenses, and have discovered a proud people who live simple lives. They suffer from an economic blockade imposed by the United States government that has caused great harm to innocent people. When I comment on how much I enjoy being in Cuba, the Cubans tell me, "In the United States you have 'well-having' because of all the material wealth of your country, but here we have 'well-being' because we all try to get along, to help, and respect one another."

My multicultural encounters have served to humanize me in ways I never learned from textbooks in school. I've never seen a test that bothers to measure what kind of person you are, only what kind of information do you have. Most of what is measured is useless information. To such trivia in Brooklyn they used to say, 'That and fifty cents will get you a coffee' (fifty cents was the price of a coffee at the time, implying that the information was worthless). Today, I have had to modernize the saying: 'That and \$3.50 will get you a latté!' They have even convinced some people to pay \$3.50 for a fifty-cent cup of coffee with some steamed milk. Not me!

In conclusion, I wish to state that speaking human is not just about how we relate to one another, but how we relate with all life on the planet we inhabit. How we are with animals, insects, plants and trees also reflects

our humanity. We are not above nature. We are part of nature. When we lose our connections to the natural world, we fail to value it and protect it. This has led to a few greedy people taking excess profit by not calculating the real costs of production including pollution of air, sea and land, as well as cancer and other human illnesses provoked by pollution. How much is a river worth? A forest? A species of animal, plant or insect? How much is a population of people worth? What wisdom is lost when people from subsistence cultures like the Quiche are globalized out of their ancient ways of living in balance with nature and into the digitalized madness? Globalization is making us all the same, eating the same hamburgers, running around with cell phones, I Pods, and pagers, even if we speak different languages. Rather than admiring the greedy, dishonest people among us, they should feel our scorn. Speaking human means we understand what is at stake and we recognize the value of diversity in nature and humanity. Speaking human means we have compassion for others. I wish to end with an anecdote that prompted the title of this talk to reflect how literacy serves as a tool for my own wrestlings as I straddle the borders of two worlds, ancient and modern:

This time in Guatemala I listened more to the wind in the trees; watched the hummingbirds; smelled the wonderful flowers; listened to running water in streams; watched the clouds caress the tops of the volcanoes; and one afternoon I just laid on the grass at the school in Chimaltenango and felt the warm sun and watched the clouds drifting by in the wind. I looked more closely at the people too. One afternoon I was walking home behind a small Indian woman. She was smaller than my 12 year old daughter! At first I thought she was a little girl. She was barefoot, wearing her traditional Indian dress, and carrying a basket on her head. As I got closer I could see how gray her long braided hair was and how wrinkled her arms were. As I was passing her I said "buenas tardes" which is something one does to disarm and to humanize. When she looked at me I saw time deeply wrinkled into her face and small tears in the corners of her eyes. She was at least 85 years old! In Guate the other person usually just says buenas tardes in return, but she looked at me and said, "no tan buenas tardes, don." (not such a good afternoon, sir). I asked her why not and she began crying as she told me about how far she had walked from her home to the market with her heavy basket filled with green peaches. She told me she sat there all day and didn't sell a single one. She still had not eaten and she was exhausted. I took 15 quetzales from my pocket (2 dollars to me, but a lot of money to her.) I handed it to her and said I hoped it would help her some. I wish that I had stopped longer to talk with her, helped her to put down her basket and rest a while, but it was getting dark. I wish now that I had asked her for a hug and that I had told her that I loved her! I must have vanished like a ghost to

her much as she did for me as she walked off into the evening. Oh well. Perhaps she did feel my love as we looked into each other's eyes. I know I felt her pain.

Forgotten Language

by Shel Silverstein

Once I spoke the language of the flowers,
Once I understood each word the caterpillar said,
Once I smiled in secret at the gossip of the starlings,
And shared a conversation with a housefly
in my bed.
Once I heard and answered all the questions
of the crickets,
And joined the crying of each falling, dying
flake of snow,
Once I spoke the language of the flowers.
How did it go?
How did it go?

And speaking of ancient wisdom:
San yo san bao.