Students and lecturers may hear each other, but are they losing the ability to really listen? Songwriters, poets and authors can teach us a thing or two, says Tom Palaima.
The vivid, imagistic responses sung back to me by my students provide a kind of textual evidence for Mycenaean Greek culture, the world of Homer, the songster that I want to talk about. Nobody listening intently, wholeheartedly and meaningfully in higher education is the problem that I want to talk about.

The problem of not listening – or we might say, the problem of students not listening to the professor – is not new but it may have increased in recent years. As one student at Harvard University put it to me: “I have in mind two students who had done serious coursework in the history of the Carolina Dynasty and used it, with my encouragement, as an analogy for interpreting how power worked in Mycenaean Greece. However, this seems more and more like a rearguard action or guerrilla tactic that can be used with relatively few students. Even with the array of communication functions made readily and constantly available online, it seems to me that students and professors more and more listen to each other less and less.

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me”. His audiences would hear the phrase “andra polletron” and immediately think of Odysseus and only Odysseus. They and their fathers before them had listened to many songs, short and long, well and poorly sung, about the exploits of the literally “much-turning” adventurer, soldier, father, husband, son, lover, king and trickster hero. And Homer learned his bardic art, like itinerant folk and blues singers in modern times, by listening, absorbing and imitating others, and incorporating elements of their styles, techniques and repertoires. There is no irony, therefore, when we say that great songsters and great poets are first and always great listeners. The maxim would be “to sing, listen”.

In Sophocles’ masterpiece, the Oedipus Tyrannus, we learn another lesson: “To know, listen – and think carefully about what you have heard, or else.” As the tragedy opens, Oedipus comes forward, having heard in his plague-stricken polis of Thebes wailings and paeans to Apollo, the healer god. He tells the worried crowd that it is a matter of just action for the leader of a community and paeans to Apollo, the healer god.

Tyrannus, who gives voice to their sufferings how he belongs partly to you, and in that act of receiving this, as if it belonged partly to you, and in that act of taking and showing you were available you were playing some useful role.”

These are examples of the absolute importance of listening proved in extremis: the violence of war extended almost beyond imagination; the long, hard and virtually impossible process of truly returning from war; a large community beset by pollution, sickness, plague; an entire culture gone mad and organising complex systems for the extermination of millions of humans being who were treated as subhuman. But they highlight the importance of developing our capacities for listening in all our human interactions, and they underscore that a vital component in educating young men and women to become productive, thoughtful and humane adults is to make sure that each of them is not just a Homo sapiens, but a Homo audians.

This point is driven home by a final example, from Chris Letch, who has taught creative writing to soldiers stationed at a Forward Operating Base in Afghanistan. She learned that talking and writing therapies are not enough – or rather that their success depends on what Bamber exemplified: good listening. In Outside the Wire: American Soldiers’ Voices from Afghanistan (2013), she writes: “It is much more than just the writing that heals – it is being heard. For veterans, it is knowing their pain is felt vicariously by those who possess the strength to listen, by those with courage enough to tilt a human ear toward wartime stories and to risk being changed by the tremor in their voices. PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] is, after all, a shared experience: when one family member is affected, the entire family suffers, and thus the community suffers.”

When are we taught the art of listening? I am not speaking here of note-taking.

We can hardly accuse of apathy students or professors who work hard to succeed within the prevailing system. But we can feel pity and fear that they may never stop to listen to the voices of those for whom the system is not so useful. Dr. Chris Letch, who has taught creative writing to soldiers stationed at a Forward Operating Base in Afghanistan, observed, “It is much more than just the writing that heals – it is being heard. For veterans, it is knowing their pain is felt vicariously by those who possess the strength to listen, by those with courage enough to tilt a human ear toward wartime stories and to risk being changed by the tremor in their voices. PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] is, after all, a shared experience: when one family member is affected, the entire family suffers, and thus the community suffers.”

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A vital component in educating young men and women is to make sure that each of them is not just a Homo sapiens but a Homo audians, as these and many other data that are instantly retrievable?