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YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE

we must learn to listen

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


ALAMY

The original two-page autographed working manuscript of the lyrics of Bob Dylan's song *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, "comprising five long stanzas of 57 lines in pencil", went up for auction on 24 June 2014 at Sotheby's in New York and sold for $485,000 (£292,000). That's a lot of money spent to satisfy partially our curiosity about the creative genius that produced a song we listen to in our historical memories and what that genius looks like when it is taking its baby steps.

The song poem is divided into five stanzas. In each stanza an unidentified, presumably older figure asks a simple question two times of an interlocutor addressed affectionately as "my blue-eyed son" and "my darling young one". The questions show true concern for the addressee as a morally aware human being and for the life experiences he has had and will have. First, "where have you been?" Next, "what did you see?" Then, "what did you hear?" Then, "who did you meet?" And finally, "what'll you do now?"

Although the terms of affection imply parent and son, the two could just as well be a professor in the role of a caring mentor posing oral exam questions to a prize student who listens carefully and then uses his mind and moral sensibilities to give back poetically provocative answers that the professor takes in and takes seriously. Would that students and professors as a whole in colleges and universities had the opportunity these days to build such meaningful relationships.

The vivid, imagistic responses sung back to these questions in Dylan's early masterpiece spotlight lots of things that were then, and mostly still are, wrong with American society. In line six of the pivotal 11-line third stanza (its exact centre in fact) the darling young blue-eyed son proclaims, "I heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin' ". Nobody listenin', or nobody listening intently, wholeheartedly and meaningfully in higher education is the problem I want to talk about.

For many senior professors who were coming of age when Dylan first sang this line, it has the force now of a warning from an Old Testament prophet that has come to pass. The problem of not listening – or we might call it the failure to hear and internalise – as it affects what we do at colleges and universities is not new but it may have reached a critical stage. The feeling of not being heard, whether attributed to student apathy, disinterest, fatigue, distractedness or careerist tunnel vision, or to faculty complacency, preoccupation with specialised scholarship or career-advancing conference-hopping, has I think always been more acute among professors in the US. In our colleges and universities, the 50- and 75-minute mandatory lecture has long been the basic tool for education, and in recent years an increasingly interactive tool. We expect students to attend lectures regularly and have the notion that they will pay attention and learn. Even in large lecture classes, we routinely try to engage students with questions and expect to field questions or comments. Our course content is readily available at all times through institutionally provided learning and course-management systems billed as "platforms for communication and sharing content". Through such systems, we ourselves are available to students during most of our waking hours.

By contrast, I still remember the shocked looks on the faces of students (true *mutae personae*) in my *Vorlesung* (lecture) on the textual evidence for Mycenaean Greek culture, at the University of Salzburg in 1992, when I passed around a postcard that had a photo of Linear B tablets and asked simple *Hard Rain*-style questions of them and waited for answers. Getting none, I offered a few that could have been given, and went on from there.

My Austrian colleagues, who were attending my first class to make sure everything went smoothly, made clear to me afterwards that I had violated a taboo and once was enough. I was there to say what

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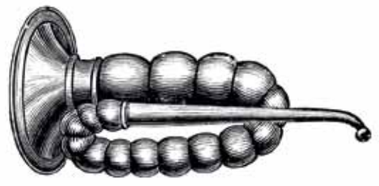
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I had to say about the topic set for the day. The students who came were there at least in principle to listen to, take in and take away whatever they chose from what I said.

That was the social contract. I came and spoke. Students came and listened and went away. During our formal time together, I was not to expect to listen to spontaneous thoughts or serious questions expressed by them. They certainly did not expect to hear me speaking to them as individuals with thoughts of their own.

Still, at the end of the semester, we did have *mündliche Prüfungen* (oral examinations). These allowed for spontaneity, improvisation and what we still call "thinking on our feet". Even in those last days of the term, my listening to them and their listening to me, one on one, personalised the course, made it a shared experience that they and I could get nowhere else.

Based on this experience, in smaller honours courses at the University of Texas at Austin, I have taken to replacing final written examinations with individualised semester-end one-on-one sessions with each student. During these, we discuss – more in the manner of engaging conversation at high table than an interrogation at a local police precinct – topics and readings specially tailored to the interests that each of them has identified to me. In setting the topic during the last weeks of classes, I listen to what they say has interested them most in the course up to that point and why; and then when we meet I listen to what they have done with primary and secondary sources and modern scholarship related to their interests, which are often in areas far different from mine. I have in mind two students who had done serious coursework in the history of the Carolingian 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.

Because of my own serious interests in early ancient Greek literature, history and culture and in the human experience of war and violence through time, I may have stronger feelings than others about one person professing and no one, or at least very few, listenin'. After all, because of the awe connected with our own thoughts, heightened for me by reading and reviewing George Steiner's *The Poetry of Thought* two years ago – where *do* our thoughts come from and where do they go? how do we control or use them? what part of us are they? who would we be without them? how do they affect what we do with and in our lives? – we can understand why the earliest public proclaimer of memorable thoughts, the oral poet whose works we identify by the name of Homer, places himself in listening mode at the beginning of his two major epics. The songster asks the goddess to sing the *Iliad*'s story of the anger of Achilles and its terrible consequences implicitly to him and through him. At the outset of the *Odyssey*, he explicitly asks the Muse to "recount the versatilely clever man to

me". His audiences would hear the phrase "*andra polutropon*" 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 repertories. 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' masterwork, 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 to hear first-hand from his anxious fellow citizens and from the distinguished holy man who gives voice to their sufferings how matters stand and what they need of him. Much like Dylan's sympathetic parent figure, Oedipus makes clear with his own questions his heartfelt affection for his people and his strong fear for their well-being. And he then listens.


KOBAL

Listening is sometimes not only the only thing that can be done, but the only thing that must or should be done. This is the lesson we take away from Neil Belton's magnificent biographical study *The Good Listener: Helen Bamber, A Life against Cruelty* (1998). Conditioned by trauma in her own childhood, Bamber was among the first outsiders to be with human beings who were surviving *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* (extermination through labour) in Nazi concentration camps. She faced the unspeakable daily horrors by resolving to do one thing very, very well. As she stated in Belton's book, she listened: "I know other people who were there also talked to the survivors and tried to reach them; some did not. But I found it necessary to go in, to face it and allow myself to be targeted and not be contaminated, and simply to listen…Above all else, there was the need to tell you *everything*, over and over and over again. And this was the most significant thing for me, realizing that you had to take it all…It took me a long time to realize that you couldn't really do anything but that you just had to hang on to them and that you had to listen and to *receive* 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 human beings 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 only a *Homo sapiens*, but a *Homo audiens*.

This point is driven home by a final example, from Chris Leche, 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."

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When are we taught the art of listening? I am not speaking here of note-taking. There are mini-courses, workshops and advisers who can develop the skill of pinpointing in lectures and discussions main themes and theses, supporting arguments and relevant data and references. I have had honours students who are extraordinary note-takers. What I mean is listening at a deep and respectful level that engenders feelings of wonder and pleasure and awe at the mysteries relating to humankind that are investigated at our universities.

I never had a course in listening. I believe I became a sufficient listener almost by educational accident. I responded at school to my own childhood trauma by being drawn to and taking in intellectually and personally, and being curious about, the manifestations of experienced trauma I detected in others.

All the incentives in our systems of higher education (and in primary and secondary education, too) are structured now to promote an intensive self-absorption and self-mindedness. We are almost 16 years beyond the point where *The New York Times* called American colleges and universities "employment credentialing stations". Students are customers. Professors and graduate teaching assistants are service providers. Lecture courses are viewed as information-delivery events. The incentive for students to listen to what professors are saying at the front of the lecture halls is minimal.

In Texas, under the influence of what politeness would have us call the educational philosophy of Governor Rick Perry, course syllabuses are viewed as contracts for providing specific information according to a set plan. Deviation from this plan is discouraged. Students come to class with the presumed advantage of having already read lecture notes online. They also know that those notes, and much more, are available online whether or not they pay attention in class or actively engage with the course material. Why commit to memory and store in the heart poems, songs, source information or any other data that are instantly retrievable?

One colleague of mine remarked that with so much information readily available, students and even younger professors no longer have to retrieve information from their own memories or spend weeks tracking down a reference. Their senses of curiosity seem stunted.

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 roses growing or "the song of a poet who died in the gutter". They may never even recognise the sound of the hard rain when it finally falls. ●

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