

Six Talks on Music, #5

Author: John Steinmetz

Okay, if you want to stand up, you'd better do it and sit right back down.

All right, class! Silence in the classroom, please. You can pass notes.

I want to make sure that you all understand that almost everything I've said here has been stolen. There may be one or two semi-original thoughts in these talks, but almost everything is a rip-off from somebody whose work has inspired me. In a few cases, I forgot to mention the sources of the wisdom; I want to make it clear that it's not mine.

That wonderful quote, "Teaching is not telling," comes from a very inventive math teacher named Mary Laycock. When you're putting that in your dissertation, you can attribute that quote to her. [One of the conference attendees later told of hearing this same phrase long ago from a piano teacher. Does anybody know who first formulated this bit of wisdom?]

I want to check in about how we're all doing with the video. I expect we'll leave it on, but I want to honor the wishes of the assembled multitudes. If you have changed your vote from yesterday, just raise your hand so I'll know that we need to take another vote. If not, we'll leave it. [No hands go up.] Okay, thank you.

Today I'm just going to blather about a few seemingly unrelated things that have occurred to me. I'm blathering because that's about all I can do any more at this stage of the conference. I sense that many of you have reached that state, too, and that overload is imminent, so I'll try to say only stupid things that aren't worth remembering. Then you won't have to worry about writing them down.

One of the questions that's interested me for a long time, for which I have no answers—and that's why it's really a good question to bring up now, because you don't have to write down any answers—is: How do we help people to have their own independent insights? We know pretty much about how to help them do other things independently, and I think this conference has tried to approach that question.

How do we help students become independent learners? How do we create a situation where they don't need us anymore? Practicing is a great place to start, because if they can learn how to practice really well, then they're not going to need very much from us any more.

Ultimately, of course, musicians begin to figure out a way to teach themselves. Not that we ever give up looking to other people for coaching and help, but we start having our own ideas about how the music should go, about how to rehearse, and we might invent a new idea of our own about how to practice.

It occurred to me, as I was watching the stage today, that we've seen really fabulous demonstrations, over and over again, of people having insights. When people have insights, you can see how excited they are, and you can see how frustrated they get when they can't share all twenty-seven thousand of them. I feel the same way, I must say.

It is always very difficult to coach other people to have their own insights. I remember a session, at a conference about learning, that was specifically devoted to coaching people in how to coach. The subject was tennis, and the teacher was Tim Gallwey, who, as I said, is a teacher I greatly admire.

He was to coach a student in how to serve in tennis, and to talk to us, the observers, about what his mental processes were as he was coaching. He had to do two things at once. He had to coach a student about how to serve, and he had to talk to us about what was going on in his own head, so that we could understand why he chose a particular instruction, why he switched to a different instruction at a certain time, and what he was trying to accomplish.

It was just fascinating to see that this was nearly impossible for him, and for us. We immediately got distracted by the serve, and almost all the questions from the observers were *not* “Tim, how did you decide to give that instruction?” but were questions like, “How high should you throw the ball?” or “What about the way he takes his racket back?”

We immediately gravitated toward the thing, rather than the coaching of the thing. And Tim himself kept forgetting to turn to the audience and tell us what he was thinking about as he coached.

I remembered all this as I was watching today, because it's been so difficult for the panels to remember to play this weird role of helping the students to develop their own ideas.

How *do* you help people think independently?

In a little while I'm going to ask you to do something that will involve writing. While I'm talking, please get out a piece of paper, or find a scrap of the program book that's not crammed with information, and get something to write with. You're not going to have to turn this in, although it *is* a test, and your future happiness will be determined by what you write down.

How do we help people have their own insights? My answer is, “I don't know,” and I hope I can put “yet” at the end of that.

While you're getting your papers out, I want to say a little bit more about contradictory truths. Earlier in the conference—about a month ago in the conference—I said that for anything that you can say that's true, there's something opposite that's also true.

This is a problem of language. I want to give you an example. I once said that a good question to ask yourself in observing teaching, or in observing your own teaching, is: Who is having the fun? Is the student having the fun or is the teacher having the fun?

Now, you can tell from the way I ask, that the implicit answer is that the student should have the fun—the fun of surprise and insight and “Aha!” and “Ooh, wow, I never noticed that before!”

Of course, a very common situation is the opposite. Once when I was walking across a college campus, I passed a series of three classrooms inside a wall of windows. As I walked by, I could see into these classrooms, and in each of the three classrooms was a different version of the same picture. There was somebody in the room who was very, very excited, and talking and gesturing, and being extremely involved and stimulated, and having a wonderful time. Usually that person was at one end of the classroom. And there were a bunch of other people who were sitting there in various stages of boredom and despair. The body language was the most striking thing. The person having the fun

was extremely energized, and the people having what I took to be the not-fun were extremely de-energized. I think we're all familiar with being in both places. I'm happy to be in this one right now.

When I talked about who is having the fun in learning, I intended it to stimulate that kind of observation: quite often there is one person having the fun, and that same one person might be the person doing the most learning. The person who is the designated learner for the day might not be doing as much learning, precisely because that person is not having as much fun.

However, as an illustration of an opposite truth that's also valid, I remember another experience. It was when I was teaching music at the computer camp, and I was so miserable. I couldn't get through to anybody, because they didn't have any musical experience, so we couldn't connect.

One of my friends, who was also a consultant on that project, came to visit me. He's quite an old friend and an advisor, and I told him how miserable I was. I was not enjoying the teaching, and the students were clearly not enjoying the learning. He observed right away that *nobody* was having fun.

He gave me a really nice piece of coaching: "What if you forgot about the students learning anything, and just tried to have some fun yourself? After all, it would be at least *slightly* better if one person in the room were to have some fun."

When he said that, a whole picture flashed into my mind about what I wanted to do, what would be fun. I really didn't know whether the students would learn anything from it, or whether they would have any fun, but I knew that I would have a good time.

Sure enough, when I did what I had imagined, some learning, and some fun, started happening for those students. So there's the opposite truth: if the teacher is having some genuine and authentic fun—probably we could research that a little more and find out what kind of fun is most helpful—then there's a better chance that the students will have fun. (At least somebody will have fun.)

Now take your test papers. Remember to fill in the bubbles firmly so the computer can read them.

I just want to ask you a few things, since I know that you've all absorbed a lot here. One of the things that's helped me the most, in my own trying to be an independent learner instead of trying to copy the people that I admired so much, is to ask Stupid Questions.

I would like to ask you, first of all, this Stupid Question: What is it that you want for your students? You may answer that in any way you like. You may rephrase the question, if that makes it easier to answer. You may write as many answers as you'd like.

[Pauses between questions.]

As you're doing that, if you think of something that you *really* want for them, that underlies what you said you wanted for them, then put that down also.

You can always come back to each of these.

Next I'd like to ask: Why do you want that for them?

Now look at the answer that you just wrote, or those answers. Since I don't know what they are, I can't ask you quite the correct next question, but the next question is: Why do you think that? or Why do you believe that? or What makes you so sure?

Don't worry about spelling and penmanship.

The next question is: What do you think your students want? There may be multiple answers for different students. If you have ninety students, then just start writing fast.

Then ask yourself: Why do they want that?

And then: How do you know?

Now look back over your answers in order to answer this question: How would you compare what you know about what your students want, with what you want for them?

Pick one of the things that's emerged from this, as what you want or what they want or what everybody wants, pick one of those things, and write just a little bit about: What experiences helped you with that? What do you remember about your own experiences that helped you with that? It could be anything—a person, a book, something that happened, a recording, a flash of inspiration.

Just a couple more. Write down performances or recordings that you've heard that were special to you, that hold a special place in your memory.

After that, write down performing experiences you've had, that are special to you in your memory.

All right. First of all, you can see that you could do too much of this. But you could take any one of these questions and go deeper into it, by asking, say, "What was special about that?" or "Where did I get the idea that that was so special?" The idea is to try to go farther back into your own formation and deeper into your own beliefs. For me, this kind of questioning, asking the most basic, stupid questions, has been really helpful for finding out what my own values are, and what I care about.

It's really easy to forget what you most care about! Thinking about it a little bit can help greatly in acting from your own values.

In addition, you can begin to discover sources of wisdom that you carry within you. How many of you found something in what you wrote that surprised you a little bit? Anybody find anything that surprised you a lot? [A few raise their hands.]

How many found things that you say all the time? [Quite a few.] How many found things that are really important to you, that you don't talk about very much? [Some.] How many don't feel like raising their hands today? [Lots.]

I'm going to leave you with one last Bonus Question. This is an essay question, not a short answer. You may take as much time as you like, and you may feel free to ignore everything else that goes on around you, in order to answer this question. Feel free to rephrase the question in whatever way suits you best. But feel free to take it seriously.

I'll give it to you in two formulations: What is the meaning and purpose of human life? Another formulation of that is: Why am I here on this planet?

You don't have to turn those answers in to anybody, but turn them into anybody that you'd like to turn them in to.

Thanks.