

Essential Activities - Reverence (Universal Values)

Reading Time: 35-40 min.

In advocating for [ecosocial literacy](#) as a foundational organizing principle in classrooms, schools, homes and institutions, we aim to broaden and deepen the principles, practices and mindsets, and importantly, the possibilities, that educators and facilitators can draw upon to become active participants in manifesting a more peaceful, harmonious, just and sustainable world and mentoring an entire generation of ecosocially literate humans. Every educator, parent and mentor has their own unique situation, yet within those situations, each of us can find small steps we can take in alignment with our vision of a more eco-socially just and harmonious world.

In “Foundations of Ecosocial Literacy” we briefly discussed the four foundational ideas or thoughts summarized as follows:

- ▶ Adopt an *enriched view of human beings*
- ▶ Recognize that outer change begins with *inner transformation*
- ▶ Develop our *non-cognitive ways of knowing*
- ▶ Incorporate and honor our *contemplative and reflective lineages*

Keeping in mind these four foundational thoughts, we draw upon eight essential activities or mindsets that we aspire to include in our everyday language, lessons, curricula and conversations. At all times, we’re looking for ways to engage activities that will illuminate and explore these following eight ideas.

Eight Essential Activities

1. The Importance of Language & Human Stories
2. Reverence (Pointing to a Universal Set of Values)
3. Self-Reflection, Introspection, Inquiry (Contemplative Education)
4. Disorienting Dilemmas (Exposure to Different Worldviews)
5. Practice Mentality (Small Consistent Steps with Intention)
6. Appreciative Inquiry as a Method of Non-force Based Change
7. Creativity and Creative Recovery Practices
8. Cultivating the Eight Intrinsic Attributes of Ecosocial Leadership

These eight activities or mindsets are not separate; rather, they are interconnected at many different levels. Often, to engage one means to engage others. But each one points to a particular facet of our orientation and world view that we manifest in different ways and in different circumstances.

Reverence (Towards Universal Values)

“What can educators do to foster real intelligence?... We can attempt to teach the things that one might imagine the Earth would teach us: silence, humility, holiness, connectedness, courtesy, beauty, celebration, giving, restoration, obligation, and wildness.”^[1] — David Orr

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“Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence.” - Henry David Thoreau, from his *Journals*, October 18, 1855.

We use the word “reverence” in two ways: 1) as a value in and of itself and, 2) as a theme to refer to the following universal values:

- ▶ Reverence
- ▶ Interdependence and Interconnectedness (Interbeing)
- ▶ Gratitude (The Gift of Life)
- ▶ Self-awareness (As a Value)
- ▶ Speaking Unarguably (Responsibility)
- ▶ Humility (Interdependence)
- ▶ Trust (Fundamental Equality)
- ▶ Curiosity (Openness and Adaptability)
- ▶ Unconditional Listening (Responsibility)
- ▶ Practice Environment (Journey/Evolution/Patience)
- ▶ Greeting Customs (Acceptance, Welcoming, Honoring)

In developing ecosocial literacy, we wish to draw our underlying values for education and life from the cosmos itself — from the Earth and nature, since this is the way we have been able to adapt, survive and evolve for tens of thousands of years as *Homo sapiens*. We aim to foster values that might be seen as universal, that we also see in nature, and that can belong to all human groups or that are common among differing groups.

Reverence (As a Value)

We use the term *reverence* as a value to refer to the way we approach and interact with one another. Some helpful synonyms or definitions that will point us in a good direction: intensely respectful, high esteem, high regard, great respect, admiration, appreciation, honor, praise, equality, veneration, awe, deference, affection, love.

Respect is the most common word used in educational settings to refer to the quality of relationships we wish to express or incorporate into our school environments. It can found in school mottos, class rules, and in educator and student discussions of how we should treat each other. Respect is another one of those qualities that is non-conceptual in nature so when asked to define respect, many students have difficulty putting it into words, even as they can feel whether or not they’re being respected. Different people will experience respect in different ways. Having a reflective, open dialogue about what constitutes respect will often bring to light deeper qualities and awarenesses we wish to consider.

In developing ecosocial literacy, we use the word *reverence* for several reasons. First, it bypasses the somewhat diluted word respect. For most English speakers, reverence implies something deeper than respect — in fact, we might say it means “intensely respectful”. The

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word invites us to reflect more deeply about this felt quality, since, unlike the word respect, it's not something we invoke very often in educational settings. When reflecting on the various synonyms and metaphors we might use to help us understand reverence, we begin to uncover qualities, mindsets and orientations that, if embodied and reciprocated, will transform classrooms and educational settings.

When we hold someone in high esteem or high regard, we tend to see their best, even when they're not currently presenting their best. In other words, we're able to continue to see them in a positive light, even as we may be having difficulty with them. When we admire someone, we're noticing a quality, skill or behavior in them that resonates something in us. There is a connection that occurs and strengthens the relationship, even if it's someone you've never met in person. You may admire an athlete or musician for their particular skill, but not everyone will admire that person in the same way you do. That admiration resonates something in your own being. It's personal to you.

When we appreciate or praise someone, again we're noticing a quality, skill or behavior that resonates for us, but we're taking the active step of putting that resonance into outer form. Bringing that positive quality into the light of awareness strengthens the quality in both parties while creating a deeper bond or connection between them.

We might even invoke the words venerate or awe as part of our discussion of reverence. Yet, as we do this, we invoke the word equality, because without equality these words might imply hierarchy, which isn't a part of our reverence. We venerate each other as a sign of humble affection, care and honor for their journey as human beings who, just like we are, are trying in their own unique way to make the world a better place. Just like us. There is a fundamental equality embedded within our veneration.

Being non-conceptual in nature, the experience of reverence doesn't just happen because we read about it. The words may serve as a map and point us in a good direction, but it is up to us to travel the territory. Reverence is an orientation, a mindset, and a feeling state that can be nurtured and strengthened over time. We're not interested in the force-based demands that often accompany the rules for respect so often seen in schools and classrooms. Rather, we wish to lovingly cultivate our reverence for each other and experience the shift in our relationships that results from that transformative journey.

It's important to note that you can hold reverence for someone even as you strongly disagree with their ideas, opinions or actions. Our reverence lives on a deeper level than our differences. We hold reverence for our fellow humans and we can extend that reverence to the non-human realm as well. When put together, all of these elements create a "field of reverence" and serve to strengthen our relationships and help create a more open, accepting and creative container for collaborative learning and growth.

Author Charles Eisenstein has offered the following six ideas as ways to help us understand and enact reverence in our interactions with others:

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- ▶ We interpret each other's words generously; in other words, we're not quick to judge or criticize others; we offer the benefit of the doubt and allow space for the different ideas and thoughts of others to co-exist alongside our own.
- ▶ We do our best to let go of the need to be right and [appearing] smart.
- ▶ At all times, we cultivate curiosity over judgment or being right.
- ▶ Reverence is the awareness that one is addressing sacred beings; however, it is not always solemn or being so serious. It includes humor, playfulness, and ease as well.
- ▶ We're always on the lookout for our own habits of polarization and judgment that arise when we're challenged by information that's outside our normal worldview or the difficult emotions that might arise from those challenges (frustration, defensiveness and anger are common signals). Our group may closely mirror the divisions and conflicts of the outside world. The answer is not to avoid those divisions or to plow them over with positivity. Rather, we seek to help and to understand ourselves and one another more deeply and clearly.
- ▶ We do our best to hold uncomfortable emotions without having to redirect them into something else, "fix" them or give solutions to them; for example, we don't need to turn anger into reactivity, grief or sadness into despair or hopelessness, or empathy or compassion into pity or "fixing" something or "helping" someone.

When we imagine ourselves interacting with sacred beings in reverence, some values that might be considered universal seem to rise to the surface. By universal, we mean that we can connect them in some way to the cosmos and what we can observe in the on-going interactions and evolution of our Earth. Often too, we find these values active in intact indigenous cultures.

Interconnectedness and Systems View

Perhaps the most obvious universal value is the pervasive interconnection and interdependence that exists in the universe and on Earth herself. Effectively building upon our four foundational thoughts requires that we integrate our teaching and learning across multiple systems. Nothing in the cosmos is separate from anything else and our insistence upon separating everything and taking everything apart, as seductive as it is, has brought us to a critical crossroads in our human journey on the Earth. If we insist on taking things apart in order to study them or more easily describe them, it's essential that we re-assemble them once again and emphasize to students and each other the importance of the systems within which we are all embedded. We need to seek, discover and engage new ways of incorporating interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge so that the systems view becomes the predominant lens through which we view the world. This includes everything from the hyper-local systems of our inner friend groups, our classrooms and schools, to our communities, ecological places and bioregions, and all the way out to our global systems of society, commerce and ecology.

Our actions and intentions ripple throughout all of these systems in ways that we can scarcely know or predict. Seeing ourselves as somehow separate from everything has had

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dire consequences on the structures and systems we've created both as individuals and as a society. This pervasive interconnectedness has been variously described by others as interdependent co-arising, interbeing, the interpenetration of all things or simply as a systems approach. Regardless of the metaphor we use, we can take every possible opportunity to transform our own world view and those of our student learners into one that recognizes the vast web within which we're magically situated. Our classrooms, schools and learning environments are unfolding in immeasurable contexts and we can bring our attention to that in myriad ways.

The Magic of Gratitude

When we deeply reflect on the expansive, cosmic context of our lives or even within the context of Earth herself, eventually we come to recognize that our own life, brief as it may be, is a complete mystery. It starts to dawn on us that our life is a tremendous gift. We didn't do anything to earn it. That is, we didn't pay for it or perform some great deed in order to get it. This life was somehow mysteriously given to us.^[2]

When one is given a gift, the natural response is gratitude. When this reflection happens regularly and deeply and we allow ourselves to truly take it in, it becomes a first step and the basis for wanting to give back something in return. This begins the quest to discover and then develop the unique gifts that are each of ours to offer.

Gratitude is a universal, ubiquitous human quality. All cultures and all people understand and exhibit thankfulness, appreciation and gratefulness. However, experiencing gratitude isn't something we merely think or talk about. It's non-conceptual in nature and must be genuinely felt within. We normally imagine gratitude as one of the "heart" qualities, partially because it is often felt as a warmth, openness and expansion in our bodies in the vicinity of our physical heart. And, since the heart is both a sending and receiving organ, gratitude is something we can both offer and accept. Either way, it involves relationship, even if you're experiencing gratitude for your own healthy heart, mending bone or clear vision. There's an obvious acknowledgment and awareness of connection and integration involved. As such, gratitude is one of the key ways in which humans connect to one another, to other beings, and to the other aspects of their environment. For example, all traditional cultures, in some form or another, acknowledged and gave thanks to the sun, the energy source of all life on earth. This was often done on a daily basis, as a ritual, practice or in a formal ceremony. Many cultures, societies and groups give formal thanks prior to meals or harvests.

Gratitude is at the core of most, if not all, worldviews of the First Nations peoples in North America (and most other indigenous cultures around the world). Among the [Haudenosaunee](#), in particular, gratitude is seen as a sacred duty. Experiencing the connection and openness that results from genuine gratitude must precede all meetings and gatherings. The expression of gratitude to all the various forms of life are so important to the success of meetings and gatherings, they are considered the "words that come before all else".^[3]

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Here are some other key thoughts to contemplate about the magic of gratitude:

- ▶ Gratitude is non-conceptual in nature. It can't be precisely described, only felt and perhaps hinted at with our languages. Likewise, it can't be precisely measured, yet is utterly real and palpable to anyone who offers it or who receives it. It can serve as an important gateway into the nature of non-cognitive knowing and understanding.
- ▶ An originating impulse of many, if not most, religions and spiritual traditions is the gratitude for the gift of life and, as such, is the most appropriate response to the mystery of our birth.
- ▶ Gratitude enacts and strengthens our interconnections and interdependence with the world around us and, over time, helps us appreciate the vast interconnectedness we share with all of life. As we expand our awareness, gratitude connects us to ever widening circles of care and concern, from our core human families and communities to all things on the Earth and in the universe.
- ▶ Gratitude can connect us forward and backward in time; for example, to our ancestors (without whom we wouldn't exist), as well as our descendants who will follow after us (for example, the seventh unborn generation). When you appreciate nature, you can imagine a vision that extends for the lifespan of a sequoia tree or bristlecone pine (thousands of years). When you plant those kinds of seeds of gratitude, you're expanding your care and concern into the future. When you contemplate what the earth was like when that giant sequoia or gnarled bristlecone pine was a seedling, your gratitude and imagination extends into the past. When you wish for your descendants, many generations hence, to be able to live freely and admire and interact with the same things you have, you are connecting yourself with that future.
- ▶ The great open secret is this: gratitude is not dependent upon external circumstances. It does not require us to like our current circumstances or situation. Gratitude is a choice that can be made in any circumstance. In fact, it can help uplift us when we're facing difficulties and in times of turmoil and danger, gratitude helps to steady and ground us.
- ▶ In the modern Industrial Growth Society, gratitude is politically subversive, because to be deeply grateful for what we have is an antidote to the consumerism that drives corporate capitalism and our political economy of constant, unsustainable growth.

Gratitude is one of the easiest entry points towards transforming any teaching and learning environment into one that supports the development of ecosocial literacy. It can be modeled, enacted and supported at every age level across all disciplines of knowledge and learning. It can be developed and deepened over time — the time of a school year or the time of a school career. There are countless activities that can be adopted or improvised on the spot that will allow student learners to reflect upon and consider the importance and the contexts of gratitude. It may well be that if there were only one practice you could adopt in your own teaching or mentoring environment, gratitude, especially when deepened and extended over time, might just have the deepest and most far-reaching ripples of any possible activity.

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Self Awareness (As a Value)

Self awareness may well be one of the qualities that is uniquely human; whether we're alone in that ability or not, it is certainly an important part of what makes us human. As such, it should be one of the things we take steps to cultivate and deepen. Yet, in our modern education systems, it is notoriously omitted, both as something to value and as something to steadily develop through the years (like we do with math, for instance).

Here we refer to self-awareness as a value — something fundamental and foundational that permeates and guides our world view. In general, we can characterize self-awareness as developmental; it grows and develops over time in human beings, even without bringing attention to it. The dictionary definition, “conscious knowledge of one’s own character, feelings, motives, and desires”, certainly captures a part of self-awareness and, at the same time, points to the difficulty of actually understanding what it is or how it develops or even what part of us is aware.^[4] It’s not something that is easily measurable (or definable), yet nearly all Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula seek to build or develop it. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)^[5] includes self-awareness as one of the foundational skills that should be targeted by SEL curricula.

It allows us to more deeply understand and know ourselves; as such, it is a critical skill for a social species such as *Homo sapiens*, since it is part of what helps us to work together effectively in groups, to learn and transform ourselves and to adapt to new circumstances. It is critical for working skillfully with emotions and developing and understanding the wide variety of non-cognitive skills essential to developing ecosocial literacy. We might also say our self-awareness allows us to locate ourselves or gauge and consider ourselves.

Self-awareness, whether or not unique to our species, is a hallmark of our human nature. It is something that has slowly evolved, as we have, through the thousands of generations of the *hominin* lineage. Where or how it actually began is a mystery, yet it is part of the inheritance we have been gifted as humans and that we share across perceived differences. We all have it. We can all develop it. As part of our human lineage and as something we consistently rely on to make choices and live our lives, it becomes an underlying value — something to honor and aspire to fully develop.

Speaking Unarguably (Responsibility)

We’ve pointed out the importance of language and stories, which highlights the need for effective dialogue and the ability to communicate across differences in ways that foster and deepen connection rather than disharmony. This is a fundamental responsibility we have as humans. As mentioned, part of that responsibility is learning to listen deeply and without judgment. The other part of that responsibility is learning to “speak unarguably”.^[6]

“Speaking unarguably” is a phrase that helps remind us to only speak about and describe our own experience. As we come to understand the importance and power of the words we choose, we recognize that so much of what we actually say out loud is made up of our projections, opinions, judgments or diagnoses of others or situations. We call these “argu-

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able” and that is usually what they result in: arguments or debates, often obscuring deeper, hidden questions and underlying, taken for granted notions.

Speaking unarguably is, unfortunately, still a learned skill in our modern society and, for most people, it takes some earnest practice, especially when opinions are held strongly. In public discourse, both politically and throughout social media, we rarely see examples and role models that will help us learn what it means to speak only from our own experience. The one page “[Speaking Unarguably](#)” from The Conscious Leadership Group reads like a foreign language to many people, yet with study it offers a number of examples of how we might begin to learn and practice this way of dialoguing with others.

When we speak unarguably, we’re speaking only from our own unarguable experience and we’re describing that experience to others. If we really believe we have a need to speak our opinion or make a judgment of another person, we try to do it consciously. As we speak it, we label it correctly as our own opinion, judgment or thought; however, we’re often better off leaving them out of our conversations altogether.

Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist who spent his life cultivating and teaching a language of peace and conflict resolution, observed the following about people stuck in conflicts,

“...they have been trained to criticize, insult and otherwise communicate in ways that create distance among people. As a result, even in conflicts for which resolutions exist, resolutions are not found. Instead of both parties expressing their own needs and understanding the needs of the other party, both sides play the game of who’s right. That game is more likely to end in various forms of verbal, psychological, or physical violence than in a peaceful resolution of differences.”

— Marshall Rosenberg ^[7]

Speaking and dialoguing in ways that foster connection can and should be started and developed very early. Yet, because of the lack of role models and the pervasive modeling of communication styles that foster disharmony (especially in all forms of media), student learners (and adults) face an uphill battle. Yet, it is part of our responsibility as part of the global human family to develop this ability and pass it on through our modeling and teaching. Critically, it lays the foundation for nonviolent conflict resolution, learning across differences, restorative justice and other similar ideas.

Humility (Interdependence)

There are several types of humility that we may experience, all of which are different from a false sort of deference that wishes to “appear” humble. Genuine humility, like genuine gratitude, is non-conceptual in nature; it’s experiential and not enacted merely through words. It can’t be faked with pretense or posturing. It must be felt and experienced internally and our actions must arise and the world must be engaged from that internal experience. Edgar Schein, in his book *Humble Inquiry: The Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, has explained several ways we might experience humility from time to time:

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- ▶ the humility that we feel around respected elders and dignitaries;
- ▶ the humility that we feel in the presence of those who awe us with their achievements or wisdom;
- ▶ the ordinary, day-to-day humility, which results from being dependent from time to time on others in order to accomplish tasks that we are committed to. This third, ordinary type of humility is the key to what we'll call "humble inquiry" and is a key to the building of positive relationships.^[8]

These distinctions are helpful and we can see that all of these forms of humility are important. However, the third form of humility, which he calls "ordinary day-to-day humility", catches our attention, because it highlights our interconnection with and interdependence upon one another. We extend this beyond the human realm as well, because we are, contrary to much popular opinion and understanding, completely dependent upon the biosphere of the planet for our continued survival. When we fully grasp our interdependence, it fosters in us a particular kind of humility with each other and with the rest of life on the planet. This humility becomes an underlying value for ourselves and our lives.

Trust (Fundamental Equality)

Trust refers to the way in which we trust each other. Often trust is used in the sense of someone we can count on, or who we believe is dependable, or something that we can be sure of. However, we are using the term in the sense of having faith in. What we have faith in is the fact that each one of us has everything we need to make our own journey of transformation. It is trust in the potency (inherent potential or power) of each person. This form of trust arises from the fact that, as humans, we each arrived here on this Earth with everything we need to make our journey through life. The journeys we each make are unique, but fundamentally, we're not lacking anything.

Trusting each other in this way, helps free us from our tendency to judge others or tell others what to think or how to act. We trust that they have the innate capacities of ecosocial literacy and leadership. We trust that they have the innate capabilities to make choices that will contribute to a more beautiful world. We can relax, trust and support their unfolding journey through our attentiveness, presence and curiosity, rather than feeling the need to correct, manage or "help" them. We recognize that the most helpful thing we can offer becomes our presence and relaxed trust in their inherent capabilities. With this trust in place, we become more open to each person's unique gifts and perspectives and we're more able to listen to their stories, especially when they differ markedly from our own point of view.

Curiosity (Openness and Adaptability)

Without doubt, curiosity is one of the most important mindsets for us to cultivate (or re-cultivate). Other terms that live right alongside curiosity include *wonder*, *awe*, *fascination*, *beginner's mind*, *openness*, *gratitude*, *appreciation*. Some have even suggested that the intense curiosity and fascination of humans is one of that main things that sets us apart from other

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species. It's another one of the gifts from our *hominin* lineage and, therefore, among the attributes and traits all humans share. Our curiosity helps stimulate our flexibility and adaptability, keeping us open to possibility.

When we're young our natural curiosity is fully alive in us and, whether we ask aloud or silently, we're full of wonder, fascination and questions. As we grow older that curiosity can wane to some degree and, in some cases, may even diminish to a tiny flicker in order for us to fit in to our material, consumer-oriented society. We run out of time to be curious. We're too busy getting good grades in school, getting a better job, taking care of our families and relationships. Many children who grow up in urban environments have never seen a night sky dark enough to view the stars and planets or the Milky Way galaxy, one of the supreme instigators of wonder, awe and fascination.

Curiosity gives rise to questions. As we explore more deeply in Appreciative Inquiry, the questions we ask have great consequences. First, the questions themselves and the language we use to ask them guide our awareness; they point our curiosity in a particular direction. Second, when we ask a question, we are, by definition, not asking an infinite number of other questions. The questions we choose, therefore, might be considered fateful. Part of ecosocial literacy is to become mindful and intentional in the questions we're asking and to recognize what we're including and what is being left out of our awareness.

Genuine curiosity is an experiential, non-conceptual feeling state of openness, interest, exploration and engagement and is an important prerequisite for creativity. There is usually some uplifted quality of energy involved, as in joyful exertion. It is an important value in developing ecosocial literacy for the open, receptive state of mind, for the questions it invokes, for the effect it has on engagement and learning and for how it contributes to creativity and reverent dialogue.

Another aspect to our value of curiosity is non-judgment. Curiosity manifests as an openness. We're not looking to judge others' responses or debate their ideas. We're not trying to find "the" answer and especially we're not trying to tell or convince others what to think. Curiosity supports our intention to give everyone the opportunity to come to their own conclusions and deepen their own awareness and understanding. The phrase "curiosity, not consensus", helps us remember that our initial goal isn't to find some position that we can all agree on; rather, our initial, most important goal is to remain open and curious to the ideas and thoughts of others. We might also say, "Consensus is not a goal." By this we mean that we're not trying to get everyone to agree about anything. Critically, we're interested in allowing others to hold views different from our own without losing reverence for them as unique, important and fully capable human beings. For student learners (and adults) with strong opinions and beliefs, this in itself sometimes involves a struggle because it goes against our learned tendency (from our enculturation into modern society) to want to be right and to prove that we're right.

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This is not to say that consensus and the ideas around consensus aren't important. They are. However, especially in today's modern society where we have so much difficulty dialoguing across and accepting differences, curiosity as a fundamental value takes precedence. We might say, "Curiosity first, consensus later." As it turns out, remaining curious and open will help us eventually achieve consensus, when it becomes important to do so.

Finally, we apply this value of curiosity to others, from those who are close to us to those we don't know personally. We wish to become genuinely curious about our fellow travelers — even excited about what they're discovering and how the journey is unfolding for them. And perhaps most importantly, we wish to become insatiably curious about our own inner experience as we unwrap, discover and develop the unique gifts we bring to the world. As we re-engage our own innate creativity and apply it wholeheartedly in our co-creative dialogues, we become deeply curious about what we'll discover and create together. As we wholeheartedly engage in our discoveries, reflections and regular practices, we cultivate a sense of fascination with what we might discover about ourselves around the next bend in the road.

Unconditional Listening (Responsibility)

"To listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by what we hear."
— Mark Nepo

We might define unconditional listening as listening without judgment; without trying to give advice or fix anything; without thinking about what we're going to say in return and without taking personally anything the speaker is saying, no matter what it is. Listening in this way is an open, receptive, curious and deeply appreciative form of listening. It reflects a state of mind that's willing to learn and discover and that recognizes that each person has their own story and impeccable reasons for what they say and do.

When we offer this form of listening to another person and allow them to express their experience without worrying about being judged, it becomes a great gift, partly because it is so lacking in modern society, but also because it is one of the secrets of leadership and is a key factor in developing positive relationships and for generating and creating an atmosphere of transformation in classrooms, schools and communities. Developing and deepening this quality will literally change your life and the lives of those you to which you offer it. Receiving this gift of unconditional listening from others will, over time, transform your relationship with those people.

Listening deeply is another one of those intrinsic human capabilities that is all too often lost in our fast-paced, materialistic, social media dominated society, where conversations so often lack that receptive state of curiosity, openness and non-judgement. As a core value, it becomes part of our responsibility as global citizens and as members of our local and hyper-local communities to learn this important skill. Unconditional listening is a fundamental unit of intact, sustainable and equitable culture.

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Dialogue among people who hold values of reverence, humility and trust with one another naturally develops our abilities to listen deeply. Most student learners, while they may intellectually understand the idea of deep listening and may have even heard of it, are often not skillful practitioners. (This is true of many adults as well.) It takes consistent practice over a period of time to fully embody the idea of truly listening to another person with an open curiosity and without carrying one's own agenda into the process. Every time students have a chance to dialogue, whether in dyads, triads, other small groups or in the full group, it's an opportunity to practice this difficult, yet critical awareness and human capacity.

[Story stewardship](#)^[9] is a phrase coined by Brené Brown and is an apt metaphor to our journey of listening to others and deepening our belief in their agency, unique gifts and contribution. It also intersects with the idea of reverence, since building narrative trust with another person develops our sense of reverence for them as human beings and vice versa. As we consistently practice seeing and interacting with each other reverently, we more easily fall into the idea of holding each other's stories as sacred. The values we hold reinforce each other and create a synergistic effect.

Finally, we apply our unconditional listening both externally when listening to another's experiences, stories and wisdom as well as listening *internally* to our own wisdom and experience. This is directly connected to developing self-awareness and practicing self-reflection and contemplation. And while developing that same openness and acceptance of the experience of others can be difficult, it is often even more difficult to listen deeply to ourselves without judgment.

Practice (Evolution/Patience/Journey)

Practice is a core, universal value *and* an activity we “do” in an on-going way. It's important to understand how we use the word practice in this context. As a value, we're referring to an environment or frame of mind or perspective. Here are some helpful words to get a feel for what we mean: *practice, exercise, custom, routine, procedure, ritual, habit, way, training, rehearsal, drill, study.*

Our society has developed a mindset of quick fix. We see this in medicine, where we often prefer to take a pill rather than slowly transform our diet or lifestyle to something healthier. We see this in our inability to generate and commit to solutions that reach beyond the short-term, preferring to rely on the technology solution of the day or the education reform of the moment. We see this in the leaders we elect who cannot see beyond the next election cycle much less generations into the future.

But in general, the cosmos didn't proceed that way. While on rare occasions significant disruptions have occurred relatively quickly, (supernovae, collisions with asteroids or comets) the evolution of the universe and of Earth have happened slowly and imperceptibly over time spans we can scarcely imagine. And while it may be true that we humans have brought things to a point where we don't have much “time”, imagining we can solve things “quickly” with our technological inventiveness is most likely just more human hubris and self-delusion.

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As we seek to “become the change we wish to see in the world”, we align ourselves with the values of the cosmos or Earth herself, who brought about wonders like the Grand Canyon, our atmosphere, the vast diversity of the oceans or plant life and even our human self-awareness. All of these marvels were accomplished over time and with much patience and persistence.

When we align ourselves with that cosmic perspective, we also align ourselves with human contemplative lineages from all over the planet, who cultivate the value of “practice”, which means we apply small steps with intention and regularity. While we might love to transform ourselves overnight, it doesn’t often happen that way. Rather than throwing up our hands after a week of trying, we settle in for the “long-haul” and apply ourselves consistently and regularly to our daily and weekly routines and activities. We relax, knowing that this practice perspective aligns with the same cosmic principles that have given rise to hummingbirds, whales and giant sequoia trees. Over time, wind and water carve beautiful canyons. Small steps, taken consistently, produce large change.

We recognize that deeper understanding, insight or self-awareness doesn’t happen by itself by wishful thinking. As Russell Brand has said, “change requires our participation”. Our responsibility is to trust the process and engage our practices whole-heartedly. The benefits of transformation happen (sometimes imperceptibly) by continually bringing attention to our experience while we’re wholeheartedly engaged.

Greeting Customs (Acceptance, Welcome, Honoring)

The final value implied in our metaphor of “reverence” comes from our human lineage, especially indigenous lineages that have a strong connection with nature. According to [Jon Young](#), master tracker, naturalist and nature-connected cultural researcher, nature-connected cultures oftentimes have elaborate greeting customs.^[10] They are an important part of any traditional gathering, yet have been mostly ignored by modern society and our perceived need for speed and efficiency. For our purposes, we distill the essence of the intent and purpose of greeting customs and apply them to our own work together.

A greeting custom is kind of like an extended “secret handshake”. It serves to let each person know they are welcomed, included, safe, valued, respected, seen, heard (listened to) and so forth. These qualities of welcoming are the same as those essential for relaxed, yet lively, creative collaboration. In his [512 Project](#), Jon Young identifies these five principles of greeting customs present in nature connected people around the world:

- ▶ They provide and allow space for connection to actually occur between people. People are able to see each other, make eye contact with one another and acknowledge and honor each other with the gift of presence, which is expressed in the quality of attention given and received.
- ▶ Each person will receive a genuine invitation to become part of what is happening. It will be a sincere, heartfelt welcoming; not just a show of words, but rather a genuine feeling that people are actually glad to see you.

Essential Activities - Reverence (Universal Values)

- ▶ The welcoming process must come with an actual “felt sense”, rather than just going through the motions. There must be a felt sense of being greeted, acknowledged and of being welcomed.
- ▶ There will always be some element of gratitude involved.
- ▶ There will always be some recognition that you were coming from somewhere else and that you had to journey to get here. Perhaps there will be the recognition that you endured some hardship to arrive, maybe even that you’re separated from your family and that’s hard for you.

In creating a core value based on indigenous greeting customs, we might say that each person should have the sense of being welcomed, included, safe, valued, respected (even revered), heard (listened to), and so forth. In other words, we aspire to have everyone in our group gatherings (from classrooms to staff meetings) feel this level of acceptance, welcoming and honoring.

Notes

[1] David. W. Orr, “Some Thoughts on Intelligence.” in *Earth in Mind* (Washington, Covelo, and London: Island Press, 2004, pp. 48–53.

[2] Many poets and writers (and spiritual philosophies) have delved into the mystery of human birth. One example is the brief chapter “To Be Born Is to Be Chosen” from John O’Donohue’s book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, which explores the nature of the unique gifts each person has brought to the world. Many other indigenous and traditional cultures share similar views.

[3] There are many online references to the [Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address](#). Translated from Mohawk, *Ohenten Kariwatekwen* means “the words that are spoken before all others.”

[4] One of the classic Buddhist self inquiries is “Who is aware?” referring to the idea of becoming aware of awareness itself. “Know thyself” and another classic spiritual inquiry “Who am I?” also point to the importance of developing and deepening our self-awareness.

[5] [CASEL Framework for Social and Emotional Learning](#)

[6] Speaking Unarguably is a phrase developed by [The Conscious Leadership Group](#) to describe what it means (and a method) to speak in a way that fosters connection rather than disharmony.

[7] Marshall Rosenberg who developed [Non-violent Communication \(NVC\)](#) has offered ideas similar ideas to speaking unarguably.

[8] Adapted from Schein, Edgar H. *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. 2013.

[9] Story stewardship adapted from Brené Brown in her book, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. New York: Random House, 2021.

[10] [Jon Young](#) and the [512 Project](#)