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THE UNTAUGHT SKILLS

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How do you make contact with the mind of another person? In what way should that other person respond to your effort?

Sometimes it is through cries, facial expressions, gestures, or other bodily signals, but for the most part it is by the use of language—by writing and speaking, on the one hand, and by reading and listening, on the other.

These four uses of language fall into two parallel pairs. Writing and reading go together; so, too, speaking and listening. The members of each pair are obviously complementary. Writing gets nowhere unless it is read; one might as well shout into the wind if what one says is not listened to.

Everyone recognizes that some individuals are able to write better than others; they have more skill in doing so, either through talent

or through training or both. But even the most skilled writing remains ineffective when it falls into the hands of unskilled readers. We all realize that the ability to read requires training, and we acknowledge that some individuals have much more skill in reading than others.

The same would appear to be true of speaking and listening. Some individuals may have native endowments that enable them to become better speakers than others, but training is required to bring such talent to full bloom Likewise, skill in listening is either a native gift or it must be acquired by training.

Four distinct performances are involved in the process by which one human mind reaches out to another and makes contact with it, and skill in each of these performances is required to make that process effective. How many of these skills were you taught in school? How man, are your children being taught?

Your immediate response will probably be that you were taught how to read and write, and so are they. You may add at once that you do not think that the training received is up to what it should be, but at least some effort is made at the elementary levels to give instruction in reading and writing.

Instruction in writing continues beyond the elementary level; it goes on in high school and even in the early year of college. But instruction in reading seldom goes beyond, the elementary level. It should, of course, because elementary skill in reading is totally inadequate for understanding the books most worth reading. That is why, forty year ago, I wrote *How to Read a Book*, in order to provide instruction in the art of reading far beyond the elementary level—instruction that is for the most part absent from our schools and colleges.

How about instruction in speaking? I doubt if anyone can recall being given such instruction in elementary school at the time that some training in writing and reading occurs. Except for special courses in what is called "public speaking," and help for those with speech defects, which may be found in some high schools and colleges, there is no instruction in speech—the general art of speech—any where in the course of study.

What about listening? Is anyone anywhere taught how to listen? How utterly amazing is the general assumption that the ability to listen well is a natural gift for which no training is required. How extraordinary is the fact that no effort is made anywhere in the

whole educational process to help individuals learn how to listen well—at least well enough to close the circuit and make speech effective as a means of communication.

What makes these things so amazing and extraordinary is the fact that the two generally untaught skills, speaking and listening, are much more difficult to acquire and more difficult to teach than the parallel skills of writing and reading. I think I can explain why this is so, and I will do so presently.

Widespread and indignant are the complaints about the level of skill that our school and college graduates attain in writing and reading. There are few if any complaints voiced about the level of skill that they attain in speaking and listening. Yet, however low the level of writing and reading is today among those who have the advantages of twelve or more years of schooling, much lower still is the level of skill in speaking that most people possess, and lowest of all is skill in listening.

In the centuries before Gutenberg and the printing press, speaking and listening played a much larger part in any one's education than writing and reading. That had to be, because, in the absence of the printed page and with written books available only to the very few, those who had some kind of schooling—either by individual pedagogues, in the academies of the ancient world, or in the mediaeval universities—were compelled to learn by listening to what their teachers said.

In the mediaeval universities, teachers were lecturers in a different sense of the word "lecture" than the one that is now generally in use. Only the teacher had the manuscript copy of a book that contained knowledge and understanding to be imparted to his students. As the etymology of the word "lecture" indicates, lecturing consisted in reading a text aloud, accompanied by a running commentary on the text read. Whatever the students learned, they learned by listening, and the better they were able to listen, the more they were able to learn.

In the great mediaeval universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Paris, Padua, and Cologne, basic schooling involved training in the arts or skills that were first called "liberal arts" by the ancients. These arts included the various skills in dealing with language, on the one hand, and in dealing with operations and symbolism of mathematics, on the other hand.

Plato and Aristotle thought, and the mediaeval universities followed them in thinking, that the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic were the skills that had to be acquired for learning how to use language effectively in writing and reading, in speaking and listening. The arts that had to be acquired for learning how to measure, calculate, and estimate went by the names of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

These were the seven liberal arts in which mediaeval students were supposed to acquire proficiency in order to become certified as bachelors of art. The word "bachelor" did not mean that they were unwed males, not yet initiated into the mysteries of marriage. On the contrary, it meant that they were sufficiently initiated into the world of learning to go on studying in the higher levels of the university, in the faculties of law, medicine, or theology.

The B.A. degree was a certificate of initiation, a passport into the world of higher learning. It did not signify that those thus certified were learned, but only that they had become competent as learners by virtue of having acquired the skills of learning—skills in the use of language and in the use of other symbols.

Most people today who use the phrase "liberal arts" or refer to liberal education do not have the faintest notion of what the liberal arts once were or the role they played in ancient and mediaeval education at the level that we would today call basic schooling.

One reason for this is that, in the course of modern times, the liberal arts have all but disappeared from the course of study.

Anyone who looks up the curriculum of the educational institutions in this country in the eighteenth century will find that it included instruction in grammar, rhetoric, and logic, still conceived as arts or skills in the use of language—skills in writing and speaking and also reading, if not in listening.

By the end of the nineteenth century, grammar still remained, but rhetoric and logic were no longer part of basic schooling, and in our own century, instruction in grammar has dwindled away, though vestiges of it may still remain here and there.

The liberal arts as recognized elements in basic schooling have been replaced by instruction in English. It is the so-called English teacher who gives elementary instruction in reading and elementary and more advanced instruction in composition. Unfortunately, the latter usually lays much more stress on what is called "creative

writing" than it does on writing that tries to convey thought—ideas, knowledge, or understanding. Some students receive instruction in public speaking, but this falls far short of training in all the skills required for effective speech. None, as I have said before, receives any instruction in listening.

Those who complain about the low level of skill in writing and reading that is now attained by most graduates of our schools and colleges make the mistake of assuming that if these deficiencies were remedied, all would be well. They assume that, if a person has learned to write well and read well, he* will of course know how to speak well and listen well. That is simply not the case.

*The reader should be advised that when I use the word "man" or the masculine pronouns "he" or "him," I am referring to all human beings, both male and female, not just males. I do not always use "he" and "him" instead of "he and she" or "him and her," my choice of which to use in a given sentence being determined solely by stylistic considerations.

The reason why is that speaking and listening differ in remarkable ways from writing and reading. Their difference makes it much more difficult to acquire the requisite skills. Let me explain.

On the surface, it would appear that speaking and listening perfectly parallel writing and reading. Both pairs involve uses of language whereby one mind reaches out to another and that other responds. If one can do this well by means of the written word, why should there be any more difficulty in doing it well by means of the spoken word? If one can respond well to the written word, why cannot one respond as well to the spoken word?

The fluidity and fluency of oral discourse is the reason why that is not so. One is always able to go back over what one has read, read it again, and make a better job of it. One can improve one's reading endlessly, by reading something over and over again. I have done this in my own reading of the great books.

In writing, one is always able to revise and improve what one has written. No writer need pass on a piece of writing to someone else until he or she is satisfied that it is written as well as possible. That, too, has been part of my own experience in writing books or anything else.

In the case of both reading and writing, the essential element in the requisite skill consists in knowing how to improve one's reading or writing.

That essential element plays no part in the skill to be attained in speaking and listening, because speaking and listening are transient and fleeting like performing arts, as writing and reading are not. The latter are more like painting and sculpture, the products of which have permanence.

Consider such performing arts as acting, ballet dancing, playing a musical instrument, or conducting an orchestra. In all of these, a given performance, once it is given, cannot be improved. The artist may be able to improve on it in a later performance, but during the time he or she is on stage, that one performance should be as good as it can be made. When the curtain goes down it is finished—unamendable.

The situation is exactly the same in speaking and listening. One cannot go back over what one is saying orally and improve it, as one can go back over what one has written and improve it. Unlike writing, ongoing speech is generally unamendable. Any effort to take back what one has said while one is speaking often turns out to be more confusing than letting the deficiencies stand.

A prepared speech is, of course, amendable before being delivered, as a piece of writing is. An impromptu or improvised speech is not.

One may be able to do a better job of speaking at some later time, but on a particular occasion, whatever excellence one is able to achieve must be achieved right then and there. Similarly, there is no way of improving one's listening on a given occasion. It has to be as good as it can be right then and there.

A writer can at least hope that readers will take as much time as may be necessary to understand the written message, but the speaker cannot cherish any such hope. He or she must contrive what is to be said in such a way that it is as understandable as possible the first time around. The time span of speaking and listening coincide. Both begin and end together. Not so the time spans of writing and reading.

All of these differences between reading and writing, on the one hand, and listening and speaking, on the other, may be the reason why I did not immediately follow up *How to Read a Book* with a companion volume on how to listen. I have put off that much harder task for more than forty years, but I think I should do so no longer, because I have become so aware of the almost universal defects in listening that are manifested on all sides.

It is possible to set forth the rules and directions for reading well without including rules and directions for writing well. That is what I did in How to Read a Book, and it was justified by the fact that I was then mainly concerned with reading the very best books, which are, of course, all well written.

When we turn from written to oral discourse, we are confronted with a different state of affairs. One can deal with writing and reading separately; in fact, that is the way they are dealt with in our schools. That is not possible in the case of speaking and listening, if for no other reason than the fact that the most important kind of speaking and listening occurs in talk or conversation, which is a two-way affair that involves us as both speakers and listeners.

It is possible to deal with uninterrupted speech by itself. Skill in that performance can be acquired without skill in listening. So, too, is it possible to deal with silent listening by itself. Skill in that performance can be acquired without skill in speaking. But it is impossible to acquire skill in conversation—in talk or discussion—without learning how to speak and how to listen well.

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