

# An Engineer's Approach to Self-Actualization

by Mark Sardella, for the Santa Fe Waldorf Graduating Class of 2013

Grads, do you feel...understood?

Do you feel seen?

Do you feel like your voice is heard?

When someone is talking to you, how intently do you listen? Do you look into their eyes?

I think the Santa Fe Waldorf School has provided you with an amazing environment for learning awareness and communications skills, and that's a good thing because your stage is about to get a whole lot bigger as you prepare to exit Santa Fe.

In the few minutes that I am honored to have with you tonight, I'd like to share a few stories from my own experience as they relate to awareness and communication, in hopes that they may provide insight.

## Blind-sighted

I have a friend named Michael who I've known for about twenty years, and soon after we met we were sitting in my living room having a conversation, and a song I liked came on the radio. I jumped up and went over to the piano to see if I could figure out how to play the song, and on my way to the piano I said, "I wonder what key this is in."

"It's in B-flat," Michael responded, matter of factly. I didn't know quite what to think of that but I sat down and played along with the song for a few minutes, and when it was over I turned around and said, "Michael, that song was actually in the key of B-natural." Without hesitation he replied, "Your piano's out of tune."

Michael has what musician's call "perfect pitch," but that's barely the beginning of Michael's gifts. I once brought him to a party and watched him stand all by himself, staring off into space, tracking several conversations

at once. I was marveling at what he was doing, and then I got an idea. I was standing on the other side of the room – a room filled with the din of party conversation, and in a normal speaking voice as if addressing someone right next to me, I asked, "Do you want something to drink?" Politely raising his voice so that I could hear from across the room, Michael replied, "I'll have a Coke."

Michael's auditory gifts – his abilities to hear things so accurately and to process what he hears so efficiently, extend equally to his conversational skills. He asks a lot of questions – not out of politeness, but because he's genuinely interested in knowing who you are and how you're doing. He listens carefully and he measures what you say to make sure he has captured the essence of what you are trying to convey.

And, he has total recall of what was discussed. Michael's true gift is that when you have a conversation with him, you feel as if he understands who you are and that he accepts you for who you are. When I talk with Michael I feel "seen" in the broadest sense of the word.

The irony of feeling seen by Michael, as you may have already guessed, is that he's blind. Before he was even born, he developed a disease that prevented his eyes from developing. He's never seen anything in his life, in the literal sense. His brain, spared the laborious task of processing visual images, reallocated itself to other matters – particularly the processing and storage of auditory information. In effect, he hears so well that he not only sees, he can see things in people that others can't. His ability to understand who I am results directly from this capacity to listen so deeply.

## Understanding Others

There are few things in life that feel better over the long run than feeling as if you are truly understood and accepted by others. The desire to be understood – deeply understood, and accepted, is perhaps the most fundamental force that drives the direction of our lives. Self-actualization – the process of nurturing the unique essence of who you are on the inside, until it is expressed outwardly in every aspect of your being – is the ultimate goal, because when WHO YOU ARE is readily visible, it's on display for *others* to readily see and to enjoy, and this is what we seek.

So what I want to posit to you today, dear grads, is that surest path to self-actualization lies in understanding and accepting others. This sentiment has been canonized in so many ways it feels a bit simplistic or cliché, even for a commencement address. It's reflected in everything from the “do unto others” commandment right down to the old saying, “the best way to have a friend is to be one.” It's even the basis of the “prisoners dilemma” – the thought exercise where the two gang members are imprisoned and separated in solitary confinement, and each has to decide whether to betray the other in exchange for a shorter sentence. There's a mathematical solution and you can look it up (or I could explain it if you want me to? No.), but it might as well be trivial: Life always returns a higher dividend when we act primarily on behalf of others. That part is simple enough.

What isn't nearly as simple is learning the *art* of accepting and understanding others. We all know someone who has a gift for it, but as Michael shows us, it's not a limited endeavor. We can always learn to do better.

The role of disability, I think is an interesting one. There's a corollary to Michael's story for people who can't hear: The part of their brain that would normally be dedicated to processing auditory information gets reallocated to other senses, including sight. When you are communicating with someone

who is deaf, they aren't just reading your lips, or watching you sign, their interpreting your facial expressions and your body language. You need to be careful, because in all likelihood you are saying more than you realize.

The art of communicating with one another may be more developed in indigenous cultures as well. My friend Bill spent eight years in a tribal village in the Republic of Palau, way out in the Western Pacific. While he was there he learned to speak the Palauan language. Like many indigenous languages, Palauan relies on facial expression to fully convey meaning. For this reason, Palauans look directly at each other while speaking – they have to, because the same sound can have different meanings depending on what else is going on, so the visual clues are essential.

While Bill was there, a multinational corporation was busily negotiating with Palau to install a factory on one of the islands. The issue of whether to allow the factory to be built was put to a vote, but the Palauan people voted it down. The terms under which the factory would be built were revised and it was put to another vote, but again the people voted it down.

The company then launched an intensive outreach campaign, replete with beach parties and barbecued chicken, to spread the message of how beneficial it would be for the Palauan people to have this factory in their country. The islanders turned out in droves for the beer and chicken, but at the ballot box they continued to vote “no.” Finally, at one of the parties, Bill watched a corporate official trying to convince a villager to vote in favor of the factory, but the villager just kept laughing. Exasperated, the official asked him what was so funny.

“Whenever you talk about how beneficial it's going to be for me, your eyes are saying something completely different.”

When you read faces all your life, I guess you get pretty good at it. I don't know any of the details of either side's argument in this case, but it's mighty powerful to be able to sense when there's an incongruity between what is being said verbally and what's being said non-verbally.

The same type of incongruity can occur between words and tone. Have you ever listened to yourself say something and realized that it wasn't convincing at all – not even to yourself? Psychotherapists are specialists at listening for this, and mine was brilliant. Margaret would say, "Did you hear that? Say that again the way you just said it, and listen to it."

"I really like living in Fort Wayne."

Try this experiment sometime – it's fascinating.

So the key when you are listening is eyes, words, and tone. Are they all the same? Do they match, or no?

### **Obstacles**

If being understood and accepted is our primary desire and understanding and accepting others is the path that gets us there, why aren't we better at it?

Ironically, the use of communications technology would seem to be one of the major culprits: computers, televisions, smartphones, iPods and the like. Without passing judgment here, is it only me that thinks that the stuff that helps us "commune" has us all sitting alone at home? The shift from first-hand to second-hand communications may have brought efficiency, but it has come at the price of isolation. We stare at screens and push buttons, and when we do, goods and services change hands, messages are exchanged, and enemies are hunted down and killed. And all of it happens without the opportunity to look the person you are interacting with in the eye, so you can't possibly understand who they are.

Before all these inventions, business deals were done face-to-face. Contracts were carefully drawn, by hand, and the parties sat together to negotiate the terms. When all was settled, they would look each other in the eye, and shake hands. I'm not a luddite and don't want to over-glamorize the past, but there was a certain advantage in this.

### **Finding Your Path**

Gaining awareness is tough stuff, I know, because when we talk about sharpening your senses and understanding others and self-actualizing, what we're really talking about is becoming more sensitive and compassionate. Sensitivity and compassion grow out of very quiet places, and learning them is sort of like learning how to tap into magic. We could all use a little magic.

I have had the amazing fortune in my life of being surrounded, somehow, by people who understand magic. My college girlfriend, Joanie, could contemplate things by closing her eyes and turning her head slightly, and after a moment she would open her eyes and say, "it rings true." It rings true? I'd never heard anyone say it and mean it so literally. I have no doubt that Joanie could hear the ring of truth the same way Michael could hear the ring of a B-flat.

Another voice that has stuck with me all these years belongs to a brilliant engineer named Gopal, who I worked with in my very first engineering job out of college. Whenever Gopal heard a technical argument he wasn't sure about he would come over to my desk and bounce it off me. "Well, what do *you* think?" I'd say, and Gopal would fold his arms and look off into the distance, and in his heavy, East-Indian accent he would reply, "Sounds like bull to me." (That's the PG version of his comment.) I can't begin to tell you how often Gopal's voice pops up in my head, especially these days, and I always heed it when it does. There's a lot of bull out there.

And, I've been lucky to have been gifted a bit of magic myself. I remember the exact moment I realized I would repurpose my life to try to stop global warming. I was at a big energy conference in Albuquerque – there were hundreds of booths in this giant exhibit hall, you know, and it was crowded with people walking around everywhere. I was standing in front of a booth and on the table was this brochure. I was flipping through the pages and I came upon this graph showing the earth's atmospheric carbon concentration over the last 120,000 years. The graph had this big spike at the end and when I saw it, the room went silent, all except for this odd, buzzing sound. I couldn't stop staring at that graph. There was nothing else in the world in that moment: Just me, that graph and the buzzing sound. In that moment I knew what my path would be.

### **Closing**

Well, these are my stories, and what we really need to do is send you off to create your own stories. So, here's the quick summary:

You know your senses can be sharpened. With a little practice you can train yourself to hear like a blind guy and study someone's eyes like a native Palauan. With all the new things you'll be seeing and hearing you'll gain a deeper understanding and acceptance of those around you, which will somehow help you begin to self-actualize such that others can see your true nature, which is all you ever really wanted anyway. Got it?

The real question is, how will any of this help you get from the fieldhouse to the locker room, or from calculus class to the library on a campus with 25,000 students?

It may not. But if it's more convenient, here's the take-out version of what I'm trying to say:

When you arrive at your school and you're feeling overwhelmed on some giant campus, or whatever campus you're going to, sometime when you find yourself alone, sit quietly and create a little, quiet place in your

mind that you can go to. Know that you can go there anytime you need to and that in that place, you can ask any question. And if you allow it, if you are really paying attention, you can ask for little, key pieces of information to guide you on anything you want. The pieces of information are like those little rock cairns you find along hiking trails. The cairns always designate a place on the trail where there are two paths you can choose from. And when you get to these cairns and you are choosing a path, be very quiet so that you can hear like Michael. And study the paths – look them in the eye like you're an indigenous Palauan, and make sure your mind is still so your preconceived notions don't color your thinking.

Just mind the cairns. You're going to be fine.