

Why Socrates Would Have Loved Shared Reading

by Henrik Wig

'From the place where we are right flowers will never grow in the spring.'

from 'The Place Where We Are Right'
by Yehuda Amichai

For many years I worked as a teacher of philosophy and Swedish literature. I loved my subjects and took pride in explaining, in a clear and orderly way, Plato's theory of ideas, Hume's critique of the concept of causality, and Kant's categorical imperative; with a literary-scientific apparatus, I taught my students to dissect poetry, from modernist precursor Edith Södergran to Nobel Prize winner Tomas Tranströmer. A good teacher was well prepared and could guide his disciples to the right answers. Or so I thought.

One day the headmaster asked me if I, instead of the absent head of mathematics, could jump into the counting cabin (the maths classroom). She was apologetic – 'Yes, I know it's not your subject' – but explained that the students who came there often had low self-esteem and needed support, even if it was not by a real maths teacher. I said I could probably figure out a lot with the help of a solid basic knowledge – I vaguely remembered a decent grade from high school – and a logical, educated mind.

Once in the counting cabin, it soon became clear to me that this was nothing but pious hopes. My shortcomings were exposed with embarrassing clarity. Sure, I remembered Pythagoras' theorem. And yes, the multiplication table was lodged in my spinal cord.

But that didn't help. These students had left Pythagoras behind a long time ago. Even worse, my 'logical, educated mind' couldn't figure anything out! So what happened? Well, to my eyes, we didn't get far. I sat next to the maths students and asked them to explain what in the world their tasks were about. Because I had such a hard time keeping up, the students had to take it slow and easy. After a while, I got at best a faint clue about the problem. I was very impressed when a student managed to solve her problem; from my ignorant horizon it appeared like pure magic. However, sometimes I asked questions so stupid that some snorted and others sighed. Someone angrily asked if this was the best the school could offer. I had to admit that it was, but I promised that the real maths teacher would be in place the following week. When the classes were over, I promised myself never to play maths teacher again, but to stick to poetry analyses and the categorical imperative – the place where I knew I was right.

The maths teacher returned. The students in the counting cabin would now get the help they needed. I put it all behind me. Until, at least, the maths teacher came into my study wondering if I could work in the counting cabin with him once a week. Permanently. The headmaster had been informed. He must have seen my face. 'You got some real cred for your efforts last week.' I looked at him. Was that a joke? But the teacher continued, seemingly serious: 'Some of the students said they have never received such good help. What did you do?'

After a few Tuesday afternoons in the cabin I understood. Since I couldn't solve the problems, it remained to ask basic, open questions. Like: Explain to me, what's the problem? What do you have to do first? What would you guess the answer might be? Can you tell me why? The students quickly realised that my ignorance was genuine, so I couldn't save them if they got stuck. This fact sharpened their focus and many understood, without more help than a few simple questions they easily could have asked themselves, how to proceed. Not infrequently, a feeling arose that we were all doing our best together; we struggled together and were happy together when making progress. All this strengthened the student's self-

confidence (and mine), and they took on new tasks with fresh courage. I finally grasped what was happening: I was an excellent maths teacher not because I knew things, but because I didn't know things. My ignorance was my competence.

As a philosophy teacher, I should not have been surprised. Socrates, the first modern philosopher, the Athenian who took philosophy to the streets and the house god of all philosophy teachers, had already shown that knowledge can be forged through simple questions – an activity that Socrates called maieutics, the art of childbirth. Socrates didn't pass on or produce knowledge. Instead, he saw himself as a midwife who helped others give birth to thoughts and insights. For instance, Socrates gives an uneducated child, a slave, the task of solving a mathematical problem. The boy is asked to construct a square with twice the area of a given square. With the support of Socrates' questions, the boy solves the problem, more or less on his own. Socrates' conclusion is that knowledge is not something that comes from the outside, but something that already exists in the individual and is waiting to see the light of day: 'He who does not know thus has true and correct ideas about what he does not know. Without anyone teaching him, no, only through questions, he can thus gather knowledge from within.' That explained my success in the maths classroom. Without realising it, I had used Socrates' art of childbirth.

As Reader Leader, I often think of Socrates. How he took existential issues out into the streets and squares, to sports fields and workshops, to people who in everyday life did not have the time, space or opportunity to examine the puzzles of life. I think of Socrates when I pass through the gates of the prison where I run a Shared Reading group, or when I run groups with psychiatric patients, or at the home where I read with people with cognitive functional variation. I think of how the personal conversation, the dialogue, was at the heart of Socrates' work. He did not consider himself a teacher. Rather he wanted people to think for themselves and trusted they could. And he didn't go easy on people, or, as we say in Sweden, he did not 'stroke with the fur'! Anyone who was included in a conversation with

Socrates could expect to be shaken by new, unexpected perspectives. Isn't that exactly what is happening in Shared Reading? One of my group members said, 'I can get a whole new perspective when someone [reads something] in a different way. It feels like entering a new room. But I like it! Then I can think: "Yes it's obvious! Why didn't I think of that?"'

Yes, Socrates would probably have liked Shared Reading. And perhaps he would think not only of the philosopher but also the Reader Leader as a midwife – someone who helps group members' thoughts and ideas, the knowledge they carry within them, to be born. The participants might be swelling and heavy with emotions and difficult thoughts. But the literature, with the Reader Leader standing by, provides the structure and language and support they need. This process must sometimes take some time, but when completed, a new idea can come forward.

In one Shared Reading group in a prison, a participant voiced the fallacy that 'the Holocaust was somewhat exaggerated, even if it did take place'. A few weeks later, when reflecting on the group, the same participant said, 'I have been provoked by some texts. Like the one about the Jewish woman in Stockholm. But it's OK. They live inside me and make me think things through. Now, I'm not sure I would have put it like that.' You could sense a wholly different attitude in him. Something new had broken through.

Socrates famously said, 'The only thing I know for sure is that I know nothing.' A Reader Leader could say the same thing. In the face of a rich text, which can never be explained in any definitive way, he or she can remain genuinely wondering, like Socrates. And this is not a shortcoming. It is a competence. The Reader Leader is not an expert who knows the answers, and that is central in making Shared Reading a joint adventure. As one of my group members put it, 'When we talk about the texts, we hook into each other, give each other impulses... it really becomes a common, shared reading. We understand together, no one knows the answer. The feeling is that no one knows more than anyone else, that we are... equal.' Socrates would have smiled and nodded in agreement.