



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of Reach Teach Talk. This is actually the third part of a three episode series called Listen Up! which is focused on the hidden power of listening. Our first guest was Dr. Graham Bodie from the University of Mississippi who teaches about listening versus just hearing, and how listening as a tool and as a skill is so incredibly important in the 21st century. Our second guest was Erahm Christopher, a filmmaker and a speaker and a school leader who wrote, produced, and directed the movie Listen, which takes place in a small town America and it focuses on a multi-racial, multi-ethnic group of students together in the same high school, but the adults don't listen to them and the consequences are serious and severe. We had great talk about how that movie is not too far from real life because high school kids, kids of all ages, let's say adults, kids up to 99 all need to be listened to because to be listened to is to be seen, and to be seen is to be known.

Nat:

That is critically important and in this day and age, particularly in this day and age, we are seeing the results of what happens when people don't listen. People could be placed into leadership roles, people could be demanding respect by the business card they hold, by the clothes they wear, the suit that might or might not fit, but they might not be listening to their constituencies, to the people that they have a major influence over. Today for our third guest and our third episode of this three part series to round it out I have filmmaker, consultant, teacher, keynote speaker, thought leader, and just beautiful person André Lee who's going to talk with us today about listening and about listening as it pertains to his work sharing his films The Prep School Negro, a documentary based on his growing up which came out, gosh André, I think it came out 10 years ago now?

André Lee:

Yeah, 10 years ago.

Nat:

Incredible. And it's available online, it's available for schools. I've got to tell you André, Prep School Negro, I saw you screen it six or seven years ago in Los Angeles, and it absolutely socked us all in the gut and yet, it also made us think. You led and facilitated a discussion about that movie that communicated to me and to everybody in the room, this guy knows how to listen, this guy knows how to facilitate and how to make us all in the audience comfortable asking questions about a sensitive topic and especially knowing that the movie was based on you.

Nat:

Then you also produced a movie called I'm Not Racist ... Am I? which came out about five years ago and is fascinating and phenomenal as it looks at, I think it's 12 high school kids in New York who come

together on retreats and on weekend gatherings staggered throughout the winter and spring of their high school year, kids from different backgrounds and different race, different ethnicities talking about race and trying to figure out how we can talk about this thorny, this very fraught, tightly woven issue topic which has become an issue. One might say in this movie, it actually kind of implies to me that it becomes an issue because the first step toward real understanding is listening.

Nat:

So both of these movies, Prep School Negro and I'm Not Racist ... Am I?, as we educators know schools go through cycles and if your school had screened this movie Prep School Negro back 10, nine, eight, seven years ago, you've got a whole new crop of students that need to see this movie. If your school hasn't seen I'm Not Racist ... Am I? or has three, four, five years ago, it's time for your school to see it again and if you can, if you're fortunate enough to have André facilitate discussion afterwards because he is an amazing facilitator.

Nat:

So for all that lead in André, I just want to welcome you to Reach Teach Talk. This is a podcast about relationships in the classroom and also in the classroom of life. The goal of these podcasts is always to try to draw people into sharing how they've been able to build relationships in their workplace, in their relationships with their community and particularly, starting with their relationships with themselves. So welcome to Reach Teach Talk, André. I'm thrilled to have you with us today.

André Lee:

Thank you so much and I'm really honored to be here, that is quite an introduction. You have so much ... and I've enjoyed your podcast, there's so much passion and love for the work. Going back to your book, to the podcasts, it was really exciting to see the shape it's taking and the effectiveness it can have in the world. So thank you for having me, and thank you for your effort and constant work. We need it, we need it in this world right now.

Nat:

Thank you so much, André, it's high praise coming from you and I really appreciate it and it goes a long way. I just want to start off just with this. You've spoken to hundreds, I don't even know, maybe even 1,000 school groups when you screened Prep School Negro, when you screened I'm Not Racist ... Am I? when you've also traveled to talk about race, to talk about DEI, diversity, equity and inclusion with schools. As a surface question here, how do you gauge whether you are being listened to and not just heard? And then my second question would be, how do you encourage listening and not just hearing among your audience whether it's a classroom or whether it's a larger group?

André Lee:

Yeah. As you ... a few points along the introduction, I thought about how I arrived in this space. I was a filmmaker. I made a movie and I thought well, what do I do with this? I started taking it around to high schools and engaging in conversations. someone at a school early on at the kids school in Denver, Colorado a man said to me, "You realize this is your ministry, right?" I was like, "I'm not a ministry, what are you talking about?" He says, "No, no. You have found the path and you can't fight it." I was so taken aback and I was like, "What is he talking about?"

André Lee:

And I think about ... I grew up in a church, in a Southern Baptist church which means you're in church all day Sunday. We'd leave my house in the morning around 8:30 a.m. and would not get home until about 9:00 p.m. on Sunday nights. And I have all the homework to get done by Monday morning, but that's another ... I worked it out. So my mother was always head of some organization, so after service she would gather the women's group or the youth group and have a conversation, and she'd stand in front and negotiate what the plan was to execute the day, or the exercise or whatever they were doing. She was a single mother. It was her, my sister, and I, she and my sister and I, and so where Mother was, I was. So from a little child I was sitting in the front row to the point where my legs were out on the bench like that to wherever they dropped down, watching her run organizations and speak in front of people. I think that's where I learned without even knowing it, I was trained on how to do this work.

André Lee:

The ways I know if people are listening is I'm really ... I make really good, direct eye contact and call people out, call people in I should say, in conversations. When someone sneezes I say "Gesundheit." And it gets a little giggle but people are like wow, you're really ... I'll be mid sentence, "Gesundheit," and keep going because I want them to know that they're in the room. I really would exercise ... I've learned if someone asks you a question, as you answer you repeat the question back to them and you give them the question back, and you really just show care and concern. I think the ways I know that people are listening are just how engaged they are. I keep direct eye contact, I make it very casual. I'm also ... because I'm in a very particular field when it comes to these films and projects, it's the DEI conversation. I intentionally avoid what I call the phraseology, all the words. The words are important and they matter in terms of talking about these issues, but I try and make it real plain talk when I'm really like, I'm talking to you as a human being, not that that other word talk isn't, but I'm talking just on a really plain, simple, faithful or conversational level.

André Lee:

Then I think about something ... Alice Walker, one of my favorite writers, I went and I saw her speak when I was at a talk at Columbia University in New York City. And she said, "You know, the problem with most conversations is that as someone is asking you a question, you're thinking about your answer as they're asking it as opposed to really just clearing your mind and listening to the question, let it sit with you." I remember sitting there thinking before and I'm like, it's Alice Walker so I'm like, everything she says is amazing. But that stayed with me so intensely. What does it mean to not ponder your answer, not ponder your response as someone talks well, it's your introduction. Even though my mind when to a little like oh, it triggers moments, but to stay in it and not let yourself go off track so you can really pay attention and stay focused, I think is a really great way.

André Lee:

Also at my company, Point Made Learning that produced *The Prep School Negro* and *I'm Not Racist ... Am I?*, we started out with the norms when having these conversations. Our norm's not your typical norms. We have three that I really like that ... we have a lot of them, but three that I really like I'll mention. One is the idea of first draft. So what does it mean when you're having a difficult conversation to assume that someone is potentially keeping that first draft as they're talking to you? So how do you say, I'm not going to say, "Nat, you made this point, therefore that is who you are in this complicated conversation." I can say, "You know what? That's your first draft, I'm going to take that in. Here's my first draft response. Let's work together to get to a more formal draft." Teachers love that one. I love that. Teachers are like, "See kids? He said it's ... " it's great.

André Lee:

Then another is, how can you ask questions with curiosity and take away judgment? How do you take your judgment out of a question you're asking? How do you remove that judgment when ... well, you really did that, versus I want to understand what you did. It's deceptively simple, that concept. Then what's followed up after that is, listen. Really listen when someone gives you an answer to your question when you ask a question with curiosity. Just really, really listen. We have this one exercise called was it something I said, and it's all about what to do when you are the person that offends someone or you're the person that's offended, how do you handle that conversation. We break it down using our company title Point Made. P is a pause, pause and take in what happened if you're offended. Respond only if you think it's relevant. Inform them what was said to you, and it goes on from there. That exercise is all about listening.

André Lee:

Because folks often say, "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to have these conversations. I'm not an expert in race and racism." And I say, "You're a human being. You know how to talk to people, so you can manage this. You don't have to cite every single bibliography that's out there or know all the phrase and terms. Be a gentle human being and listen to what someone says and do your best to just try and come with love and respect in these difficult conversations." So I try and ... I mean, I did it with a room of 1,000 people at Ohio State University. We showed one of our films Catherine and I, the director of the film, and we're on a stage and something happens when we get up there where we know how to work with the crowd and get folks in and get them in. I like it when someone's like "Oh!" And it's like, what's happening for you over there? What does that mean? Tell us about what you're experiencing. There are no wrong comments or thoughts or ideas.

Nat:

It sounds like whether you're in a group of 1,000 or a group of 15, you have this similar approach in terms of generating good listening, effective listening, true listening. I'm thinking about I'm Not Racist ... Am I? and I'm thinking about how the group met several times. I think the first meeting was an overnight retreat up in Vermont or something or upstate New York or something. They got a chance to know each other, they got a chance to feel each other out, first impressions, but they were all first drafts. Right?

André Lee:

Yeah, yeah.

Nat:

And this idea, you were just ... as you were talking I was thinking about the incorporation of time and listening, and this rush for time preventing listening. Because if you're rushed for time you're not going to be thinking about oh okay, this is my first draft and we'll be able to return to what's been said or what I might have said but not quite perfectly, later with this group of kids, because they knew they would be coming back again and again and again throughout the winter and spring to delve further into the topic of race. It helped so much for those kids to have that knowledge that this wouldn't be the last time, the first impression isn't the last impression. Can you speak to that at all? Was that intentional, and am I kind of correct in that, or is there more to go on that?

André Lee:

Yeah. It's so funny. I still remember the moment because we had met all the kids. We spent a good couple of months finding the children. The night before, two children dropped out. We thought we had 14 and it was like, oh no. And so it's ... and the kids had never met. Some of them knew each other, maybe two or three knew each other. Maybe a few more, let's see. One, two, three knew each other and then two more knew each other from childhood but hadn't seen each other in a long time. So 12 kids, different schools. Actually two more knew each other. But for the most part the group didn't know each other. I'm having all the flashback of memories right now.

André Lee:

So they all get on a bus and I go to the site in advance to prepare and set up, and Catherine meets them with the camera crew. I have another camera crew that's going to film their arrival. We're up in French Creek, it's Upstate New York, it's this great campsite and it's winter. We're all staying in this one castle like building because there's 12 kids and a bunch of crew. I'm sitting in a window and I'm thinking oh, I hope they like each other. The first meeting, what's going to happen, are they going to get along. Kids can be ... [inaudible 00:15:26] cliques, what happens. And the bus pulls up and they all come bumbling down the path laughing and giggling after having spent an hour in advance saying hello and talking, and then about a 90 minute drive. All of a sudden they were tight and buddies and they were just kids enjoying each other. I remember being emotional because you work so hard and you want it to work and be like oh, it's going to work.

André Lee:

I think that they had a immediate affinity and they all were children that were very ... and part of our requirement of being in the film was being able to talk and to listen. They had to be able to show up and participate at a full level. We told them, we said, "Look. We're not making love and hip hop. This isn't an MTV TV show. This a real serious, deep conversation about some complex issues so we'll have to respect each other, we'll have to learn how to fight well in terms of challenging one another, in terms of ideas and principles because we're different people. So what does it mean to disagree yet stay in the same space?" We asked the children to remain with us in three ways and we do this at our screening where we say, "Stay with this intellectually. Think about why we're having this conversation, what it means and show it with your intellectual self. Stay with it emotionally, bring your heart and spirit to the conversation, and stay with it physically. It's going to get tough and you want leave, do your best. If you need to walk out, walk out but please come back when you're ready."

André Lee:

What's required in that and I think what happens so quickly is that they were hearing folks talk about issues they had never discussed so openly and deeply. That first three days, we took them to a workshop run by what's called The People's Institute and man, talk about listening, that's three days of intense conversation. When I first went to it I thought [inaudible 00:17:25] I'll see people learn something, I know all this stuff. And I walked out like oh, I didn't know all this history and it was changed. And it was exciting to see them go through that and then to have one another. We gave them lots of free time to be together, we had our meals together. It was a real intense three day experience, and that's how they got on that path to go forward and show up and be present.

Nat:

And there's such a great example of that and I won't spoil it, in the movie near the end where there's a perfect example of what you were just saying André, where there was a kid who says, and I've said I'm

not going to spoil it but I'm kind of spoiling it. I won't give any names. When one kid says to another, "You've annoyed me 90% of the whole experience," and the person to whom he or she says this tries to run away. Her instinct is to run away, human instinct. Yet through really, the comforting role of the facilitator, she comes back and we watch as the audience what happens when they sit together and they don't threaten to leave and they look each other in the eye, and they explain. And they explain in ways of how they are feeling and they listen to each other. And that is such ... it ends up being a perfect case example of the importance of just what you said, not leaving.

Nat:

And it gets me thinking André, about something that I wasn't expecting to think about which is the times that we live in today where we flip channels all the time. People are scanning headlines every day on the web and they're looking, and they get headlines. And it's like okay, one day it's Corona, it's COVID. Another day it's a protest march, another day it is the economy is crashing. Another day is Russia, another day is elections. Right, right?

André Lee:

Yeah.

Nat:

And we're all flipping the channels but we're not sitting. We're not sitting and staying. We're not staying. So can you speak more perhaps to the idea of staying in conversation or staying quietly and listening even if ... maybe the role of discomfort that could come with staying, André. Do you have any examples of that or anything that comes to mind?

André Lee:

Yeah. That scene you mentioned that we're not going to spoil, that facilitator you mentioned has something in common with the two of us. You and I met in college. We went to Connecticut College, the school on the hill in New London. [crosstalk 00:19:56] Same with [Eliza 00:19:56], who was the facilitator you just mentioned, the one who facilitated-

Nat:

She went to Conn?

André Lee:

She went to Conn College.

Nat:

Oh, get out.

André Lee:

I was on campus and she was leading this great conversation. That scene is one of the last workshops the kids go through. And we were struggling because we were saying, "The kids are talking at this high level about racism and systemic racism, but they're not talking to one another and challenging each other and communicating their truths." I saw her make a talk at a reunion. I was there giving a talk and I

watched her give a talk. And I raised my hand and I was like, "Hey, what are you doing on Saturday?" And she goes, "Having dinner with my husband." And I was like, "No, no. That's not-

Nat:

I wasn't asking you out.

André Lee:

Right, right. It was hilarious. She's someone who is gifted. Eliza [Townsend 00:20:44], she's so gifted with that work. I learned a lot from working with her and witnessing her experiences and ability and skillset. And so I mean, that kind of ... you gave a great example of what I see in that space in terms of what it means in those difficult, difficult spots to listen and helping guide someone. But I was thinking about this because in terms of people in my life who've done that for me, and I have a lot of them. But I thought of one in particular that comes to mind that I haven't thought about in a long time. I went to my high school on a scholarship and I was a smart kid. I had read everything [inaudible 00:21:29] had ever written by the time I got to ninth grade.

André Lee:

But I got to this intense private high school and we were reading literature. It was on a much higher level than anything I had read and I had assignments and writing, and I wasn't prepared academically. I didn't have the skillset to balance my homework, to ... back in those days you had four or five hours a night of homework, literally. That's a change that I've seen happen that that's not the case anymore for the most part which I think is smart and great, but that's another podcast, homework. The school got me a tutor to help me because they saw me struggling and this guy, his name was Tom and he was just this guy who came in and he worked with a few students. I remember one session we were in and we were probably 30 minutes into it and I was just talking and talking and talking about school. We hadn't covered anything in my schoolwork and I remember thinking, why am I talking so much? And he was like, "Because you need to."

André Lee:

I mean, that man turned my academic life around because we were doing the work also, but I needed to talk about the difficulty of being in this environment and how I knew I could do it but I wasn't sure. I needed to vent and just discuss. And he knew the institution so well, he knew the work so well that he could get me to the next steps and help me crack through my essays and organizing my time, we could do all that. But he also spent a lot of time just letting me talk about my experience there and responding to it, also. We would talk about it, we'd have heavy conversations. I remember one day, it sticks out in my head because I think it was my beginning of understanding about economic divide and inequity in the world. And I was talking about it, how it just felt so strange. I saw kids doing stuff that I couldn't participate in and this and that.

André Lee:

And he said, "You know, I really wish your eyes weren't opened to this stuff so early." I didn't know what he meant at that time. And as an adult I'm like, "Oh, this is what he was talking about," the structures in our society. And here I am with a life committed to dismantling and rebuilding those structures and that was all because this man, this tutor who met me, it must have been twice a week. It was after school. I had to go do sports and come back to campus. And we would sit there and just go through and it was fantastic. I mean-

Nat:

Wow, this is like therapy but kind of in the disguise of academic tutoring. But Tom had this whether he really intended to or not, it was just in his way of knowing that in order to get you André to excel, to whatever the definition of excelling is for you academically, meant meeting you where you were. André is a verbal person. André has a lot on his mind. André is trying to fit between two extremes. And academics are actually the bridge there. And if that academic bridge breaks, then André's going to break. So whether you thought this consciously or not, he was certainly by allowing you to be you, and that's another whole podcast as well is-

André Lee:

Yeah, right.

Nat:

... identity and being authentic and flourishing, he was allowing you to do that. And it's funny how it's ... the way you were describing Tom is in the rear view mirror. You don't necessarily know it going through it, but it's when you look back, right?

André Lee:

Yeah. Yeah. I want to find him. I wonder where he is and what he's doing and what he's like. I knew him as ... I was a kid and he was an adult, so he wasn't like a real person.

Nat:

Yeah right, exactly because ... that's so [inaudible 00:25:26]

André Lee:

Totally, totally, totally.

Nat:

Yeah, a real person. But I'm also thinking just quickly, in Prep School Negro that, and you have two versions. You've got the one that's for schools and you've got the one that's longer and it's more personal. And I'm not sure, I can't remember, I've seen it so many times in both of the versions, but basically you're discovering ... you probably will find Tom because you found your mom's therapist and you learned that during your whole growing up or during these years when you were at GFS and beyond, she was seeing a therapist and the importance for her to help navigate, right? Is there a connection between Tom and your mom's therapist in that way?

André Lee:

I wonder. I mean, in terms of an actual physical they knew each other, that's one story. But in terms of the experience and work they did, there clearly is. There clearly is. I learned posthumously that my mother was seeing a therapist, I learned after she was gone. And it was actually at the school when I showed the film and someone ... because I made the shorter version and I showed it to the school and we talked about it, and I wanted their approval before I took it out to [inaudible 00:26:36] School's representative and they're like, and someone said, "Well, how did you first learn about the school?" And I was like, "Oh, yeah. This guy," I said, "His name's [Steven Rook 00:26:45]." And he said, "I know Steven,

he lives around the corner from us." And someone else said, "Yeah, I know him, I have his card on my desk." And I was like, "What? I've heard the name since I was 13."

André Lee:

I called him up and this man knew my life. He knew so many ... and I was like, "Who are you?" My mother saw him as a therapist for eight years secretly, so my instant connection with her that I didn't even know I had was her ability to seek help and seek someone to hear her. Here's this woman working in a factory raising two children on \$13,000 a year in the '80s in America. Think about that. Think about that. And we had clothes and a house and food. I don't know how she did it, I don't know how she did it. And she knew that she needed help. One thing he said is, she walked in the door and she said, "My boy needs something else." The school I was in wasn't enough, my boy needs something else. She couldn't say this private school I went to on a scholarship because she couldn't say Germantown Friends School. She didn't know that, that place. But she said, "My boy needs something else."

André Lee:

So she was listening to me and I didn't even know it. She was hearing me communicate needs and desires and wants that I didn't even know I was probably communicating, and she listened and saw and she went out and saw it. It's so funny because I remember when I first sat with him, I assumed I was going to be a ... she [inaudible 00:28:15] the whole time that I ever come up and he was like, "Are you kidding me? You're the first thing she talked about."

Nat:

Yep. That's in the movie, yep.

André Lee:

I was like, "Really?" It was mind blowing, mind blowing, mind blowing.

Nat:

It is absolutely mind blowing. I'm also thinking about the coach, the basketball coach. Can you tell me about him? I think you know what I'm getting at here because that has to do with it also, listening, watching and being able to action-ate or whatever.

André Lee:

Yeah, that works. Yeah, David [Felson 00:28:51], Senior. He was the principal at the school at the time. And the therapist sent me to the basketball reading clinic. I was in North Philadelphia. The section I was, I wouldn't go outside and play very much, I wasn't very active. He's like, "This kid has to get out of the house." And so they shipped me off to the basketball clinic. It was a day clinic and I'd go back and forth between the school and my house. I was horrible at basketball, but I was great at reading. It was a basketball reading clinic and half the day was basketball, half the day was reading, so I excelled in one half of the day and he saw that. He saw me, every question raising my hand and having done all the work and being excited ... being probably the only kid in the whole camp excited about reading time.

Nat:

And word of the day.

André Lee:

Word of the day. Word of the day was great.

Nat:

Word of the day, and there's his hand up, I know it!

André Lee:

Exactly. And for the people, the word of the day was ... we had a scrimmage at the end of every day which was like a nightmare and I was never, I was always the last kid picked. I just didn't have ... no one ever taught me how to play sports. No one had ever shown me how to play sports. When I got there as a 13 year old, it was the first time I was shown how to actually do a layup, which I still know how to do to this day, but no one had ever shown me. It wasn't in my vocabulary and in my training. So we had the basketball games and they would blow the whistle at any point in the game and go okay, the first team to use word of the day in a sentence ... the word of the day was introduced in the morning. End of the day, using the word of the day in a sentence, you get five bonus points. So people were like, "We want André." They knew I knew the word of the day. I wasn't first picked, but I definitely [crosstalk 00:30:38] Exactly, exactly. Get it where you can, right?

Nat:

Yes.

André Lee:

Yeah. And I really ... and I mean, there was community that once again, people that I didn't ... and this is interesting to think about how important it is to listen to children and witness them. Because there were people, I didn't know they were watching me and listening to me. I just thought I was this annoying kid who couldn't play basketball, that's how I felt, who was excited about one part of the program, who would sneak off to the computer lab. Because this was my first time seeing a computer lab. The school had a computer lab. A computer lab in 1984 was a big deal, and it all printed on dot matrix when you'd type your paper.

Nat:

Yes, totally. Oh, I think we still had that in college.

André Lee:

Yeah totally, right? Totally. The old Commodore three somethings?

Nat:

Totally, totally. Yep, exactly and the holes on the side.

André Lee:

Totally, totally.

Nat:

You used a really interesting word that I want to circle back on speaking of word of the day. You used the word "witness," André, witness. And he witnessed you, he witnessed. And it resonates with me André, this word because I've always looked at witness as there's a 12 person jury and there's a witness than then the judge and the prosecutor and all that. I go right to a courtroom when I think about witness, witness for the prosecution. But now I'm thinking about witness in a very benevolent, completely different way, this basketball coach Dave. Dave, right?

André Lee:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nat:

And he witnessed you. Do see what I'm getting at here? How can a teacher in a classroom and as we kind of round third base and head home in this podcast episode André, for the teachers who are listening and who are gearing up for a new year in September, hopefully-

André Lee:

[inaudible 00:32:31] look like.

Nat:

Oh, my God. First of all we don't know what it's going to look like because it's going to be fully remote depending on the school, fully remote, is it going to be a hybrid, is it going to be bricks and mortar, is it going to be ... but let's just focus on a classroom whether it's remote or whether it's bricks and mortar. We are honored to have the privilege to have a classroom and a classroom of students and that's where we come from on this. I know you do too, it's where you come from on this, is we are honored. But to bear witness to your students, can you delve into that a little bit, how teachers at the beginning of the year can use listening to bear witness?

André Lee:

Yeah. I think the witnessing of a child in your classroom, pick up on little notes when something's frustrating or hard. Luckily I'm not very shy. So I had noticed when we talked about this, your eyebrows went up. What happened for you? Was that something ... they're like, "No." They may come back later and go, "Well you know it was a little bit complicated." I believe, I really ... as a teacher I kind of bare my soul to an extent. And I'm very like, "I'm here for you, I'm present. We're going to hear ... " because we're doing films and I'm teaching film making and we're watching some complicated movies. And I start my film saying, "These are some tough topics sometimes and I need you to be mature and I need you to let me know if you need to check out or step out." I had one student ... I like to bring snacks to my classes.

Nat:

It always helps.

André Lee:

Yeah, right? Totally. Especially when we're watching a movie I bring a bag of popcorn. And my class this year somehow is all boys, so I walk in and I put the bag down and one minute later there's one kernel left.

Nat:

Totally, it's all gone.

André Lee:

I had one student that didn't eat, he never partook. I checked in with his family and I said, "I noticed that he doesn't ... " and his mother said, "Oh, he doesn't like to eat in public. That's his thing." So the next time I brought it as opposed to being like, "Why aren't you going to have some?" I was just like, "Oh, we're going to do this now and if you want to have some, have some. If you don't want to have some, don't have some. There's no pressure, don't feel bad," and just really made it, created a space where his choice was not odd and strange. It was I witnessed who he was, I did some research to find out, and I was able to create a community that said, "Okay, this is what this kid needs."

Nat:

That's excellent, excellent.

André Lee:

For me it comes from the phrase, to be a living witness. I remember hearing that as a small child. I'm talking about church a lot. But hearing that in church as a small child like, what does it mean to be a living witness. And I think that for me, that is a matter of witnessing the world, witnessing what's around you and then actually being able to come back and witness two other people and share it. I think that story really illustrates to me how you can as a teacher really do that. And yes, it takes extra steps and extra work but you know what? We all know this is one of the hardest jobs out there and this is one more thing we do within it.

André Lee:

I knew that kid had a great experience in the class because of that, because his family told me for one. But I also knew that I could see him the best because he was always the first in class. Just like oh, [inaudible 00:35:56] Hey, how'd you beat me here? He was ready. And when we started doing remote, once again he's the first one in. And I'm going yeah, because we've created a space that's for him as opposed to making someone feel strange because they don't do one behavior that seems normal or standard. We live in a world now where I think people ... I understand people going to those moments and status quos and standards because people are nervous and afraid of difference. I mean, we have to get over that, we have to let that go. We have to get comfortable being uncomfortable, lean into the discomfort and embrace it.

Nat:

Along those lines of being afraid to acknowledge one's difference, your work is all about André, it's all about helping actually your students whether it's in your film class or whether it's your students who are in the high school gymnasium of 500 after they've seen one of your movies to really feel empowered, that I can be somebody, I can be an individual, and I have an identity that is different than everybody else's here and everybody else has an identity that's different.

Nat:

I think that when it comes to your work, the difficulty, and tell me if this resonates or not and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, but it's ... okay, so it's we're going to come into our classroom in September.

If we are truly relational teachers we are going to learn about the identities of our students and we're going to celebrate them as you did and as you do. Yet when it comes to talking about certain issues, when it comes to talking about certain topics where it could be just uncomfortable or whatever, people can also become part of a tribe. They can feel comfort with okay, I'm going to go with somebody who's like me. Or I'm not going to speak because I don't feel like I have a right to speak because I'm not in the shoes of somebody else who fits this topic more closely than I do.

Nat:

Circling the airport here. So what could you advice teachers to do to encourage a classroom of respect for the individual, yet how can you use listening as a teacher? What elements of listening do you think would be so important for teachers to lay out from day one so that students can not only honor who they are as individuals and feel safe to be authentic, but also really lean in as you said earlier to the ideas, the thoughts, the experiences of their peers who are different than they are?

André Lee:

When I think about that, something I learned from another teacher friend of mine who's a very introverted person, and he said something he does in his classes and I tried it, and I always say it and I think it helps, is he says, "Okay, we're going to do group work now and you can work in groups of one to three." And when he said that I was like, "What do you mean?" He's like, "Some people want to work on their own." Sometimes you need to have the group dynamics important for the progress and the process to spread out the work et cetera, but sometimes if you say that, I just say that and do all kinds of things I can do to make sure everyone has a moment where they feel acknowledged and seen. And that means going outside and doing the actual work, going outside of what I know.

André Lee:

I don't know things about ... I don't know things especially about sports. It's not my universe, my forte, what I learned about. At a class of all boys and sometimes the conversation goes into sports teams so I was like, "I got to do some research." And the way I did it was I could come to class and say, "So let me ask this question. I don't understand this," and get them to talk about, explain it. The experience a child can have to teach an adult something that's meaningful for them when they have respect and admiration for you and then they have the chance to teach you something and you're open to it and you let go of your need to know it all.

André Lee:

There's a really great ... my school's a Quaker school and I gave a lecture. And to prepare for a lecture, it was about Quakerism and the teaching of the arts and how the two come together. And I went to this book by ... the guy, his name's [Palmer 00:40:23], and the book is called Meeting for Learning. And I was like, what is this? And the whole idea is, because the Quakers practice their religion by doing a meeting for worship. You all sit in silence and the spirit moves someone to speak and the idea is you all come together in a space. There's no dogma, there's no minister, no one's in charge, you're all one big group. How can you recreate that in your classroom and have a meeting for a learning experience? How can you as a class, figure out what you're learning?

André Lee:

Of course you're the guy, you're the teacher but how can you say okay, we're going to do this math, you ask the question and it's going to go this way and we're going to be fine with that because we're

learning together, and let the ... It's tricky because you do want to ... I have points A, B, C and D to make and for me it was very like, you got to know how to talk about film this way and understand these concepts so you can inform your last pieces. But I had to get out of the way of the process and let the class actually define and decide where we go, and that meant trying to find a way to accentuate every single child in the class in some particular way. We're watching movies, reading pieces, like okay. They're going to relate to this part, they're going to relate to that part, and really aggressively not just coming in with what I've taught every year and saying okay, got to rebuild it a little bit. I got my spine, let me add my pieces to the vertebrae so each person in the room can feel acknowledged.

André Lee:

When you do something to recognize someone in the space in the room, much happens. People feel heard, people feel loved, people feel real, people feel witnessed. How do you achieve all of that? I think you can achieve that with the practices, the exercises, the work of being vulnerable, being vulnerable as a teacher. I have no problem with oh, I got that wrong. I got that wrong, let's work it out.

Nat:

Because it goes back to what you said at the beginning of this conversation about curiosity. You absolutely exude curiosity, André. These examples you're sharing where I don't know anything about sports, tell me. Or, I don't know the answer, it's okay. It's okay but you're curious to know the answer and you'd love to hear it from all your students. That's part of this other word that you shared a second ago which I just love is process, it's the learning process. And the process is you've got the vertebrae, you've got the spine of what you're going to teach and of course this is about you've got a curriculum you got to follow through of course, it's for teaching, but the way as you said it's the process that fills out that spine and that process is all the qualitative stuff that we don't assess through standardized testing or any of that stuff or teacher evaluations necessarily because it's qualitative. It's sensed, you know when it's done right, and it involves these skills like what we're talking about right now, it involves listening.

Nat:

And if you could speak, maybe just kind of take us home right now, one final word about the importance that you've recognized about listening André, in your work with students, with groups, with ... just any sort of context, and why you value listening so strongly at this day and time.

André Lee:

Right now as you're asking me this question in June of 2020 with all this happening in the world with a question of listening, I think sometimes as the person communicating, you have to be patient and know that some people may listen but may not hear you for a while. And what does it mean to have patience in that space and when someone actually does reach back out to you and says, "You know what? Something you told me freshman year in high school, I think I finally get it." And that takes ... and I'm a living witness for that one, I am an example of that. That takes patience and time, to be patient with someone. Because sometimes you're dropping stuff and especially with ... half of the stuff the kids are reading or talking about is kind of going in their head but just going over, and I believe in giving them this heavy content and information to plant the seeds.

André Lee:

Sometimes, it's funny because I'm taking your listening idea and turning it around to talk about it as a communicator-

Nat:

Fascinating, right?

André Lee:

... because the communicator, the person who's giving the information that you're listening to, has to not demand that you're actually heard and teach your audience how to actually listen. You see the difference in that? There's a real slight difference. I said this, repeat it back to me. No. Here's some information I want you to think about, what did you hear and how did you interpret it. I think that's a very different exercise.

Nat:

It gets back to the concept of time. I can't separate listening from time André, because of what we're talking about and that example's perfect. Our students are not open vessels to just fill up. I'm filling you with this, listen to me and you will understand. That's not the process of teaching, that's not the learning process. That's not bearing witness to each student's learning. But what you're talking about is through true listening, allowing time so that ... My dad would always say, my dad was a teacher and he literally would always tell me, "Make time your friend. Make time your friend." And if you are fortunate enough to work at a school and work in a class where you're able to marinate and let kids be kids and listen and digest at their own rate, that's where true learning, that's where it's so much more effective than that whole push, push, push which does not long term retain.

André Lee:

No.

Nat:

Does that make sense, right? Yeah.

André Lee:

Yeah, it makes complete sense. I'm in complete agreement and I think that is the way, that's one of the secrets of making this happen. And I've seen it work time and time again in a classroom, so it's exciting to know that we can make this happen. It's fun. Teaching's fun. Teaching is so fun. It's so-

Nat:

It's so fun when you were watching those kids get out of the van, those 12 kids in I'm Not Racist ... Am I? in that workshop, in the joy that you felt like oh, they've bonded. They're already clicking, they're all not clicking up but they're clicking together as a whole, how great is that? I'm going to have fun with these kids now. And the fun comes in all the spectrum. You've got kids crying, you've got kids sharing, you've got kids laughing. But it's all bringing out their idealism, it's all bringing out the goodness and that is fun, creative, passionate. André, thank you so much.

Nat:

I just want to say before we actually close this up, is I really mean this. For any teacher who's listening or watching this podcast, check out Prep School Negro, check out I'm Not Racist ... Am I? and I say it for overlapping reasons. But when I think about Prep School Negro, you're looking at your kids at the beginning of September through a screen or in real life brick and mortar, you're looking at your students and you might have that student who, or a handful of students who just don't seem like they're fitting in, who just might seem like they're a little bit out, they're a little bit just not feeling comfortable either with themselves or in the classroom. Prep School Negro is all about that, and this is your story, André. The teachers, and this is why I wanted to ask it, who listened to you and who are these teachers who really heard you and listened to you and saw you and made you comfortable in a school where you were of a very, very, very small, not fitting the stereotype of the prep school kid in 1986. So watch Prep School Negro for that.

Nat:

And then watch I'm Not Racist ... Am I? to learn how to teach in a sense, to learn how to set up a group of 12 kids which would be like a group of your class on the first day and how to make time your friend, how to look at them as first drafts, how to listen to yourself as a first draft and then ... but with the confidence that you'll be able to turn in a final draft, to create a classroom where it's safe to throw out a first draft knowing that that's not how you're going to be looked at or listened to for the rest of the school year. Learn about time, learn about groups, learn about allowance and safety and authenticity through the movie I'm Not Racist ... Am I? and then dig into that content. All right, that is critical content so it's beautiful, André. Thank you. And do you have any last word you want to say? Otherwise we can close it out.

André Lee:

It's great to listen to you. That's my last word.

Nat:

Thank you. André Lee, filmmaker, teacher, speaker, consultant. Oh my God, we didn't even get to your civil rights tours and the leader in that way. But you are just amazing and I'm just so honored to have had you on set. So thank you so much, André Lee.

André Lee:

Thank you, Nat.