

Response to Tomie Hahn

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While thinking about Tomie's beautiful talk, I remembered a story from my childhood. I was about 10. I was very excited about a new idea; or I thought it was new, and I thought it was my own, though now I'm sure I picked it up somewhere. I told my mother: "You know, we never really experience the world. All we ever know is our sensory experience, and that's different from the real world." I found this idea exciting and scary. My mother replied immediately, with a calm sweetness. "Our senses are wonderful. I'm grateful for them."

I was disappointed. I thought my mother was unresponsive to my terrific insight. I wanted to be praised for being smart, but it wasn't going to happen this time. I also thought my mother was right, and I found her response deeply consoling. I had been brought down to earth from the headiness of incipient philosophy, and I was confused.

What happened in that conversation? You could say that we were practicing our gender roles—the boy who is willing to disparage the senses for the sake of a clever idea, the woman and mother who wants to bring him back to the senses and embodiment. You could also say that I was expressing a more general doubt or worry about my belonging in the world, and my mother was trying to steady me. She undoubtedly knew that I would like to hear that I was smart, and in not giving me what I wanted, she might have been steering me away from a limiting sense of self-worth. In a different conversation, someone could have responded by telling me that such ideas have been the starting point of elaborate philosophies, and recommending some books. That conversation would have attended to my words about the senses, finding value in them, and directing me toward many, many more words. I like the actual conversation much more.

Memorably, Tomie describes a situation where words interfered with her sensory experience. Someone's verbal description implanted the sonic image of a chainsaw, and this impeded her access to the actual sounds of puffins, delaying her ability to be with what she was hearing. It is easy to relate to this story, for many sensory experiences and for life experiences in general. As Tomie says, we benefit from conceptualization, and we need to be wary of its effects. Meanwhile, the operation of our senses, apart from any conceptualization, can also shape experience in potentially misleading ways, as when ocean sounds, without changing, become less conspicuous with the passage of time. Tomie also warns against our spontaneous, natural-seeming reactions. If we think we know, by

perception and empathy, about the inner lives and interactions of the birds we are watching, or for that matter of our pet dogs and cats, we need to remind ourselves, through thought, of the ways our projections can exceed our knowledge. From these considerations, I notice that my mother and I were both onto something, which we formulated in one-sided ways. We need to maximize access to our senses, while remaining cautious about what they seem to tell us.

The idea of failure is contextual; there is no failure apart from *criteria* of success and failure. When issues of failure come up, we can accept a judgment of failure or, instead, we can question the criteria. We could say that someone in a wheelchair is a failure at bodily mobility; or we could say instead that the built environment is wrong because it denies access to people in wheelchairs. We could say that a student is a failure at sight-singing and therefore not a good musician; or we could say that conventional concepts of ear-training fail because they deny the musicality of many people. The potential for reversing a judgment of failure into a critique of the relevant criteria is invaluable. The idea of queerness as non-identity is helpful because it recommends setting aside entrenched categories of gender and sexuality, letting go of criteria that make people into successes and failures. Needless to say, judgments of failure can come with a lot of emotional intensity. And there is emotional inertia: challenging a judgment of failure can be easier than changing the emotional responses to that judgment. I could say that I was a failure as a heterosexual man; or I could say that the powerful institution of compulsory heterosexuality is cruel and destructive. The latter insight does not necessarily remove my lingering shame and sense of failure.

As Tomie emphasizes, we have many academic habits that get in our way—disciplinary distinctions, norms of coherence, separation of the senses. These all generate criteria of failure that can be challenged precisely by *seeming* to fail, while actually accomplishing something wonderful, and thereby showing the inadequacy of those criteria.

I want to turn to aspects of teaching with which Tomie is very familiar, though she does not emphasize them in her paper. Tomie's recent book *Arousing Sense* [[link to https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=87cqq8bq9780252044168](https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=87cqq8bq9780252044168)] offers a wealth of recipes, as she calls them, for practices to enhance and reshape sensory experience. One obvious destination for these recipes is the classroom, though some can be done alone, and they could all belong in many kinds of groups beyond college classes. Tomie recommends them as ways to develop skills for

ethnographic research. But they can point in many directions, for many kinds of musicians and non-musicians. They are akin to Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* and her other text scores, and to the event scores of the Fluxus group. [links to <https://popandmom.org/products/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditations>
<https://popandmom.org/products/anthology-of-text-scores>
<http://fluxus.lib.uiowa.edu/resources.html>]

Tomie's explicit focus on the senses is unique, and the volume is astonishingly rich in different approaches.

I want to comment on the use of such practices, drawing on my own experiences. This aspect of my teaching comes out of training that was shared and at one point shaped by Tomie. Tomie is my sibling, in that we were both profoundly affected by the practices and teaching of Pauline Oliveros. She is also my grandmother, the Director of the Center for Deep Listening when I took the one-year Deep Listening training in 2017; she supervised my teachers. What I will say about my teaching has deep continuity with Tomie's teaching and with her wonderful recipes.

I'll describe some practices that I have used in my course "Deep Listening," which meets for an hour each week. "Teach Yourself to Fly," the best known of Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*, invites participants to sit in a circle. We begin by bringing awareness to our breathing. As we continue, we make the sounds of our breathing more audible, and then introduce vocal sound. There are no wrong notes; we let our vocal cords vibrate in a way that feels natural. Oliveros asks us to "always be an observer." The meditation continues until it stops.

Many people are self-conscious about singing, fearing a humiliating failure. "Teach Yourself to Fly" sets aside criteria of success and failure, inviting participants to have an experience that need not be judged. As students often tell me, it creates a complex experience of intimacy that is not intrusive. Each of us feels our own body vibrating, and we hear the vibrating bodies of everyone else.

Oliveros's text score "For Alison Knowles, a. k. a. All is On" invites participants to "make a sound/gesture/word/movement/graphic . . . for each year of your life." I simplify this in my classes, asking students to perform an action and/or make a sound for each year. I go beyond Oliveros's score to coach students in specific ways before they begin: don't rush through it; pause after each movement or sound to experience its resonance; you might sometimes understand a relationship between a particular year and what you do as a performer, but it is all right if you do not experience a definite connection. I

usually work with groups of about 20 students. They spread out in the classroom and move through their performances, peripherally aware that the other students are following the same instructions. Again, there is a feeling of non-intrusive intimacy; success and failure become irrelevant, replaced by each student's focal awareness of the students' own experiences and global awareness of the other students. Not surprisingly, participants can become emotional during this practice. Once when I used the practice, a student sat down at the end, looking as though he was about to weep. I asked him quietly if he was all right. He said he was, and that he had just realized something about his life that he did not know, and that he was grateful. My instructions for this and all other practices include a recommendation to stop, if a student begins to have painful thoughts or emotions in a way that seems unproductive or dangerous. Permission to opt-out is crucial for the kinds of practice that I am describing.

A third practice is one I created called "Doing and Undergoing"; it comes from John Dewey's emphasis in *Art as Experience* on the back-and-forth of doing something and then experiencing the result. I invite students to walk around the classroom, again asking them not to rush, and as they wish, to change something in the room, with attention to what it is like to make the change; then they should pause to experience the difference that change makes. This easily continues for fifteen minutes or more. To close, I ask the students to pause and take in all that they can about what the room is like now. (Then, of course, we restore the room to its usual configuration.) As before, the activity is about experience, and success and failure are not relevant. There is a pleasant subversion of authority in the piece. A student told me, after one performance, that it gave her a sense of agency and control in a room where previously she had felt that the arrangement was someone else's.

My University of Virginia students are deeply invested in success and failure as central to their identities—their success in being admitted to UVA in the first place, and their ongoing hopes for success and fears of failure. At the beginning of the semester, when we start each Deep Listening class meeting with a few minutes of mindfulness meditation or when we do practices like the ones I have described, students are preoccupied with "getting it right." They are especially worried because the criteria of success and failure have been set aside, while there is powerful inertia in their well-trained, well-rewarded desire to succeed. I tell them repeatedly that the goal is not to succeed in following instructions, but only to see what happens when they interact with the prompt. It is a joy to see

students learning, during the semester, that they can set aside their self-judgments.

I invite you to bring Tomie's recipes in *Arousing Sense* into your classrooms, along with other practices you may find, scavenge, or invent. Diminishing the power of success and failure in our students' lives is one of the best ways we can educate them.

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