

Cold Calling and the Wonderful World of Relations

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Like many other freshly minted PhDs from such superfluous fields as Philosophy of Education, I had to “bridge” a couple of years before my real job by doing something else; it was quite an interesting job in a small start-up company. One duty I always tried to avoid under any pretext was cold calling, which we were supposed to do during down times. Cold calling is a marketing technique consisting of calling potential clients without any prior lead, and offering a product or a service. Everyone has been on a receiving end of a cold call, but only few have had a pleasure of cold dialing. At the time, I was finishing my book on dialogue, so cold calling provided a nice contrast; it was a metaphor for a relation made impossible. Two human beings separated by a disembodied technology, by the insurmountable barriers of commercial interest, by the pervasive culture of mass marketing — such two human beings had as much chance of developing a dialogical relation as winning a state lottery.

Let me back track by saying that I am delighted to have this exchange with Barbara Stengel. The proposition to consider the relation as a unit of analysis evokes a very energetic response in me. The pedagogy of relation is, in my view, the most promising language of a constructive opposition to the tsunami of accountability reform and its instrumentalist understanding of education. Both Stengel and I belong to the group of self-described enthusiasts of the pedagogy of relation. So, this is really a family dispute; strangers beware of relational implications. My attempt at critiquing her essay is just an experiment to find out if she will still relate to me after reading this response. I know she will, for she can hear the call, even over the noise of the disagreement that is consciously built into the format of this volume. In other words, Stengel can hear the call to relate in any situation, or in most situations. I wonder if she ever did cold calling. “Ms. Stengel, this is Joe Shameless on behalf of your Visa Platinum calling. Would you please relate to me?”

I have always admired Stengel’s gift for storytelling that makes philosophy real and relevant. Here she tells a story of two Kates, a story in which most people can recognize themselves. Who has not failed in a very difficult situation, and has not done much better in a better situation? Oh, you have not? Those who have only done the latter, but not the former, are advised to stop reading now, for the experience of failure is required to understand further argument. Not observing others fail, not reading about others who fail, but first-hand, land-hard, learn-quick sort of failure experience is needed; not necessarily in teaching, although teaching failure is most welcome. Nothing can better expose the power of relationality than a good failure of a relationship. Stengel goes to great length to explain the reasons for failure beyond Kate’s control; she also implies that the reasons for Kate’s subsequent success may also be largely outside of her control. And yet Stengel comes down rather hard on poor Kate; if only she was more response-able, more able to hear the real calls of real students (and not the deceitful, treacherous principal), she would do

good. Doing good, according to Stengel, involves a response “in a rich and fitting way.” The theme of “fitting” is very prominent in the essay; both Kate’s success and failure are described in terms of “fitting” response. Yet what is a fitting response? In cold calling the most fitting response on the receiving end is this: “Thank you but I am not interested” (hang up immediately after saying this). On the giving end, one has to ignore ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent failure rate, and keep dialin’ and smilin’.

In Kate’s failure story, the most effective response to the students’ call could be giving them what they want: easy assignments, easy grades. This would dramatically improve student-teaching relationships, and is not it what the pedagogy of relation is all about? Yet Stengel implies that students had issued another, deeper, more authentic call, of which they may not be aware themselves. “She did not respond to her students as persons for whom personality and its disorders (we are in a psychology class — A.S.) prompt both fascination and fear. And so, she could not encourage her students’ response-ability toward those, including perhaps some of their classmates, who suffer from or live with others who suffer from mental disorders.” Stengel gives us an outline of her own would-be response to Kate’s situation, should they exchange places. Do you not have these fantasies when watching a disaster movie, where the hero is in a very difficult situation, and you imagine what you would have done to overcome it? Do you not have an action plan in case of a nuclear war or an asteroid hitting the Earth? The truth is, these are just fantasies, and in the real life most of us would be totally screwed on an inhabited island, or facing a trained assassin...or making a cold call. So, let us face it, in Kate’s shoes, most of us, excluding Barbara Stengel, would be just as likely to fail, because of the overwhelming adversities of the situation.

There are two different problems with Stengel’s solution. First, her version of “response” is very much instrumental; it is an I-It rather than I-Thou response. When a teacher claims to know better than a student what the latter one wants, even guided by most altruistic motives, this is certainly not a dialogical relation. Buber himself has pointed out that in many cases, the situation may preclude the possibility of a genuine relation, for example, in patient-therapist encounter:

But, of course, there are limits...the limits to simple humanity. To simple humanity meaning being I and my partner, so to speak alike to one another, on the same plane. I see you mean being on the same plane, but you cannot. There is not only you, your mode of thinking, your mode of doing, there is also a certain situation — we are so and so — which may sometimes be tragic.... You cannot change this.¹

Buber did not know about cold calling, otherwise he would probably mention it as an ultimate situation that exterminates the “simple humanity.” What I really fear is that the pedagogy of relation, should it eventually sink into teacher education programs, would produce better, more sophisticated manipulators who can convert the essential human need to relate into an effective learning motivational strategy. I cannot resist more marketing examples: the most intrusive and dehumanizing forms of marketing are those converting the fabric of interpersonal relations into cash. Here are some examples: selling expensive knives by teenagers to their own grandmas and uncles, Girl Scout cookies, door-to-door sales of magazines by

minority children. In all these cases, businesses show real mastery of human relationship. Now, if we are going to “sell” quadratic equations, atomic weights, and sonnet structure in very much the same way (by developing and using our relationships with students), how are we different? Yes, students “need” the knowledge, but doesn’t your grandma need a very good knife, lifetime warranty and free sharpening, five easy payments of \$99.95? Plus shipping and handling? One principle of the pedagogy of relation should be that the relation is an aim, not a means of education.

The second problem with Stengel’s solution is this: although she recognizes the constraints of the situation, the final lesson we draw from the paper is one applicable to an individual. Although she promises to shift the center of gravity from the individual to the relation, in fact, she talks more about the individual than about the relation. The central question is whether Kate’s failure was her own fault or the fault of the situation. Stengel generously acknowledges that this is not entirely Kate’s fault, but she could have done much better. In my view, the only reason we agreed to place relations at the center of analysis is to show that an individual may not be considered outside of the system of relationship. The relation has to be something real, too, something one can study, analyze, describe, and ultimately, change. The question of fault may not even make any sense in the relational way of thinking.

This is not a call to abolish personal responsibility. However, responsibility is not the same thing as response-ability. The hyphenated spelling is postmodernistically cute and etymologically correct, but I wonder if it is wrong in substance. An ability to respond does not make one accountable for one’s own actions. Responsibility is an ethical ideal, while the ability to respond is ethically neutral, and can as be vicious as often as virtuous. Many bad characters can respond well to others — for their own benefit, of course. Even worse are good characters, who respond to others for the others’ own benefit. Ethical theory developed within relational paradigm (for example, Nel Noddings) implies strong particularism, and “embeddedness” of moral choices in relational contexts. The ability or inability to respond are not as much a function of an individual, as a function of a relationship in which the individual participates. The ability to respond really describes a relation rather than an individual. Yet the notion of responsibility strongly correlates with an individual inasmuch as she or he may be able to withstand the pressures and demands of a particular relationship. Responsibility in the sense of accountability may be located in a non-relational terrain.

Here is where Stengel and I differ: for her pedagogy of relation is a call for personal heroism and growth. For me, it is mainly a call for reshaping the organizational structures of education to make interhuman relations possible. Yes, relations need effort and wisdom; but more than anything, they need a reason to develop. We need not a new Enlightenment; we need a different type of educational reform, this time focused on the relational analysis and aimed at creating a fertile soil for growing human relations.

My short career in business ended because I wanted no more cold calls. Perhaps, Stengel could have heard the call correctly and have overcome the situational constraints; I simply sought to get out of the bad situation and find a better one. This

is why I can relate to Kate more than to Stengel's stoic idealism. It is much more effective to change the situation in which people have to relate to each other than to teach everyone how to overcome the constraint of situations in which they find themselves. For example, what would happen if Kate's first school had been free of grade inflation? What if an elective would be what it sounds like, a course one elects because one is interested in it? What if Kate had an opportunity to meet with her students outside the classroom? What if she had more choices in what to teach and how to teach it, and whether to teach them at all? If my boss stopped asking me to do cold calling, I might be still doing the not-so-bad job with the same company.

1. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988), 162.