



HOLDING SPACE: PRESERVING THE WRITER'S VOICE

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You walk by someone you know and they ask, “How are you?” This is how we greet each other in Western society. Within our fast-paced lifestyle, when you begin to tell someone how you are, are you granted the time to truly be heard? We all have judgments, prejudices, and ideas whirling around our think-space. It is difficult to hush our thoughts because we have been taught to think when we should listen.

The title I hold as a writing tutor exudes the message that my time is valuable and should not be wasted. When I hear a writer say, “I don’t want to take too much of your time,” I hear that they have been taught that their writing is not worthy of time spent, that their voice is undeserving of time put in.

Society’s powerful machine doesn’t realize that all of our voices matter. To value one voice over another is to value the health of one part of the body over another. My time is valuable because

I have the capability of contributing to the web through which we are linked, to listen knowing the writer’s voice and time are equal to mine.

One of a writing tutor’s responsibilities is to hold space. The small moments between two people are sacred; they are where society’s microcosms are faced, where identity and humanity can be experienced. Listening creates a space where cultures of ethnicity, place, and experience meet in the middle. My identity crosses paths with yours, while all around us are the norms of white culture. Academic spaces have the pressure of conformity looming over them. At times, I question whether it is my voice giving feedback to you, or if it is the Anglo-American channeled through me, because I, too, breathe this culture. Am I a spokesperson for the norm, contributing to drowning your voice? Or am I fighting the norm, by listening for cultural roots in your writing, so that your voice can surface?

During a session, I try to be aware of my reaction to your presence and story. The only way I am able to not become the oppressor is if I acknowledge how the oppressor thinks—how I think. As a male, I've been taught to use a rigid and authoritative tone. I've been taught to assert what is right and speak from a place of logic. I've been taught to tell you your story doesn't make sense when that's not what you're asking about. The authority of my voice can have the power of silencing from a place of privilege.

So when I sit with you to work on your paper, I am still, silent; I hush the thoughts about my day. I lean forward in attunement and speak in a warm, inviting tone, the voice I use when speaking with people I feel close to. I word my feedback so that it is not the final answer, but a contribution to the writing process. My truth is my own subjective input, and it does not represent all truths.

Tutoring involves cultural negotiations. I inform you about the cultural demands that could compromise your voice as a writer, such as writing objectively, in a logical form, and using Standard Academic English. All of these things can come up for me in a tutoring session, if I am really listening.

A successful negotiation only happens when I am able to receive.

What are your needs as a writer? How can I hold a space for you to gain the confidence to listen to your own wisdom? You are the expert on your life and the expert on your own needs. Your values, passions, and experiences may be different from mine, but a space held with the intention of reflection, listening, and respect is a space where your voice can emerge. ◇