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## About the Author

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For Christopher  
who is in every word

*Praeterita Honorem*

Peter Kline

who said I should write,  
and who saved my life  
so that I could

# Introduction

Sometimes you're just standing there. You have a thought. And your life changes forever. Maybe you have had one of those moments. It happened to me when I was thirty-seven.

I was co-founder of a Quaker school in Maryland. All of the faculty and students had gone for the day, and I was gazing out my office window, looking across the playing fields to the woods. I was thinking about what more I could do with the rest of my life to make a difference in the world.

Out of nowhere came this question:

*What is the one thing which, if it were to change, could change everything else for the better?*

And an answer:

*The quality of people's independent thinking.*

That may not sound exciting to you. But I was ecstatic.

It made sense. What we do follows what we think. So if our thinking is good, our decisions and actions will be, too. If our thinking is rubbish, well, welcome to the world.

So all we had to do, I reasoned, was improve our thinking, our *independent* thinking, and *voilà*, we could change everything.

The tricky part would be how to do it. I had a few ideas. Not many. But that was good enough for me. 'Start with something,' they say. Just start.

This book, another thirty-seven years later, is the fourth big pause to capture findings from observations my colleagues and I have made in that search for 'how':

*How do we improve the quality of our independent thinking?*

We have some answers now. They are tentative, as all good answers should be. But they are thrilling. And simple. And so far astonishingly dependable.

Those answers are developments of ten *ways of being* with each other. I call them ‘the ten components of a thinking environment’. We will explore them in depth in a little while because when we live them, as a system of being, we and the world around us do begin to change.

This ‘thinking environment’ starts and ends with the promise not to interrupt each other. It really does. I know that sounds too simple a thing to change a life, much less a world. But that simple promise is loaded. Like an atom. Take it apart and you see an unimaginable force, a force that generates the brilliance of life, in this case the brilliance of independent thinking.

Here we will explore how this promise does that, and why, and how it can become the centrepiece of our lives.

It seems that about every ten years my colleagues and I look up and realize that over that period we have learned so much more, so many new insights have surfaced, so many people’s lives and organizations and relationships have grown in beautiful new directions because of these findings, and so much new research has substantiated and explained our own that a new book almost writes itself. This is the latest.

This book is both the science of the promise not to interrupt, and the music of it. It is both journey and scrutiny, reason and irrepressible stirrings.

It reflects the experience we all have every day. We interrupt. And we are interrupted. We may be inured to its ravaging because it is just the way life has become. But each time it happens, we wince. Often we rage. It registers.

The book builds on that common experience, sharing these past ten years of work with people, with their teams and their leaders, with families and schools, with law firms, scientists, engineers, the military, the police, academics, business schools, doctors and medical teams, politicians, therapists, business coaches and mediators. The results resound. Yours can, too. Living the promise is the proof of its efficacy.



To glimpse this living of the promise of no interruption, I think we have to understand the nature of three things: independent thinking, interruption and the promise itself. I have divided the book into those three points of focus. Each is both philosophical and practical. And each draws on those conditions for independent thinking, 'the ten components of a thinking environment'. These ten ways of being with each other profoundly affect the quality of our thinking. In brief, they are: attention, equality, ease, appreciation, feelings, encouragement, information, difference, incisive questions and place. We will explore them in depth in a little while.

The book does propose ways to 'live' these components, to *become* a thinking environment by making and keeping this promise not to interrupt. It offers glimpses into a life as rich as this. More than anything else, this book is a saunter, a stretch, a suggestion. We humans, I find, learn the profound things best from experience, not from instruction. We learn from living the complexity of the context, not from lurching through a list.

And so this book is a conversation with you. I hope it will allow you to imagine what can change for you and your world because you and others around you make this promise and begin to think for yourselves with new quality and grace. I hope you will see as well that this most powerful promise of no interruption can affect even our current most vicious societal scourge – polarization. And I hope that exploration will lift your heart.

I invite you to join me, as if we were actually together, thinking for ourselves and delighting mutually in our freed minds.

If this is your first acquaintance with the 'thinking environment', welcome.

If this is one of many years of your engagement with it, I am honoured.

# Part One

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## UNDERSTANDING INDEPENDENT THINKING

# 1. The Difference

I won't interrupt you.

I promise.

I won't interrupt your words – or your *thoughts*.

Imagine it.

Imagine the relief, the possibilities, the dignity.

You now have ground that is yours. Unassailably. This is for you. Time to think. To feel. To figure out what you really want to say. To say it, to consider it. To change it. To finish your sentences, to choose your own words. To become – because you can trust the promise – a bit bold, even eloquent. To become you.

And because you *know* I will not interrupt you, you will *want*, when you finish, to know what I think, too, even if we disagree deeply. You open your heart. And because you in turn promise not to interrupt me, I open mine.

We all long for this, the promise of no interruption, the promise of interest, the promise of attention while we think, the promise of this much respect for us all as human beings. We long for that gentle, rigorous expanse that produces felt thinking and thoughtful feeling. Every day, in *every* interaction, vital or trivial, we hope for the kind of presence that lets our brains and hearts find themselves.

We were born for this. In fact, says the science, we were born expecting it. Our brains needed it to keep forming when we were infants, almost marsupially.

They still do. To stay fully *Homo sapiens* our minds and hearts need this promise.

And yet?

It is nowhere. We look around. We can't find it. We see only interruption. Our colleagues interrupt. Our professionals

interrupt. Our beloveds interrupt. Our friends interrupt. We interrupt.

Where in your circles can you point to a single person who you are certain will not interrupt or stop you when you speak? Who in your circles has ever made this promise to you? And kept it? And have you ever made that promise to anyone?

Most likely not. That is the shocking truth. The one thing we can absolutely depend on in life is that we *will be* interrupted when we start to think.

In fact, according to the Gottman Institute in Seattle, three years ago the average listening time of even *professional listeners* was twenty seconds. Now it is eleven. Eleven seconds! And those of us who are paid to listen – coaches, therapists, doctors, managers, leaders, teachers, pastors, advisers – have paid for endless instruction in how to listen. But the instruction is effectively in how to insert, how to tailgate, how to justify the populating of silence with our own view. It is listening that expects us to interrupt. Or so it seems. Certainly, observably, it does not require us to promise not to.

And so we interrupt. All of us. Paid and not. Partners and parents. Leaders and learners. Wage earners and shareholders. We move through our days and years interrupting others and failing to foil it when others interrupt us.

And that matters. Interruption diminishes us. It diminishes our thinking. In the face of it, our *own* thinking barely has a chance to form. That means that our decisions are weaker; our relationships are thinner. Interruption of thinking is so destructive, in fact, that what we have produced as a species, however advanced it may be in the animal kingdom, is probably inferior to the achievements the uninterrupted human mind might have produced over those aeons instead.

In fact, you could mention just about any stubborn issue in your life and I would wonder whether you might have resolved it already had you not been interrupted so many times on the road to now. I also could name almost any innovation, from howling steam engines to hallowed cyberspace, and argue that humanity might well have thought of things more elegant and nourishing if our thinking had not been interrupted so much along the way.

Most vital questions human beings have asked through the ages – how can we educate? how can we heal? how can we earn? how can we govern? how can we judge? who should be rich and who poor? what is a nation and who are we anyway? who is right? – might have produced more sustainable, egalitarian, integrated, dignifying answers if we had not interrupted each other so often in conversations and meetings and musings, and if we also had not interrupted *ourselves* because others' interruptions over the years had convinced us we didn't have much to offer anyway.

And our relationships? I surely don't need to articulate the difference the promise of no interruption might have made in every single relationship since humans developed language. Think about yours. Imagine your relationships without interruption. Imagine the sweet, stimulating sturdiness that would grow from that promise. I often wonder if divorce figures would reduce dramatically if there had been a vow of no interruption at the wedding.

Then, as if interruption by each other were not enough to minister to the diminishment of our independent minds and the shrinking of meaning in our relationships, enter smartphones. More accurately 'hurtphones' or 'stupidphones'. With their built-in servicing of platforms that colonize our attention, they slap our brains into brainlessness. Relentlessly distracted, our thinking begins to haemorrhage.

This loss is not wholly the device's fault, of course. It is mostly ours. Even with the smartphones' on-purpose designed-in distraction notification architecture, our prostration at their non-human feet is the real issue. Our obeisance demotes the advanced human, and we pretend it doesn't. We don't take charge of our attention. Our little robots do. And we caress them.

This we can stop. We can stop all forms of interruption. (There are more than you think, and we will explore them all.) We can decide right now to be masters of our attention, to commit to the flourishing of our minds, of our hearts, of our very nature.

This attention, this promise not to interrupt, this act of breathing free, is prodigious. It changes things. Even the big things. It bestows sanity. It shapes and reveals and shapes again who we are. It offers ease in the face of uncertainty. It can stop

things like hatred and start things like love. It rescues our meetings from vacuity, creates fabulous places to work, brings humanity to leadership and leadership to humanity. Attention, some have told me, is what we mean by 'god'.

It launches dreams. The dreams we have for ourselves, yes; but also the dreams for our world. We all have them. Even the most cynical of us. We've just grown wary and weary and willing to walk away from each other, and from ourselves.

This promise of no interruption, this sustaining of generative attention, can turn us towards each other.

In fact, the decision not to interrupt each other is powerful enough to mitigate the prepotent relationship issue of our time, the issue that cleaves our conversations at work, in politics, in religion, between neighbours, in families and invisibly inside ourselves – the societal bifurcation we call polarization. This contemporary scourge is ancestral. And it is high time we faced it down by facing its cause.

*Polarization is not a result of disagreement. It is a result of disconnection.* When we disconnect from each other, when we see each other no longer as human beings but as threats, we polarize. And the first, most forceful disconnecter is interruption.

I think that polarization in each instance, therefore, starts with, and is fed by, interruption. The very first minute one of us in stark disagreement interrupts the other, the brain registers the interruption as a *physical* assault. Immediately the brain hormones of adrenaline and cortisol bathe the cortex, the very centre of our thinking; the amygdala, dictator of feelings, instantly dispatches the triumvirate actions of freezing, fleeing, fighting. And presto, we disconnect. Our thinking shrivels. And polarization is born.

But I have seen people stop that cycle. I have seen them gather instead, determined to understand each other, not to convince each other. Crucially, they have arrived having promised to stop interrupting. They have agreed 1) to *start giving attention*, 2) to *stay interested* in where each other's thinking will go next and 3) to *'share the stage'* equally.

The promise of no interruption consisting of those three ingredients changed their conversation forever. Polarization fizzled. New possibilities emerged. Those three ingredients walked

forward together. Not into a sunset. It was better than that. They walked into the grit and gossamer of new thinking that springs from emotional integrity, understanding and mutual cherishing of the effects of this powerful promise.

*I will not interrupt you.*

It changes everything.

Good, you may be thinking. I'm in. But surely I don't need to read on? Can't I just take your point, go home, stop interrupting and, *tra-la*, change the world?

In theory, yes.

It *should* be enough for each of us just to notice this out-of-control, societally rewarded, devastating practice of interrupting, this wholesale, sanctioned violence against human independent thinking, and resolve to stop it today.

But it isn't. This practice of interrupting people's speaking and thinking is fed at an ideological level inside us. We think it is the right thing to do. We really do. Oh, we know it is not really polite or considerate, so sometimes we apologize as we do it. But we keep going. We think it is nearly always justified, and maybe even the very best thing that can happen at that moment. We think we are even saving time by knocking down the person talking while we hold forth.

Delusion takes some doing to undo.

First, we need really to *get* that interrupting is a violent act. To begin with, we need to understand what interruption *is*. We have to recognize all of its pernicious and artful forms.

And then we have to examine it at a 'cellular' level. We have to see the untrue assumptions that drive it, take them apart and start over with true ones.

Keeping the promise of no interruption is a tough job.

Tough because this promise is an unspiralling galaxy of a thing. It stretches past our all-at-once field. It defies our gulping. Its whole cannot be parsed, and yet it has to be to be understood.

Every day over the years I have thought repeatedly that I had seen this promise in all its glory. I have thought each time I saw it that I had it down, that there was no more to see, no more to add

to its definition or its effect. I have felt confident that I was doing it just as I wrote, as I taught, as I spoke, as I tried every day to live it. I have committed to its treasure and been sure I held it all in my arms. But before I could breathe out, I have, startled, seen it as if for the first time. And I have had to smile.

I also have seen people claim this promise, clip it to their listening portfolios, sell it as their skill set, and not come close. It is as if we can never know it. It is as if it is here and not here, evident and elusive, finished and foetal all at once.

I think this is because this promise is different from anything else we do with each other. I want to say that again. *This is different.*

It is different because it requires a donning of humility, a rich regard for difference and for 'other'. It is different because it upends the appearance of stability. It is different because it wants to, and does, produce *independent* thinking. And so it is subversive. Succouringly so. It is different because it requires us to stop wanting to impress and to start wanting to free. It changes what we call expertise. It changes what we charge for and pay for and what we reward. It can change our very purpose.

This promise and its luminous effects *are* different. But humans cannot see difference all at once. Our predispositions, our rituals, our norms – in this case interruption and its frayed and fractious outcomes – are our habituated context. They are our reference points for what is. So they are all we see.

We, therefore, have to fell those remorseless norms one by one in order to notice their radiant absence.

This felling begins by facing the emptiness of our excuses for interruption: 'I must clarify; I must correct; I must look smart right now; I must enrich; I must follow my *own* curiosity; I know where you are going with this; I need to take you elsewhere; your unformed thought will be less valuable than my formed one; I am more important than you are; I look stupid not talking; no one needs to listen this long; you will never stop.'

None of these is worthy of us.

So I hope that you will step away from that crepuscular culture and follow the first light: the soon-to-be-obvious power of this promise and of its effect on the intelligence in front of us. Including your own.



To stop interrupting –

- 1) to start giving attention
- 2) to sustain interest in where the person will go *next*
- 3) to ‘share the stage’ –

comprises possibly the simplest cluster of complex change we will ever make.

## 2. The Search

This all started with surrender. One day, just like that, I gave up. After three years of trying everything, I admitted I knew nothing. I was forty.

Three years before, I had set out to uncover the secrets of independent thinking. Armed with the insight that the quality of everything human beings do depends on the quality of the independent thinking we do first, I reasoned that to create the world we wanted, we had to think *for ourselves* well. And as far as I could see, hardly anyone was doing that.

I had thought listening would help. I had been among Quaker educators and among peer counsellors, so I tried all kinds of listening. Thirteen to be exact. I listened to understand, to reframe, to release feelings, to plan, to unblock, to challenge, to comfort, to solve, to interpret, to inform, to diffuse, to guide and to teach.

They were useful. But they didn't produce *independent* thinking. They helped with other things. And they produced good ideas sometimes. But no matter what kind of listening I did, people were not dependably thinking *for themselves*. Most of the time I was thinking for them. They probably wouldn't have put it that way. They were usually pleased with the outcomes. But I knew that my listening had taken them, however cunningly, to *my* idea of where they should go. And they had come along willingly.

I did not know how to keep their own thinking going. The weird thing was how fine they were with that.

I was not fine with it. It seemed to me that the world, and every individual life in it, needed *fresh* thinking, not guided, moulded, rewarded, derivative, compliant, samey thinking.

So one day I decided to throw out everything I knew and start from scratch. I couldn't really do that, of course, because who we

are is where we have been. But I did my best. I walked away from the theories, processes and knowledge I had acquired through my study of various psychological and philosophical takes on the human psyche, and began again. What, I asked myself, was the very minimum I could do to ignite, but not influence, a person's own thinking? And what could I do to keep it going?

Eventually, I faced it. It was embarrassingly simple: be present and don't speak. (Later, of course, this simple notion turned out to be heaving with complexity.)

So, at-wits'-end intrepid, I decided to do that. To promise it, and to do it.

And *that* is what worked: I *promised*.

I asked people if they would be willing for me to try it with them. They were.

And it was astonishing. The thinking that emerged was every bit as good as, often better than, the thinking that had come from my oh-so-smart, guiding questions. *How could that be?* I agonized. I had not done anything. I had just sat there, saying nothing. And they knew I would. How could that be so effective? I was sleep-deprivingly curious about that. But I became afraid to wonder too hard about it for fear it would jinx everything. So I just kept doing it. I threw in this and that now and then, but the additions seemed to distract. Finally, I returned to those two simple things: be present and don't speak. I promised. And I kept the promise.

Along the way when they said they were truly finished, I was tempted to come in with something wise and wonderful from my vast and, of course, impressive knowledge and experience, with some drop-dead brilliant question that would leave them dazzled at, yes, me. But I gritted my teeth and plugged back into wondering whether they could think even further than that, *for themselves*.

Getting their own thinking to continue was a bit stumble at first. Follow-ups like, 'Is that it?' or 'Are you finished?' or 'Keep going' didn't always do much. And certainly any question referencing my choice of their content flopped utterly. 'Can you tell me more about ...?', 'I hear you saying that ...', 'Have you thought about ...?' and 'Could you imagine instead ...?' were

disasters. People went visibly from energized to enervated, from autonomous to anonymous, in a heartbeat.

So I stopped that and tried to find a 'say more' version of 'be present and don't speak'. After several years of stabbings in the dark I tried: 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' It worked. They kept going, and I kept out of it.

I had feared they would think I had not been listening at all given that they had just said they were truly finished. But I was finding that where there has been some thinking, there can be more, given just the right encouragement. And almost always, which if you think about it is amazing, the additional thinking they generated was usually even more valuable than their previous thoughts.

So I tried it again. And again. That same 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?' Until they really, really were finished, as in they had no response at all.

This became the whole focus of my work for a while. I was on a mission. At first I was doing all of it pro bono. Who was going to pay for me to say 'nothing'?

But so many people said it was the most valuable listened-to experience they had ever had. Really? So eventually I began to charge, and held my breath. They paid and did not hold theirs. They thanked me.

That bewildered me. What were they paying for? My presence and my silence and the same keep-going question asked over and over until it didn't work any more? Apparently. There was nothing else to pay for. Why, then, I had to ask myself again, was it producing such valuable results?

That question took a third of my life to answer. (In fact, my colleagues and I are still working on it; these answers are ever-emergent, it seems.)

During that time we discovered that inside this promise not to speak, this simple three-faceted agreement to stop interrupting (to start giving attention, to stay interested and to 'share the stage'), there is a lot going on. Inside this promise there appears to be a kind of 'coding' for removing blocks in thinking. It appears that the mind, when not interfered with, asks itself a range of catalytic, almost 'innate' questions when it gets stuck, breaking through

blocks for itself, so it can be on its way again. All of that seems to happen when the promise of no interruption is in place and the mind is soaring.

And in that promise, too, there is a rich colony of catalysts. There are at least ten conditions – the ‘components of a thinking environment’ I mentioned, conditions we are providing when we give attention and don’t speak. These ‘components’ – attention, equality, ease, appreciation, feelings, encouragement, information, difference, incisive questions and place – we will explore in fresh detail later. The point here is that they actually *generate* thought. To decide to live them is to decide to cherish independent human thinking.

So I think of this promise not to interrupt as a kind of zygote. Zygotes mesmerize me: one cell combines with another cell to become *one* cell. I adore that bit of mathematical defiance. And inside that new cell is the stuff of trillions of other cells and their heroic and resplendent expressions that collaborate to become an entirely unlikely entity of ineffable majesty: us.

I think that attention and interest are like that. Let them meet, and you create independent thinking – the singular, triumphant articulation of this wonder that is *Homo sapiens*. Could it be that attention and interest *create* thought, a ‘being’ that is loaded with the fire of life? I think so.

The ignition of independent thinking happens inside us when we experience attention and *know* we will not be interrupted. It is the *knowing*, the promise, that produces the trust that produces the courage that produces our new thinking.

So, most of the time, generative attention was enough. And it was splendid.

But sometimes it wasn’t enough. Sometimes the person suddenly could not break through for themselves. They got stumped. They stopped. And I did not know what to do. I could not figure out how to help someone past a block while not steering them *at all*. I faked it for a while and we limped along. Eventually, probably desperate to extricate themselves from my sudden, uncharacteristic ‘follow-me’ utterances, they started thinking again and managed to break through for themselves.

Over time I pondered that: they *would* break through for themselves if they possibly could. I had ‘seen’ those moments. Over time I did my best to deconstruct their breakthroughs and to discern what they had just done for themselves.

Finally, I could see it. They had asked themselves a spectacular breakthrough question. And they had gotten there by asking themselves a cluster of other questions first. It was a logical and beautiful sequence, supple and able to leap from one snare to a question to a different snare to another question until it arrived finally at that most liberating question of all. In later years I would label that one an ‘incisive question’, because it was, indeed.

How fabulous, I realized. Maybe I could ask people those questions, ending in the incisive one, when they said they were stuck, instead of making them live through my lurches and collapses. I tried. It worked. Virtually every time.

And it still does. That cluster of questions (some of the ‘innate’ ones I mentioned) seems to be the mind’s own life force.

I have said that we have also very recently begun to understand that the mind seems to think in ‘waves and pauses’, not in ‘parts’. (Formerly I thought the road to the incisive question consisted of ‘parts’ and could be mapped. I was wrong. The mind is not so predictably linear.) It then determines in the pause the ‘just right’ question among those ‘innate questions’ to generate a new wave. As the listener, we are now able to navigate that same ‘pause’ process to determine the right question when the person cannot do it for themselves.

And so the journey continues. From the frustration, to the white flag, to the stripping down, to the trying, to the wondering, to the noticing, to the piecing together, to the being wrong, to the trying again, to the noticing again and the being wrong again, and the not turning away, to the impressive results and changed lives and organizations, and to the ongoing intrigue of the never-completely-there seeing of what works, of facing what doesn’t and of watching the pursuit find itself.

Along the way we have created beautiful courses and qualifications and other elegant executions of what we are learning about this way of being with people, this ‘thinking environment’. But the abiding joy is in seeing that these ten

conditions, these 'components', that populate the promise not to interrupt appear to work regardless of culture or background, status or personality type, religion or income, or even predisposition to being nice. Something innate does seem to be going on when we honour each other in this way. Something worth learning.

Something even worth living.

### 3. For Themselves

Do you want people to think well?

Yes. Most likely. At least I hope so.

But the real question is: do you want people to think *for themselves*?

I still hope so. But I'm dubious. Because that is different. Thinking *for ourselves* is different. Entirely.

And that difference is the absolute marrow, the quark 'inside' the proton, the point of the point of the point of this book. *Thinking for yourself is different.*

The difference between thinking and thinking for yourself changes not just the game, but the life. And *helping each other* to think for ourselves is so different it stops us in almost every track of helping we have ever mastered.

Thinking for ourselves is different from thinking. It is different from thinking well. It is different from solving, from understanding, from sorting, from factoring in, from seeing the path, from listing the pros and cons, from deciding, from noticing patterns, from seeing the blind spots, from establishing accountability, from being quiet, from telling the story and from doing cartwheels because, yippee, the equation finally works. Those are all fantastic. I wish them on everyone I know and love.

But that is not this. If what you want to do is to think *for yourself* as far as you possibly can before you need my thinking – that is *different*. Wonderfully, it will include all of those things, I promise you. But it will go way beyond them.

And here's the thing: that difference occupies nearly a world of its own. It reaches in and pulls out the most amazing aspects of ourselves. It finds pristine honesty and dazzles us. It employs courage we had no idea lived there. It gestates what we call



belonging, norm-addiction and status. So the decision, this entirely different decision, is an act of courage.

Imagine this moment: You are talking. You are thinking. I am listening. You are alive. You step into that world of fully independent thinking. I keep listening. You keep thinking. Then. Without warning, I feel a need to speak. I nearly do. But having promised not to, I try to notice what is happening. I see, reluctantly, that I don't *have* to speak. I have choice.

So I decide at least to weigh up the risks. I remember writer Nassim Taleb's way of assessing financial risk (from his majestic book, *Antifragile*). I ask myself this question:

*If I speak now, can I be sure that the upside from the gain of my already thought thoughts will be greater than the downside from the loss of your as yet unthought thoughts?*

No, I admit, I cannot possibly be sure of that because neither of us knows what you have not yet thought. On the other hand, I do know what *I* have thought. So those thoughts are retrievable if needed later. I can just set them into my pretty come-back-later box here next to my antsiness.

But what you have not yet thought can be obliterated forever if I dive in before you have finished. And that loss of your thinking may be far greater than any gain from mine. I just don't know. And because *I don't know*, I do not make the sacrifice.

Or for brevity I might have formed the question in my mind this way:

*Can I be sure that what I as the listener am about to say will be of more value than what you are about to think?*

Of course not. For the same reasons. I have *no idea* what you are about to think. I think I do. I think I've 'got it'. I think I have heard enough of what you think to be sure I know what you are going to think next. But I don't. I absolutely don't.

How could I? For one thing, according to Ken Sergi, Organization Development specialist, we think seven times faster than we speak. We speak at approximately 115 words per minute, but think at approximately 825 words per minute. My own experience aligns

better with an even starker view offered by a psychologist on one of my courses. His working hypothesis is that ‘for every thirty words we say, we don’t say 300’. If he is right, even when I am listening to you beautifully, I don’t have access to 90 per cent of your thinking. So surely we both benefit if you can develop your thinking fully before I speak. At least the 10 per cent I am responding to will be more accurate and fully formed, so my response can be, too.

A more important point, though, is that if the conditions are right, i.e. if I keep listening with deep interest in where you will go next, you will go next to places I could never have taken you. Places with far more magic and meaning and relevance.

So I do make a choice, but it is different. It is the choice that sacrifices the known for the unknown. I stay attentive, rapt. Generatively and generously.

I overcome the urge to speak.

You continue. Intact.

I want to say again that this decision to produce *independent* thinking is different from any other we make as listeners, as colleagues, as friends, parents, teachers. It is. And that overriding, glistening difference is so huge it is like a billion pirouetting photons headed our way.

There is also a rending insight about this difference. I heard it from one of my students, a business executive:

*‘Wanting people to do their own thinking, listening to ignite their as-yet unthought thoughts, as you say, is going to be, for me at least, a step-by-step journey towards humility.’*

Yes. It is. That is exactly what it is. As listeners we decide to shine by not shining. And of all the differences between exchange thinking and *independent* thinking, between interruptive listening and generative attention, the ‘journey towards humility’ is surely the most uprooting.

But it is only the first journey. A needed one, an elegant one. But only the first.

The final journey is, ironically, the *end* of humility, because when we want independent thinking more than anything – when we cannot stand *not* to know what will evolve next in the mind of

the thinker – humility is no longer the challenge. It has become the norm.

And when it is, when we know because we have seen it hundreds of times, that we *can* think brilliantly for ourselves, and that we *will* if the people with us keep the promise not to interrupt and to stay interested in where we will go next? And when they want us, fiercely, to keep thinking?

What then?

It *will* happen.

We *will* think for ourselves all the way to a place of quality and value neither of us could have divined.

This *decision* to produce independent thinking in ourselves and in others is monumental. It is an earthquake's earthquake. It is a way to meaning. It is a way to understanding. It is a way to the lives we long for. It is a way to the world most of us want, but speak of only in our personal silence.

We ache for it, this act of simplicity that teems with complexity, and smiles in our direction.

See? There it is.

We need only walk over and say hello.

*Then why do we resist?*

If thinking for ourselves is so great, so much fun, so full of self-discovery and meaning and sheer amazement, not to mention loaded with propitious implications for our world, why do we resist the decision to do it? Why as thinkers do we defer to others' thinking, and expect others as thinkers to defer to ours? Why is it that just about the only time we think for ourselves is when we are thinking for someone else?

Because when we were young, no one asked us this life-shaping question: 'What do you think?' And then listened because they wanted to know. No one. Most people grow up without that question. And without that attention. And what people don't experience in childhood, they don't expect in adulthood.

What a world this is. A child is born. It has equipment in its head (with sentries scattered elsewhere) so dazzling even Da Vinci would fail to render it. All it needs right now to work well and to keep unfolding is a particular kind of sustained attention, *generative* attention. And in a very short time it needs also that

question, and more of the same attention. Yes, it needs information from sources as accurate and varied as possible. But attention and the question ‘What do you think?’ are the key means to their brain’s lifelong purring.

But where is it, this attention? And where is it, this question? Nowhere.

Actually, sometimes the first few minutes of life are pretty good. Usually the newborn is placed in its mother’s arms and into her intelligent, loving gaze. Again, that attention is generative because it continues the cellular development of the newborn’s brain.

But very soon ‘I’m listening’ is nowhere to be found. ‘What do you think?’ Nowhere. ‘Keep going, I’m interested.’ Nowhere. ‘Your mind is a treasure.’ Nowhere.

So. Good thinking? Independent thinking? Not much of a chance. Not at the moment. But change is afoot. And the human mind will not be in this sutured state forever. In Part Three we will explore how different a human life might look if its inborn thinking capacities were not beleaguered from birth, if instead the ‘nowhere things’ were ‘everywhere things’. It is beautiful.

And it is excruciatingly possible.

This deciding – what must we face to do it?

That we have a self.

That’s a tough job in the grip of our be-like-me, do-it-only-this-way reward cultures. A big job. Too big for us most of the time, it seems.

We won’t risk it. We won’t risk overturning our allegiance to the forces that formed us. We won’t risk even imagining that we might have a good brain; that we might be able to think as well as, even better than, the brains that birthed us and the ones that lead us, the ones who pay us, who stick that medal on our lives and shake our hand. To risk all that we must face that the persuaders we long to love are wrong.

And facing the wrongness of the master is a wrench. *Feeling*, rather than suppressing, our disappointment at allegiance stings. At first. But once we’ve done it, it is freedom unlike any other.

The self?

Yes. We do have a self, an intact, luminous core of intelligence. A core that deserves a fifty-times-a-day opportunity to express itself.

We just have to decide. We can free that self from the made-up infrastructures of command that glare when that self peeks through. Glare back. Crawl out. Stand, lift your ribs, take in the sky. Decide.

I've witnessed this deciding, this resurrection of self, this cradling of core, thousands of times. Each time is a fresh revelation, a privilege.

*What do you think? I want to know. I won't interrupt.*

There is something about that question and those conditions that rescue the core self. Genuine is what the *core* self is. And it will emerge when genuine is what surrounds it.

*What do you think?*

*I won't interrupt.*

The self *will* arrive, if the road is right.

## 6. Trust the Thinker

Remember, too, that we can't know right this second what we don't know right this second. We can only stride out and trust. Also, we can't know that trusting will be worth the risk of abandoning what we know for something we don't.

That is a lot of not knowing. And humans are not brilliant at not knowing. We like to think we know everything. Even some very, very, very smart people have said things like, 'It seems probable that most of the grand underlying principles of life have been firmly established' (Albert Michelson, 1894), and 'The era of fundamental revelations in nature is over' (John Horgan, 2014).

Disquieting, I agree. But you need only look around yourself to see how your life defaults to knowing-for-sure. It would take you quite a few hours to count the things you do because you have already done them and you trust they work. But in only a few seconds you could count the things you did today that were conscious opposites of those trusted things. Two, three?

I counted three this week. I usually sleep eight hours. But on this morning I heard the blackbirds in the dawn chorus, swooned and decided to get up, go up to my study and just sit, listening.

And yesterday I wrote for two blissful hours before I did a single email.

And today I decided not to be the 'glue' of conversation when my six students were gathering over espresso. I moved to the circle of chairs where we would be learning in a few minutes and just sat, admiring them all.

In all of these moments there was that faint frisson in that split second when I turned my back on the usual and committed to the different.

That's all it is. Just a little zing. An 'if' feeling. A 'this might not work but no one will die' feeling. It's not a 'jaspers what have I

done and who will I *be* after this?’ feeling. To let go, even for a minute, of the thing that is familiar for the thing that is really not is only to shift from *ah* to *hmmm*. And that is actually kind of nice. And the good thing is Plan B. We can always go back to the familiar. It is there, arms crossed.

So it’s not such a big deal to decide, for example, not to interrupt anyone or, before they are finished, not to interject your thoughts, for the next hour. What could go wrong? Just about the worst thing that could happen would be that they look at you strangely because they have memorized your interrupting pattern and you have suddenly become weirdly out of sync with yourself. But so what?

You could let them know ahead of time that you think that if you don’t stop them, they will produce thinking they couldn’t otherwise. You could do this not in order to save the familiar brilliant you from seeming weird to them, but rather to save their thinking from the distraction of the surprise of your not jumping in as usual every few seconds. Weirdness is not weird if it is announced ahead of time and grounded in the ‘why’ of itself.

I mean, you may have to repress, possibly even with a ten-ton psychic hammer, a few thoughts you are pretty sure could change the whole argument and even show you off to be quite the ‘choice’ choice. But again, you won’t die from a conscious hanging back. And you can bestow your irreplaceable thoughts graciously once it’s your turn (if they are still relevant).

So how about trying it with a colleague today? And then tomorrow. What if you tried it for a bit longer? And then in a few days you could try it with the person you love most in the world.

In the end it is a decision to trust. To trust the thinker in people. To trust the thinker in yourself.

Go for the frisson.