



Episode 60: Teaching is a Sacred Responsibility: Part Two with Eloise Hellyer

Welcome to Episode #60!

This week we're back to continue our conversation with Eloise Hellyer. If you missed last week's episode you many want to go back and listen to the first half of this conversation first.

In this part of our conversation we're going to talk about the importance of teachers, of not having preconceived ideas about where students are headed and a great practice in as well.

Let's jump right in!

Eloise Hellyer:

I think there's one story in the book, in one of the interviews that if you haven't seen it yet (unclear) who was a famous quartet player in his day, said that he was a soloist in front of an orchestra, and he finished playing. And nonetheless, than the concert master, the orchestra said to him, oh, Manny, you're so lucky. You know what you want. And he said, what a peculiar thing to say. Doesn't everybody? And then he said, I started teaching and found out that they don't. So a lot of it is to help them discover what they want, but you help them. It's like giving birth. It's like being a, what's the word? Midwife. You help them give birth to something that's theirs.

At least that's how I see it.

Christine Goodner:

And there's a lot of research that the more adults a student has in their life that just sees them as a person and is attuned to their emotions and needs, the better they will do. In many ways, I'm not quoting that well, but I think we just become an adult in their life that cares and is helping them with something. And like you said, we're not trying to get them to love us, but we hold an important place when we work with students for so long.

Eloise Hellyer:

No, there are two things I have to say about that. First of all, it's opinions. I think one of the most dangerous things a teacher can do is to size up their students. And what I mean by that is that when you decide, okay, I've met, and people do, it's human nature, it comes natural to us. But if you stop and think

about it, I don't know how long you've been married, but I've been married a long time and I still don't know everything I should know about how am Earth, am I going to size anybody up in a few lessons or one lesson or even 10 years of lessons? Because people change and everybody's different. So if you form an opinion of that student, he's this, he's that. And the other thing, you may not see the changes. And as a result, you're not teaching the person you're teaching your opinion. And that can be very frustrating for a student. That's hard because kids want to be seen for what they are in that moment.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah.

Eloise Hellyer:

That's really, really, really so important. The second thing I'll tell you, and I still get scared every time I talk about it, I once had a student, I spend the first 30 seconds of every lesson talking to my students and asking them how they are.

Christine Goodner:

Sure, yeah.

Eloise Hellyer:

What's school? How are you getting along with you? Everything right. I did it by instinct. Now I do it on purpose. And this is why some years ago, I had a student about 15 who kept getting thinner and thinner and thinner and thinner. I thought, oh my heavens, what's going on? So I call her mother and she says, oh, we can't do a thing with her. We're so upset. We don't know what to do. She's just not eating. This is terrible. Oh, dear, dear, dear. I said, okay, fine. Let's see what happens. I waited another month. She's getting thinner and thinner. I called them back and the mother said to me, this really got me, Louise. You have no idea how hard it is to watch your child kill herself. And I said to her, do you want me to talk to her? And she said, well, you can try. Everybody has. Nobody's gotten anywhere with her. You can't. Her parish priest, everybody's talked to her. We can't do a thing. Go ahead. So I didn't try to talk to her. I just wanted to find out what she was thinking. So I asked her, is there something bothering you? And so we chatted for a few minutes, and it totally came out that she was upset because a member of her family was behaving badly.

According to her. It was not abuse. We quickly established it was nothing of the sort. And I think as well as I do that, it doesn't matter what happens to you, it's how you take it. Okay? And it's nothing that this person did that was so horrible. It was just the way this girl was reacting. And I finally asked her, I said, well, do you think people who behave badly are, this is where the universe helped me. I don't know where this came from. I had not planned it. Do you think that people who behave badly are happy? She said, well, no, I don't think so. And I said, well, do you think this person is happy? She said, well, I mentioned, I guess not. I said, well, why don't you try having some compassion for that person? She said, she went home the next day.

Her mother called me. She said, I didn't know what you said to my daughter, but she asked for help. And 25 years later, she's normal. Weight has a career, children, husband, the whole bit. And I still get chills when I think about it. What if I hadn't been there? And that's how important we can be to our students sometimes. Just a question. I asked her a question, and the interesting thing about this is that it was compassion that turned, asking her to have compassion, which is something teachers need to have. We need to have compassion for ourselves as well as for our students. And that's a scary story. But I think it's indicative of just the difference we can make in of our students just by being there.

Christine Goodner:

And you didn't lecture her, you gave her space to talk to you?

Eloise Hellyer:

No, I didn't. Absolutely. The worst thing you can do with kids like that is to talk at them. So I just asked her a couple of questions. That's all I did. And it was, I don't know why, Christine. I don't know why I think I was being helped. I really do. Sometimes I think that's part of instinct, because when you connect to people, all of a sudden things will come to you that maybe wouldn't otherwise. You've had that experience, I'm sure.

Christine Goodner:

So I think we hold a space and maybe a level of trust with our students too.

Eloise Hellyer:

It's trust. It's trust. She trusted me because I always asked her how she was, even when I could see she wasn't well, I never lectured her. Nothing like that. I just say, how are things going? Okay, fine. And it doesn't take much to gain a child's trust. It doesn't take much to lose it either. But gaining their trust is really, really important. And I think that's the same thing with my own children. Let me go back to that for a second. Learning to say three good things before you'd said what went wrong was really tough. It took me a couple of years to change my mentality about that, because I wasn't raised that way most of us. So, well, maybe some of us were, I don't know. But I think Suzuki was really big on that, and it was an eyeopener to me when I read *Nurture by Love*, and it's been very, very useful. And now it comes natural to me to do that. And by the way, just for your information, I'm also teaching my grandchildren online.

Christine Goodner:

That's wonderful.

Eloise Hellyer:

Which is really, yeah, it really is. I'm really glad to do it.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Well, I think for parents listening, I did a research project with a colleague, Dr. Rebekah Hanson, and we asked teens - there was like 120, 12 to 22 year olds. We did a research project that was published and it asked the journal. And one of the things we asked them was, what motivates you now to practice or to be involved in music? And one of the top three answers was the relationship with my teacher. And I think it kind of put into some data, something we already know when we reflect as ourselves, whether we're a musician or not, about the teachers in our lives who make a difference. And I think as a parent, if you're listening, supporting the relationship between your child and their teacher is so important. So I think a story if you're a parent, I think really illustrates that teachers hold a powerful place and you can communicate with them. Every teacher I know really cares about students they're working with as people. And you want to find a teacher like that. For sure.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, yeah. And children do not forget these teachers. They don't forget them. They don't. And some of us did not have teachers like that as children. So it's hard to realize, and it's a big surprise. And all of a

sudden you out that they come back to you after 20 years and say, you're the only one that believed in me.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah.

Eloise Hellyer:

Give an example. Okay. Or you have no idea how important it was that you would ask me how I was every day. Okay. You just don't expect it. And it is wonderful when that happens. You don't wait for it, but it goes to show you just how important it can be in somebody's life. Small acts like that.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Teachers are so important. And just adults who care about kids and create that space for them. Well, we're going to pivot to a totally different topic for a moment now, although maybe it'll weave together. I just wanted to mention, you have some wonderful interviews with professional musicians in your book, Gil Shaham. I just got to see perform this past year with Organ Symphony. We got to sit in on a dress rehearsal and then a concert with him. And just the way one of the people that you interviewed in your book and just the way he interacted, even with the orchestra, I just was so struck by him both as a musician, as a human. So we don't have to talk about him specifically, but I just wondered, what have you personally taken away from all those interviews?

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, what they all have in common is interesting because they're all different. And I will say before you go on, I've known Gil for a long time, and he's an angel. He really is. I was checking his back to see if he had wings. He really is. It's not a description he would like, but really he's amazing. The thing that struck me about all of them, and some of them were great. Virtuosos, was their humility.

You wouldn't expect some of them to be that way, but they were their humility in front of music, in they're in service to music, and they all have very strong personalities, which of course you need because you have to get, what was it is Schley, PQ Bach would say about the concerto being oboe against the orchestra or whatever it was instrument he was talking about. When they get up and they have to play louder than the orchestra, sometimes they've got to be tough. But yet, when they talk about music and the way they talk about it, it shows that they completely humble in front of music. And the thing that's interesting is how they practice. People think, oh yeah, talent, these great virtuosos born like that. And they can play the violin on their heads. They're two arms tied behind their backs and this, but it's not even that they practice their scales and their octaves and arpeggios, that kind of thing.

It's the way they study every single aspect of the piece. They're playing every note, every nuance, what part of the bow, where they're going to phrase everything. And I can give an example. One of them came to see us, and he stayed for a couple of days, and he was practicing, which was kind of fun to listen to. And then he said at one point, Eloise, I've got this new piece of music that I'm practicing. And I looked at it, and it wasn't anything that for him would be difficult at all. I mean, remotely, he could play anything at first sight and stupid by you, you should see what his music looked like. It was two pages of music. It was all marked up. Every single bow stroke, he had different colors, which meant he wasn't playing through the music. He sat down and he planned the whole thing.

So I said, would you mind if I took a photo of this? He said, certainly not. So I did, and I show it to all my students. There is one in particular in there. It was the way he markets himself. It's pretty commercial. And so I interviewed him because I wanted to talk to the last living student of George Escu. And this guy

blew me away. He blew me away. He absolutely talked about everything on a highly spiritual level, everything he had to say. And then I realized what he has to do to make his living is quite different from the way he sees music. That was a wonderful experience. That was very heartening.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Well, I definitely encourage people to pick up your book. Maybe we can talk about next where we'll go on and talk about a few other things today. But where can people find your book or where can they best connect with you if they're interested in, for example, reading those interviews?

Eloise Hellyer:

Oh, Charles Avsharian, of Shar Music decided he wanted to publish the book. So the only place you can find it if you're in North America, meaning Canada, not Mexico, but Canada in the United States is at Shar Music in paperback and also in Download. So it's not on Amazon. He's got it. He's got the elusive to it, and I'm very happy about that. It was nice that somebody like Charles got really, really interested in this. I don't know if people know much about him, but he was one of the star pupils of Galamian. And so it was really wonderful that he got on board with it. So I deeply appreciate it. And then there's my blog. Yeah, there's my blog, which is violin teachers.com, and that has at least, what, 125 articles on it? Yeah, something like that. Because I don't know, I just keep going.

Christine Goodner:

Well, I don't know about you, but I know I teach better when I think about all these ideas, the kind of work I do, it just makes me teach better, looking at things in a certain way and looking for patterns and thinking about ideas. And it gives me a lot, even though I'm also giving something.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, I think it's always useful to read what other people do. You may not always agree with them, but reading what they do and seeing what they do, that's why I go on these forums all the time because they give me new ideas. I may not agree with them, but it makes me form an idea in another way. So therefore, it's always very, very interesting. It's useful to keep up that way. It stimulates you.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. We'll make sure a link to your blog and to the book or in the show notes so people can easily find those and connect with you that way. What do you hope people take away from your work, your public work like this?

Eloise Hellyer:

Wow. Well, several things. First of all, teaching is a spiritual activity, which isn't something we talk about much, but it is important. And it's playing music as a spiritual activity. It's a transmission. Because if you think of it, how does it work that somebody can play? Let's just say you go to a church service here in Italy and somebody plays in Ave Maria, maybe only in first position, and everybody starts crying. What's the mechanism? There's something there. I don't think it's a question of neurons. There's something more there. And it's the same thing when you teach. It's very, very important, the human transmission, the energy that passes between two individuals, and it's a sacred responsibility. Teaching is important. It's a privilege. It's something we do for future generations. I dunno if you've noticed, but even Gil Shaham, who swore he would never teach, is now teaching. In his interview, he says it, I'll never teach. Right? And I laughed.

They all do. They all do sooner or later, because you want to give back. You want to give something to future generations. So we need teachers who love teaching. We need to see it as important. We need to see students as individuals. We need to proselytize for music. We should try not to give up on our more difficult students as well. And students don't forget teachers like that. They don't. So I also wrote the book to give a hand to musicians who have been trained to play. They come out of conservatory and they find out that maybe it's a good idea if I start teaching. And nobody's really talked to them about that. I know how hard it was for me when I first started, and so I wanted to make it a little easier for everybody else. And there's stuff for parents in there as well. There's a lot of things that could be useful to parents. I think every student is precious. Every single one, every professional we produce, we need hundreds of music lovers, hundreds to support them. What better way to get people to love music than by teaching them to play it with love and compassion on our part. And I think that's really important.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I agree. And there's a lot we gain from learning music in so many layers, whether it's the way our brains think, whether it's learning to work hard, whether it's just learning to be sensitive to beautiful things. I mean, we could just go on and on and on. It's so important.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, there's one thing I should add, and that is that I think classical music, one of the reasons that we find ourselves in a bit of trouble, I mean, a lot of the major orchestras are having reductions in benefits and pay and things are happening because we have not cultivated the amateurs. In other words, you could have somebody for three lessons who decides they're not really that interested, but you didn't make 'em hate music. I do know of one case I met someone, they're multi, multi multimillionaires, and the wife told me that she had studied the violin when she was little, but her teacher and her parents decided her sound was so awful that she should quit. And she was very upset, but I could see still, and she was in her fifties, so I just pointed out to her, maybe it wasn't your fault. Okay. But the upshot of the question is this. She has four kids. Do they take music lessons? No. Do they go to concerts? No. Do they give any of their millions to the arts? No. So we have to really cultivate even the ones that you might think are not going to go anywhere, the ones that aren't going to practice, or this is a waste of my time. Nobody's a waste of time ever. Time is never was wasted in music lessons, especially the time of the teacher ever.

Christine Goodner:

Oh, I couldn't agree with you more. And that goes back to just, there's so many reasons we might play music, and becoming a professional musician is just kind of a drop in the bucket of all those reasons.

Eloise Hellyer:

Yeah, that's one of a hundred.

Christine Goodner:

That's

Eloise Hellyer:

One of a hundred. And a lot of people think that. A lot of teachers think that if you don't training people to get to the top levels and everything, then you're wasting your time. I don't know. I can't see it that

way. I can't. And I think if we don't start cultivating everyone possible, we're going to find ourselves in big trouble.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, couldn't agree with you more there. I think that's a really important message for all of us to think about. It's been delightful to talk to you. I feel like our time has passed so quickly, but I always ask people before we go to share a tip about music practice or a day about music practice they'd like to leave listeners with before we go. So I'd love to hear yours.

Eloise Hellyer:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Great.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, I got a couple of them. I think my favorite one is what do you do better? What you like or what you dislike? And your students will always say, well, something I like to do. And I say, okay, you can't control what comes at you in life, but you can control how you look at it. And I said, you see that awful study right there? And they say, yeah, you don't like it, do you? No. I say, well, let's find something you like about it, because if you don't like it, you're not going to practice it. Well, oh. Then they look at me like I've lost my mind. So I say, okay, fine. Look at this. I know it's not very musical, but could you try to make it sound like Brahms? Well, I guess I could try. I said, and look at how many position changes there are here. You think what a master you're going to be a position changing once you get that down. Oh, well, I guess I could. I said, so if you decide you like it, you're going to practice better, right? I guess. I guess you're right. So I did this with one little girl. She came back the next week and she practiced this study we'd been stuck on for months. And I said, oh, that's wonderful. Did a great job. She said, yeah, I tried your philosophy on my homework. It works too.

Christine Goodner:

I love it.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, what I did to my students once was I was having trouble with some of them practicing the scales. So I said, Hey guys, shall we play the valley summer in the group? And they said, oh, cool. Yeah, that's great. And I said, okay, fine. So I said, before you know it, you hear them going, so one by one in private lessons. I said, you do realize you're practicing scales. Do you? Anyway, I snickered a lot. That was fun. So anyway, this kind of attitude will get you to practice. That's important. Then I also point out to them, once they're practicing, once you're concentrated, right? Do you notice if you like or dislike something? And they'll say, well, I guess I don't. I said, no, you're concentrated. So whether you like it or not is completely beside the point. I said, well, yeah, I guess you're right.

Once you focus, it's not so hard after all, is it? And they say, well, yes, it's not, these are my tips. I think it would be helpful to talk to our students more about concentration and flow states, because a lot of them have them and they don't realize it. And I think we have to be more aware of them. The one thing I noticed about all the musicians I spoke to, they would talk about these magic moments that would

happen maybe twice in their whole career when they could do no wrong and everything was flowing perfectly. But I think they have that experience more often than they think. They're just different gradings of it. And I think we have to encourage our students to look at it this way.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I like that a lot. I just talked to Dr. Molly Gebrian. She talked about neuroscience and the brain. She has a neuroscience background and as a violist, and she was just talking about the problem solving part, which is what made me think when you were talking about when you're really focused in and concentrating, you don't really notice if you like it or not. I think you're in that problem solving, this is a problem and I'm going to look at it from different sides and try to solve it. And then like you say, it's sort of irrelevant what we like or don't like, but we're just like, oh, how do I solve this? I love,

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, it's the same thing for us as teachers. When we're really in contact with a student, everything is extraneous. And I found that it's very helpful to point this out to my students because a lot of times they don't realize what concentration is. They don't know that they're, because as well as I do, you don't know you're concentrating until you're not. So it could get them to practice. They got to decide they like it. And then to keep practicing, they have to realize that once they're concentrated, it won't matter. And those are two things. I think that if we can help them realize that it's going to help them face lots of problems in life, not just practicing, because I think practicing is a microcosm of all the things we're going to face in life. Know that there's a goal, there's something you're working toward, how happy you'll be when you get there. What I'm going to have to do it, break it down into pick little bits, learn how to break a problem down. These are all extremely useful things. I read this somewhere, I don't know if it's apocryphal, but something like 60% of CEOs of multinationals play music to a professional level that should tell you something.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. And I heard a speaker at, I think it was an Asta conference, who was saying she speaks to groups of doctors all the time and asked them to raise their hand. How many of you grew up playing music? And she says like 90% of the hands will go up. It was, we just learn how to think and we learned how to work hard, and we learn how to focus. And I mean, we all want that for our children, I think whether they are a professional musician or whatever they do.

Eloise Hellyer:

Yeah. I don't view, I mean, I've got among my ex students, because I teach them to a certain level than I turn them over to others. I think it's better that way, but I don't care if they become professionals or not. It doesn't matter to me one way or the other. And I think that that's helpful. You're not interested in the outcome. You're interested in what's going on now. It's not that you're not personally invested in their future. So you're personally invested in what you're doing with them right now. And that's so important. Oh, and I will make one last distinction, and that is the beauty of music as opposed to everything else, is that you have to live in this moment. Now you think about it, what children do is always for tomorrow, eat this so you'll grow. Go still. So you can do this. And nobody's telling them that what they're doing is important right now, for now. So if you play the Twinkle, twinkle little star for me beautifully, as beautifully as you can, you are doing a service to the universe. You're sending positive vibrations out there, and who knows who hears them, but they're there. Okay? And if you do this, you're doing a service to humanity.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's beautiful. That's I think, a beautiful note to end our conversation on. Thank you so much for your perspective and all your wisdom. I hope people connect with your book and your blog, and thanks for sharing your thoughts with us today. I hope a lot of people take that to heart. Think about the young musicians in their lives that they're supporting in that way.

Eloise Hellyer:

Well, thank you, Christine. This has been a real privilege. I've enjoyed it.

A couple of take aways from today's conversation with Eloise Hellyer.

Time is never wasted in music lessons! I couldn't agree with this more - we never know the impact, or we may not know until the far into the future and we may wish something was going differently or want to change our approach but it is not a waste of time and I loved Eloise's point.

What did you take away from this conversation? I'd love to hear from you. If you're enjoying the podcast you can help in the following ways:

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Alright with that - happy practicing time to practice community! I'll look forward to being back with you next week!

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