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## *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

*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 import-