

*"When you talk, you are **only** repeating
what you already know. But if you **listen**,
you may learn something new."
by the Dalai Lama*

THE ART OF LISTENING

The heat was sweltering, and the tired hikers collapsed on the ground, welcoming the shade of the huge cedar.

"All right class," Miss Barnes said. "We'll take a ten-minute break, then we'll get moving again. We have to meet the bus at the rendezvous point no later than three o'clock if we want to be home before dark."

Everyone moaned in unison and removed their backpacks. They retrieved their canteens, downing huge gulps of water. They had been looking forward to today's excursion, spending the day hiking in the woods, gathering plant and flower specimens for their final science project.

The seven young backpackers were grade eight students from Pine Hill School, which was located in the small village of Valleyview. Most of their parents worked in the copper mine or for Johnson's Lumber Mill. Annie McPhee was the one exception. She lived with her father in a log house west of Valleyview. Mr. McPhee was a trapper and a widower, and from the time Annie was old enough to walk, she traveled with him, happily spending hours climbing mountains, forging streams, and exploring animal trails.

When she was old enough to attend school, Annie rebelled, but her father insisted she go. He had never had an opportunity to get an education, and he wanted his daughter to have one. It was not surprising Annie spent many hours in detention in Mr. Fountain's office. At first, he stressed over her defiance, and over time, he came to understand her originality, her longing to be outdoors. He soon appreciated her intelligence and spirit, and they became friends.

Miss Ophelia Barnes was Annie's homeroom teacher, and it was well-known that the two of them had never seen eye-to-eye. Ever since the incident in grade five, when Annie had panicked during school inoculations, tackling Mr. Davis, the gym teacher, and causing a riot worse than a Boxing Day sale at Zellers, Miss Barnes had never forgiven her.

Annie had a wonderful day, spending hours in her beloved mountains. It was now late afternoon, and she realized there was a problem, a huge problem, and she wasn't sure how to approach Miss Barnes without causing a commotion.

She fiddled with the strap of her backpack, wrapping it around and around her hand. Knowing Annie well, Cindy, her best friend, leaned over and whispered. "Whatever you're thinking about, don't you dare say anything to Miss Barnes, you'll ruin the whole day for everyone."

Cindy was well aware of the tense relationship between Annie and Miss Barnes. For that matter, everyone in Pine Hill School was aware.

"The whole day could get a lot worse if I stay quiet," Annie answered.

Cindy slumped back on the mossy ground. She trusted Annie's instincts, and hoped her friend would handle matters tactfully, and not in her usual brusque style.

“Excuse me Miss Barnes, how much farther do we have to go?” Annie asked, wiping her damp hair off her forehead.

“Honestly Annie,” Miss Barnes replied. “Why is it always you who complains first?”

Annie observed the faces of her classmates. Miss Barnes’ critical remark had sparked their attention.

“Well, that’s a first, usually you have so much to say,” Miss Barnes continued disparagingly.

Annie angrily curbed her frustration. “I do have something to say, it’s just that you never let me explain anything, you just immediately lose your temper.”

Someone gasped audibly, and Annie knew it was Cindy.

“That was very disrespectful,” Miss Barnes remarked indignantly. “If it wasn’t so close to the end of the term, I would report you to Mr. Fountain.”

For a moment there was silence, and all eyes were pivoted on the drama unfolding before them. None of the students would have had the courage to confront Miss Barnes, and their loyalties were divided, some of them thought Annie was a champion, others thought she was a troublemaker.

“I don’t care if you report me to Mr. Fountain, it won’t be the first time. But you need to listen to what I have to say.”

“Fine Annie, but do hurry, we must get moving.”

“Yes, we do, but not in the direction we are going. We’ve been walking in circles; we’ve passed this same cedar tree three times.”

“That is utter nonsense. I know perfectly well where we are. I have Mr. Fountain’s map right here.”

“Maybe it’s wrong Miss Barnes.”

Miss Barnes inhaled sharply, turned and glared openly at her students. “Who said that?”

“I did,” a raspy voice answered

She stared in astonishment as Keith Johnson, her stellar student, walked towards her. “Keith, why would you say something like that?”

“Because I agree with Annie. We are walking in circles.”

“But... but that can’t be, I have Mr. Fountain’s map.” Miss Barnes answered, her voice rising an octave. “Everything he does is exemplary. I will not hear anything derogatory being said of him.”

At this point, everyone began talking at once, voicing their concern of having to spend the night in the forest, terrified of being attacked by a bear or a cougar.

“Quiet everyone,” Miss Barnes shouted. “We are NOT lost and we will arrive at our destination in short order. Thank you, Annie, for causing such pandemonium.”

Annie crossed her arms in frustration. She stood up, wiping the cedar needles and dirt from her jeans. Then she walked over to the edge of the slope. Below was a panoramic view of the never-ending forest and the winding river.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Keith said quietly, as he came and stood behind her. “She doesn’t mean to upset you, it’s just her way”.

Annie studied Miss Barnes. If ever a teacher was ill-suited for teaching in a small village, it was she. She was always impeccably dressed in dresses or suits, her hair was never out of place (which drove Annie crazy as her own red hair had a tendency of flying everywhere), and she cloaked herself in an aura of haughtiness. Her attire today was entirely unsuitable for hiking. She wore a long skirt, a blouse and walking shoes more suitable for shopping than a strenuous hike through the woods.

“She’s always treated me this way Keith, she hates me so much.”

“Come on Annie, you know that’s not true, it’s just that the two of you are so much alike, unbending and stubborn as mules.”

“That’s not true,” Annie responded indignantly.

“Neither of you would ever admit that you’re wrong about anything. If you want to make things easier for yourselves, then start listening to each other.”

Annie shrugged, and gazed at the peaceful landscaping.

“You mad at me?” Keith asked.

“No, not really,” she replied. “I just never thought about it that way, you know, about Miss Barnes and me being alike.”

“Then you’re the only one in Pine Hill School, heck in all of Valleyview, who didn’t know that.” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Annie glanced at Keith. She had never taken any notice of him before, maybe it was time she started.

Miss Barnes had Mr. Fountain’s map spread out on her lap, and was examining it closely. She frowned then threw it on the ground in frustration.

“Keith, can you tell us where we are? And please, everyone else, calm down, we are not in any danger. This matter will be straightened out shortly.”

“I’m can’t, I just know we have passed this location before. Annie can help; she’s grew up in these woods.”

“I’m sure if you and I take a look at the map together,” Miss Barnes answered, ignoring Keith’s suggestion. “We’ll work this out.”

Keith said nothing, he shook his head, then walked over and joined the rest of the students.

Miss Barnes wrung her hands, then bent over and picked up Mr. Fountain’s map. She walked over to the ledge where Annie was standing and gently tapped her shoulder.

“Annie, it seems we are lost, and we need your help.”

Annie reached over and took the map, quickly scanned it, and handed it back to Miss Barnes.

“I’m sorry, but this map is useless.”

“Young lady, it most certainly is not, this is Mr. Fount...”

“I know Miss Barnes, it’s Mr. Fountains map, but it’s still wrong.”

Miss Barnes shook her head, and it was then Annie realized her teacher liked Mr. Fountain, which was probably why she could find no fault in his actions.

Miss Barnes sighed wearily, then whispered so only she and Annie could hear. “I need your help, we’re already late and if I muddle this up, Mr. Fountain will be so disappointed in me. I assured him I was capable of taking our class out today, but it seems I was wrong.”

“Miss Barnes, it’s hardly your fault. The directions on the map are wrong. Here I’ll show you.”

Annie picked up the map. “See, this is where we are right now, Raven’s Ridge. And this squiggly line is the Whitewater River, which is just below us.”

Miss Barnes nodded her head, and Annie suddenly realized her teacher was actually listening to what she was saying.

“We need to go this way, which will take us back to the meadow we passed a while back. Instead of heading west as marked on Mr. Fountain’s map, we should have gone east. Eventually, we’ll arrive at the rendezvous point.”

“Oh Annie, thank you so much. Would you mind guiding us down the ridge?”

“Sure Miss Barnes, no problem. We’re going to be a little late, I hope the bus doesn’t leave without us.”

“If it does, I’ll have something to say to Mr. Fountain.”

Annie grinned, then walked over to her backpack and strapped it on. “Come on everyone, we have a long walk ahead of us, and I’m hungry.”