

Exploring Theatre from the Principles of Heart-Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Both children and adults are wrestling with mental health problems in the United States. Workshops were held to introduce basic principles of Heart-Intelligence for improving mental health. In a five-week workshop, eight students aged 8-12 were selected from an elementary school in South Atlanta. The following article documents this practitioner's experience facilitating this work in order to address the students' perspectives, providing them with the framework they need to reduce mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress.

There has been an unprecedented union of science, philosophy, and spirituality through the understanding that Heart-Based Living, or Heart Intelligence, can improve mental health and the world at large. Therefore, teaching and performing artists can experience profound changes in their mental health, emotions, and overall well-being in the applied theatre world by interfacing with these principles. I have explored the intersectionality between theatre and Heart Intelligence as I developed Heart-Based Theatre praxis and pedagogy while studying at New York University in the Program in Educational Theatre. Though there are a few schools of thought regarding Heart-Based Living or Heart Intelligence, I will use definitions from the International Institute of Pneumatology, where I practice as a pneumatologist and master coach to center my discussion.

HEART-BASED LIVING AND HEART INTELLIGENCE

First, to live from the heart is to use the intelligence of one's energetic system (interchangeable with spirit or heart) as a primary source of value, worth, and self-validation, and uninfluenced by external influences. According to Zane Pierre (2022), the Head Master Mentor of the International Institute of Pneumatology,

Within the context of human beings, life or energy takes the form of the expression of consciousness. Consciousness is in simple terms what is referred to as awareness. In human beings this awareness is characterized by intelligence that expresses itself through sentience.

Intelligence, in this case, is the ability to create, establish and develop a process of rationalization, or a system of logic. That is, the priority that one chooses to be responsible to which is used to define:

1. An identity
2. An understanding of the potential of the identity
3. An understanding of limitations of the identity

This creation or assimilation is commonly assumed to be the self or what one commonly refers to as "I".

A system of logic has a *priority* or *reference point* that determines one's limitations, potential, value, and worth. It serves as one's compass, inspiration, and comparison for logic and gives direction to make decisions. The priority, in turn, develops a *mental framework* that determines how to do something and feel about something. A *reference point* determines whether or not one is functioning correctly; one feels validated and approved when these reference points are functioning properly.

Conversely, one that uses their energetic system as a priority lives what the Institute calls a *Self-Existent Identity or Self-Determined Identity*, in which you are solely validated by the heart. Pierre (2022) says, "The Self-Existent or Self-Determined Dynamics of Human Consciousness is simply the identification of the substance or the source of one's very own consciousness as the priority of existence." In other words, when one's spirit is their sole identity, there are no limitations to the consciousness, and therefore, there are no limitations. One's potential is infinite and emotions experienced are positive. Additionally, one takes full responsibility for their energy.

Unfortunately, today, our definition of self comes from *external frames of reference*, which leads to powerlessness and victim-like mentalities, resulting in a rise of mental health issues and many navigating negative emotions. Like a *reference point*, an *external frame of reference* or *reference point* is what one uses as a compass and inspires decisions in life; it is simply outside of the heart. When an *external reference point* functions as one desires, one experiences positive emotions. However, when it is not functioning properly, one experiences continual negative emotions. These negative emotions are indications that one is no longer being validated or approved by the priority. This occurs because the heart is thought to be expressed as a feeling. Where there is thought, a feeling is attached. One may experience a thought that brings feelings of depression, anxiety, fear, insecurity, condemnation, inadequacy, or stress. Or one may experience thoughts that bring joy, peace, gratitude, and hope. A thought is never separate from emotions and feelings. There are two types of thoughts; thoughts generated from the heart and thoughts

influenced by external factors such as social norms, sex, money, culture, family influence, race, and the like.

Though numerous people, places, or ideologies can be used as *external reference points*, money is a primary example. Suppose money is a reference point and serves as a priority over one's energy or spirit for rationalizing, making judgments, and expressing value in how one views life. When money is dependable, one feels inspired and secure in life. However, one suffers from negative emotions and poor mental health without money. This occurs when one uses an external factor to determine potential, limitations, and value. When an *external frame of reference* is unavailable or not functioning correctly, emotions serve as signs or responses to how a reference point is functioning.

While functioning from one's energetic system is called *Self-Existent Identity* or *Self-Determined Identity*. In a *Self-Determined Identity*, we live internally and view every opinion, moment of praise, moment of rejection, societal norm, situation, and circumstance as independent of oneself. Contrarily, functioning from external reference points, such as money, romantic relationships, and degrees in effect becomes *Identity Codependency*. Those with *Identity Codependency* have neglected their innate or natural full potential, their nature, and their inherent character. By rejecting the physics of our spirits, in this context, we are the only species that does not adhere to the functionality of our own nature.

HEART-INTELLIGENCE AND THEATRE

By facilitating discussions and improvisations with a small group of third to fifth grade students in southwest Atlanta, I have begun to break down the complexities of living from the heart. After a few rehearsals of teaching stage directions and terminology, allowing them to direct, participate in improvisation, and engage in ensemble-building exercises, I began a rehearsal by asking them, "What are some negative emotions you have felt?" Negative emotions were not well-understood by the students, so I provided them with a list of negative emotions. Having explained the emotions, I asked, "What has happened at school that has made you feel negative emotions?" One child expressed he experienced frustration and anger after losing table points because her group wasn't on task. Another student recalled accidentally hitting another student while stretching, which resulted in

them repeatedly hitting one another. In the end, both students were written-up and lost their recess. Subsequently, he became frustrated and angry about the other student not understanding it was an accident and also the teacher writing him up and taking his recess. We recorded others' emotions and situations as they shared their stories.

Afterward, I placed them into two mini ensembles and gave them five minutes to recreate the two moments mentioned above. Before they played, we addressed the need for a beginning, middle, and an end, as well as a set, props, and stage directions.

When they performed, they expressed the anger and frustration they had experienced when the events occurred. For instance, in one scene, two third grade boys played the roles of the boys who were hitting one another. Frustration was conveyed when the first child said, "it was an accident" and returned the hits from the other third-grader (which they did quite softly). This frustration increased as the student received punishment from the teacher, as portrayed by another student in the group.

After their performances, I explained that living from your heart differs from not living from your heart. People experience negative emotions when they do not live from their hearts. Taking center stage—which is just the front of my classroom that we call the stage—I pointed to my heart and said that when you are experiencing negative emotions, you are not living from your heart, you are living from something happening outside of you. Their just-performed scenes gave me an opportunity to ask them what they lived by in those moments—external factors or the heart? It was good to hear their responses and I assured them that those situations were unfair (I will discuss the handling of injustices in a later rehearsal), but we wanted to avoid negative emotions so that we could remain at peace. In other words, if it wasn't within their heart, it was external; if it was inside, it was internal.

I explained that when something happens to them in life, they should view situations as they would view a leaf falling from a tree. I asked them how a leaf falling from a tree made them feel. One said, "Sad," then I shared that that was not true. When a leaf falls from a tree, they keep playing or chatting with friends; they do not start to cry. The young actors agreed that they felt no negative emotions when a leaf fell from a tree. I then shared that they needed to view everything everyone else does as a leaf falling from a tree or a dog barking down

the street. I also took a moment to express that this is not to say it is okay to be bullied or mistreated.

Due to time restraints, it was not possible to explain how one manages mistreatment when functioning from heart-intelligence during this particular rehearsal, but I will provide a brief explanation here. When living from the heart, you hold your energetic system in the highest regard, but you also have great respect for the energy of others. In other words, if you are functioning from the law of self-determination, you also identify self-determination in others. However, the law of self-determination becomes oppressive when the self-existence of others is disregarded. All oppression is a sign of self-importance, valuing one's own life and rights above others. Therefore, you must recognize and steward yourself in the atmosphere of injustice or oppression, whilst highlighting the wrong and without violating the law of the environment. In addition, if a group is held higher in esteem by environmental laws, then that law is unjust, and one must act against it using the system of the environment. This approach should be utilized in order to avoid being viewed as a naughty child throwing a tantrum. Because this perspective is often not considered, many groups working outside their environment's legal system to bring equity to oppressed groups, often suffer. This is because every environment, whether it functions within the confines of equity and integrity or not, is in itself self-determining. At this school, children are advised to inform their teachers if another student hits them. Therefore, the student in the first scenario should have immediately informed his teacher when the other student hit him, instead of hitting him back.

Next, we discussed positive emotions. I then gave them four minutes to rework and rehearse the same scenes, but this time the characters that were frustrated and angry would respond to what was happening as they would a leaf falling from a tree, giving it little attention. I reminded them that the first time, they performed the scenes as someone who was not living from their heart, and now they would perform the scenes as one who lives from their hearts.

As each group rehearsed, I asked them about their changes, tweaked some misconceptions, and quickly checked for understanding. One mini-ensemble struggled with how their scene would look from the heart, and I explained that you never want to leave your heart or allow anyone to move you from it because that would give them control over you. I was also asked to join the scene and play

the teacher.

During the second performances, there had been some changes made in the scenes that conveyed they were understanding the concepts of heart-intelligence. When the boy accidentally hit the other young man, he raised his hand and immediately informed the teacher what was happening. After both groups performed, I asked them to compare the first scenes with the second scenes. They noted that in the first scene the boy retaliated and in turn had consequences. In the second scene, the boy communicated the situation to his teacher and both boys apologized to one another, but he did not lose his recess.

I then communicated that living from the heart is something that they had to practice and that over time as they do so they would start to feel happier which means they would be well in their minds. When their mind is healthy, they live a more extended life. On the other hand, the more worry, anger, rage, and strife you experience, the shorter your life.

In the next activity, we drew pictures on the ground with labeled boxes representing emotions or aspects of a character, similar to Rasaboxes.¹

¹ Rasaboxes are a techniques developed by Richard Schechner and others at East Coast Artists, especially Michele Minnick and Paula Murray Cole. The exercised "is based on the assumption that emotions are socially constructed while feelings are individually experienced" (Schechner, 2001, p. 39).



Image 1: A modified version of rasaboxes students drew for an exercise. The center was where one lived from the heart, while the other areas were negative emotions.

The center stage was 'peace,' where one who lived from their heart would stand, while the remaining boxes were labelled with negative emotions. If someone gave them a positive emotion, they would stand center stage and act it out. If they received a negative emotion, they would stand in its relative box and act it out. As students acted out each emotion, I asked them how they felt and which of the two emotions they would rather experience. Sometimes, I threw out a scenario to help them bring out their emotions. I told them that there are always consequences to responding from the heart and outside of the heart. When you live from your heart, you have good emotions going through your body, your body is healthier, and you live longer. Many realized that their responses outside of their heart would have

resulted in them getting into trouble, but if they had responded positively, they would have had a better outcome. Eventually, as they performed, they included others in the ensemble.

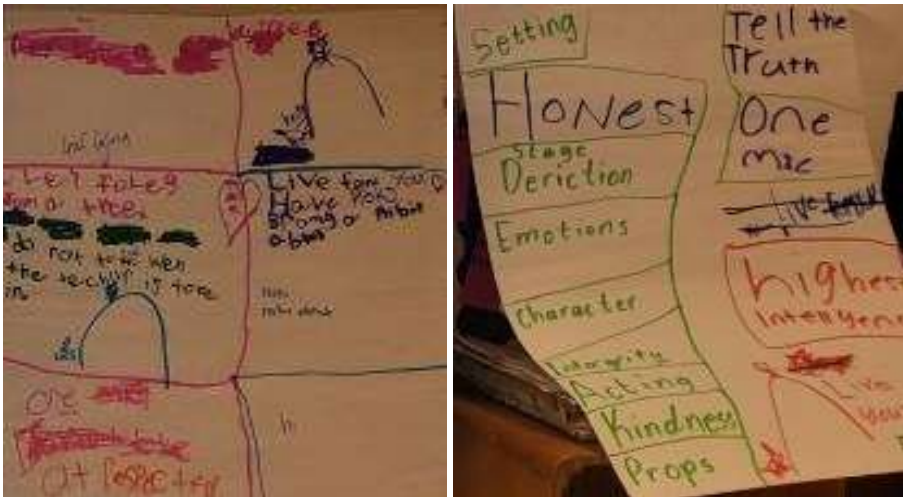


Image 2: In a rehearsal, children wrote what they had learned so far.

In future rehearsals, I would like to explain that heart intelligence is to function from a higher-intelligence and frequency, share characteristics of living from their heart, communicate facing injustices and doing what is best for all, and dive into how heart-intelligence eliminates the need for external validation. There will also be a culminating piece, in which students will take what they learned and produce a storyline. If time permits they will rehearse and perform the piece. View the ideas students brainstormed for these pieces in Image 3.

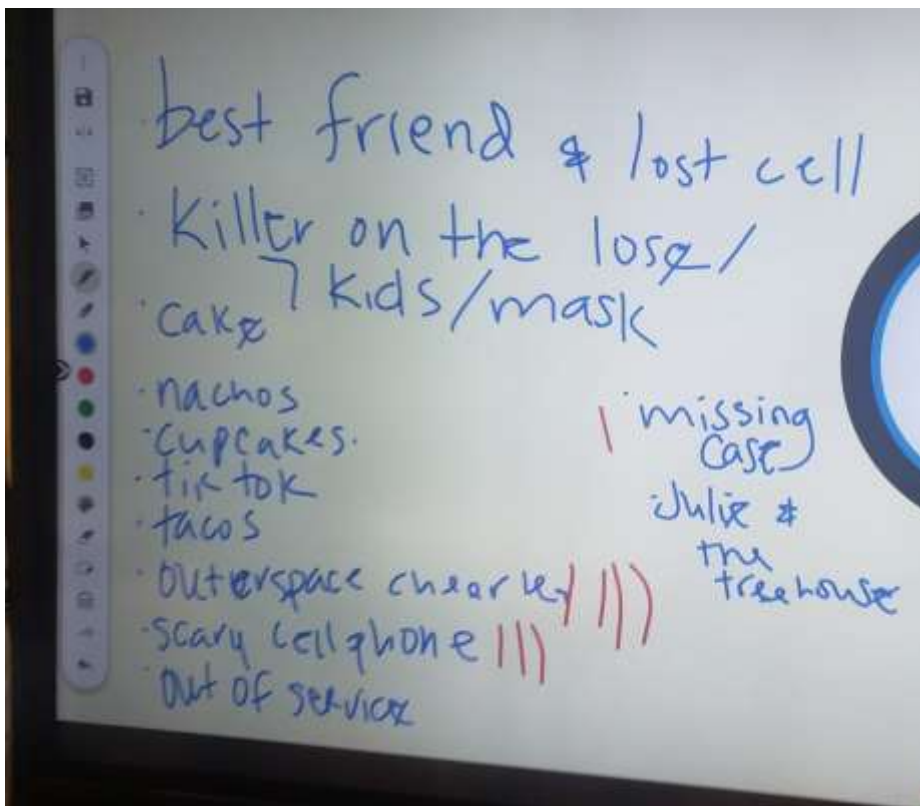


Image 3: I wrote down students' ideas for the short play they will perform as a culminating activity.

CLOSING

Heart-Intelligence is a logic that encompasses using one's energetic system as its sole reference point. *Identity Codependency*, however, is to use norms, people, circumstances, or situations as a compass for decisions for life. By intersecting theatre with the principles of Heart-Based Living, theatre practitioners and our students can experience profound changes in their mental health, emotions, and overall well-being.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kourtney King will graduate with her Master's degree in Educational Theater for Colleges and Communities at New York University in Fall 2022. King desires to open a design and performing arts center to encourage youth, young adults, and teaching artists to embrace various art forms through the practice of Heart-Intelligence. Since beginning her studies at NYU, she has been acting, assistant producing and directing on the NYU Steinhardt Main Stage. King is Master Mentor and Pneumatologist at the ZKI International Institute of Pneumatology, a non-profit dedicated to practical and experimental research and education on the mechanics and physics of Spirit. She is the co-host of *Reboot Your Biblical Perspective* Radio Show and the host of the *Live From Your Heart* podcast. She recently relocated from NYC to Atlanta, Georgia. You may connect with Kourtney King at: info@coachkourtney.com or on social media @CoachKourtneyKing.