

“Listening as an Act of Love”  
Reverend Thomas G. Steffen, Dean of the Chapel  
Culver Academies, Culver, Indiana  
17 September 2006

Drawing on an insight from the Jewish prophet, Isaiah, St. Matthew tells us Jesus said to his disciples that “a person can listen but not understand...a person can see, but not really see...because a person can plug up her ears and shut his eyes. But your eyes can see and your ears hear and your minds understand. And if you listen to me, my words will heal you.” (a paraphrase of Matthew 13:16)

Many of you had the opportunity this weekend to meet two experienced listeners who teach others how to become better listeners. Please raise your hand if you attended at least one event with Linda Wolf or Linda Wolf. They are remarkable women doing remarkable work quite literally around the world. In a few weeks, Leah leaves for Israel to continue her reconciling work with Palestinians and Israelis. The stories she shared with us were truly remarkable.

As I listened to them this weekend, I think I discovered what makes them good listeners. They love listening, they simply love listening, and they love watching us rediscover our own love of listening and how listening helps us fall in love with people we didn't know we could love. But Linda Wolf and Leah Green have returned to the Northwest. They are gone. So this is the question we must consider: “Who will do the listening now?”

Who will do the listening now? The professionals we have on campus? I'm thinking of the adults like our counselors or our clergy like Fr. Kohrman or Rabbi Wood or Venerable Wuling. And what about the adults who work in the Health Center or our Head of Schools, or what about his senior staff? Sure, there are a number of us who are ready and able to listen. Come to us; seek us out. But there are not enough adults on this campus to do all the listening. How about student leaders? There are many student leaders on this campus, official leaders with official titles who serve on committees and councils. And it is true, we should go to them because they have a special responsibility to listen. But there are not enough student leaders on this campus to do all the listening that needs to be done.

When you come to think of it, listening is at the heart of everything that needs to be done on this campus; it is at the heart of everything that needs to be done in our country and in our world. Whether it is sorting out problems between roommates or trying to determine who plagiarized on what assignment, or whether it involves deciding who belongs on the US side of the border and who should go back to the Mexico side, it all begins with listening. Listening is at the heart of good teaching and good learning. Listening is the single most important activity in a good marriage or friendship, the reason businesses succeed, and governments reconcile with their enemies. Listening may be a way a good school can become a great school.

Here's the point: If our school is to be a “listening place,” every one of us will have to do our share of the listening. And we can – almost the minute we decide to listen! Okay, a little training would help us, you're right, but listening is mostly accomplished by practicing it, by listening to others and being listened to by others...oh, to hear, really hear...oh, to be heard, really heard! Listening can set in motion, Jesus said, listening can set in motion the healing and harmony we seek.

In my reading this week I stumbled over a paragraph attributed to Gregory the Great in which he was wondering why Mary Magdalene (remember all the hoo-haw about Mary this summer?) looked with such intensity into the empty tomb where she expected to find the body of Jesus. And Gregory writes: “Why did she stoop down a second time, why did she want to look again? It is never enough for a lover to have looked once, because love's intensity does not allow a lover to give up the search.” What do you say, let's not give up on each other, or this school, or our nation, or our world. May God grant us love, love enough to want to listen to each other, love enough to look – even a second time, just in case, just in case, some one might be there. Amen.

***I dedicate this sermon to five remarkable women: Leah Green, Linda Wolf, Nancy McKinnis, Jodie Davenport, CGA'07, and Demi Dehays, CGA 06, whose vision for us and work among us will make us better listeners.***