

# RELIGION

## VOICES OF FAITH

# Communication: Do you hear

Last month, in Maine, we held a memorial service for my aunt, Thistle. Her lifelong friend gave the eulogy, a poem titled "Requiem." In it, she chronicled the life and adventures of Thistle, an artist, whose travels took her to destinations near and far. When Thistle was 25, in 1959, she won a scholarship to paint in India. Here is the story of that time as told in "Requiem."

"And once, when Thistle spied a horse belonging to her cousin's friend, the Maharajah she asked, "Please, could I paint him, your magnificent stallion?"

"Yes, of course!" he replied, but we must make the preparations. They take time. Next Thursday, come and we shall all be ready."

She came on time, with easel, canvas, paints and brushes all in hand.

The horse stood ready, steadied in his gold-embazoned bridle, reins in hands of servants-also clad in gold- and there in front of the horse, a major domo stood beside a gilt-enameled pail of gold paint.

He offered her a mammoth brush and beckoned to the horse."

It's an amusing tale. Clearly, something was lost in translation. It reminds me how often I say something that feels perfectly clear to me but which my listener misinterprets entirely. The problem deepens as communication becomes less direct. I believe it is a fallacy to assume that email, texting, tweeting or a phone conversation can substitute for face-to-face communication. A typed message, even one longer than 140 charac-



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intonations, sighs, shouts and wonderful belly laughs. One need not know the language to discern exactly what's being said. We Yankees may find that too dramatic, yet the principle remains true. Our eyes speak. Our bodies tell a tale.

Imagine a group that has gathered to discuss a particular issue. Some folks lean forward, listening intently to others., while one speaker may addresses a topic but never make eye contact with anyone. A woman sits with her legs and arms crossed, looking down at her lap. Someone who has remained silent now speaks out and looks directly at each person in the group, with his eyes gathering them all together. One person offers what seems like a good suggestion, but then rolls her eyes and smirks. Now imagine this as an email exchange, or even a conference call. Important information about the ideas and responses of the group aren't communicated.

Years ago, I lived in a small town where children roamed the safe neighborhood. One day I was talking to Helen, one of my daughter's friends, an Englishwoman living in the states for a few years. With considerable dismay, she told me that her neighbor two doors down had phoned police to complain that Helen's dog was digging in her garden. Dumbfound-

come and talk to me in person?"

It's been my habit to rely on a verse from Scripture to introduce this column and give me some insight into a situation. However, it's no surprise that the Bible provides no guidance about when or when not to phone, text or email!

Yet we can learn there about the importance of direct communication. In Matthew, Jesus speaks to his friends: "If your (neighbor) sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If your neighbor listens to you, you have regained that one." (18:15). Implied in Jesus' teaching is that open, honest conversation forestalls a heap of later misunderstandings. For he goes on to say if that doesn't work, a series of next steps will complicate the matter as more and more people become involved to sort out the truth, with disastrous consequences for the friendship. (18:16-17)

Not unlike this scenario Is Concord's Communities for Restorative Justice (C4RJ), established 12 years ago and now serving 14 surrounding communities. C4RJ has been sorting out cases like Helen's and the one in Jesus' teaching: conflicts that arise from misdemeanors such as property damage or breaking and entering, that might otherwise end up in court. The program, based on the model of Native American council circles, brings together offender and victim, eye to eye, in a carefully structured, supportive environment where each has an opportunity to speak and be heard:

What I'm not saying?

ters, doesn't the recipient know the full content of your thought.

Communication is a whole body event. Ever watch two Italian or Greek men in conversation? The entire self speaks: body positions, eye movements, hands in constant motion;

ed, Helen told me, "Back home, the woman would have marched right over and we would have sorted it out. Why didn't she

to know the "other" not as an anonymous accuser or perpetrator but as another human being with similar wants and needs.

In a circle of trained volunteers and a representative of the local police department, the two parties look each other in the eye and appreciate what the other has experienced, often witnessing tears and expressing anger. Many times, mutual understanding results and offenders who go through the program often take away important life lessons. At the same time, there will always be a place for technology that enables us to

communicate immediately and globally. One example: last week whole communities moved to safety because newscasters tracked Hurricane Isaac and got the word out moment to moment. On a personal note, I'm thankful that I can pick up the phone to talk with my family in Australia, But I never want to lose the opportunity to sit on the porch with a friend or take a walk around the neighborhood and stop to chat for a bit, or gather

in a group to discuss an issue, looking into each other's eyes as we speak.

Robert Frost wrote "Something there is that does not love a wall, that wants it down." (from Mending Wall). Can we break through the electronic walls that keep us from really knowing each other?

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