

Days of Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God
to hurting kids in a gentle way*

A Failure to Communicate

By Jon Wells

'What we are witnessing here is a failure to communicate.'

How many times have you heard this sentiment expressed? How often have you experienced a breakdown of communication that creates confusion, frustration and even conflict? It seems that on a daily basis, as I visit young people in various treatment facilities, communication breakdowns are the norm rather than the exception. When working with a group of at risk youth, a simple breakdown of communication can escalate into some pretty ugly consequences real fast.

One of the most basic building blocks of healthy interaction is hardwired into the design of our brains. 'Mirroring' is the term the researchers use to identify a unique ability demonstrated only by people and a few groups of mammals like monkeys, dogs, and dolphins. Mirroring is the ability of one person to observe the actions or emotions of another, and duplicate those actions or emotions in a similar fashion. Neurological research has demonstrated that specific structures in the brain are responsible for allowing us to imitate others and identify with their experiences. This system of 'mirror neurons' often functions without our awareness. We witness an injury during the football game and we grimace in pain. We see our neighbor's face as he smells the trash and our noses scrunch up in response. This complex neural system helps us interpret and replicate facial expressions.

Mirroring is present from the very first moments of life. Any mother who soothes her crying infant is using these critical neural pathways, forcing an upset child to calm down in response to her comforting presence. This is a beautiful dynamic to watch as it plays out. A completely unhinged infant may be screaming, every muscle tense, literally excreting from every orifice. A skilled mother will gently and persistently press in towards the upset baby, using sound, touch, and powerful emotion to overwhelm the child. Perfect love drives out fear! It is funny that these dynamics are not necessarily intentional or even consciously executed. A mother need not know anything of mirror neurons or brain activity to soothe her child. This is a dynamic that all of us utilize in our daily interactions. You may not notice when someone is mirroring you, but you certainly notice when mirroring is absent.

Children with autistic spectrum disorders often have difficulty mirroring the emotion and interaction of others. Autistic and Asperger kids remain flat and nonresponsive when another person smiles at them, says hello, or tries to interact. Absent the biological capacity to effectively mirror the inputs that they receive from others, these kids all suffer from setbacks due to lack of social interaction. Mirroring is a powerful tool, it facilitates profound interactions between people such as compassion, empathy, and group interaction. More than once I have used this potent tool to avoid conflict when working with highly agitated kids who direct their anger at me. When an older teen boy gets in my face and threatens violence, my favorite response is simply to observe that he has a great pair of sneakers.

"I love those shoes, where did you get those? Are they new?"

This open kindness is an invitation. It is biologically impossible for most kids to maintain a high level of anger when the object of their anger is demonstrating kindness. Overwhelming kindness forces them into a corner, making it increasingly difficult to display rage. Solomon wisely reflected on this dynamic in the Proverbs, advising us on how to respond to those who come against us.

'If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.' *Proverbs 25:21-22*

This hardwired tendency to mirror emotion often overwhelms rational thought. Try this experiment: walk up to someone you know, and for no good reason, just begin laughing hysterically. Make no explanation of why, just continue laughing. It is simply a matter of time before everyone in the room is laughing. Then ask all of them 'What are you laughing at? What is so funny?'

As wonderful as appropriate mirroring can be, there are pitfalls in the system. Individuals often fail to differentiate their own emotional states from that of others. I've seen this dynamic over and over again. A room full of calm teens sit in a facility, going about their daily routines. The front door of the unit swings open, and in walks a law enforcement officer with a young man in handcuffs. The shackled teen is furious, cussing at everyone, threatening to hurt others. Within seconds, this spark lights the entire room on fire. All the kids in the room are now enraged, cursing, yelling about their own complicated problems. *Continued on back page . . .*

We Can't Flee Unless We Are Free

By Sean A Wilson

As I was walking through and visiting some of the young ladies, Sarah (name changed to protect privacy) approached me and with tears in her eyes she asked, "Can I speak with you?"

I asked the staff member if it was OK to step out into the hall to speak with her and they approved. I had no idea what was about to happen. Sarah explained to me that she didn't want to go to hell. She then went on to describe how she is struggling with her love for Jesus and her comfort of being a homosexual. Sarah shared that she had not been in church for a year. She was recently living in a unit called 'The Bridge' (which is a privilege to those who are transitioning out of residential) and she was able to visit a local church. During the service, Sarah went to the altar for prayer. The person who came to pray for her informed her that she was going to hell for being a homosexual because it was an abomination to the Lord. She could not remember the exact verse the minister used but she did know that it was in Leviticus. As Sarah was talking I was listening to her and praying for the right thing to say in response. *How should I answer this young lady who was sincerely sharing her struggles?*

To some this may seem like an easy response. Perhaps I should just say, "Yes, you are going to hell, and yes, it is an abomination to the Lord."

My first response was to explain to her that I'm not perfect- in fact no one is perfect. Then I proceeded to ask her a question; "Why did God create man and woman?"

She answered, "To populate the earth."

I agreed with the answer and added a detail- we were given gender as a means of glorifying God. Sarah continued to talk and I listened for quite some time. She mentioned how she wanted others to acknowledge her as 'he' out of respect of her wishes.

I asked her, "What do you want me to call you?"

She replied, "Damon."

I said, "OK."

As we neared the end of our conversation she asked for a Bible. As I took out the pen to write her name on the cover of the Bible I was confronted with a conundrum. What name should I write on the cover? Writing 'Damon' may seem like it is condoning the young lady's activity or choice. At the same time, this may be one of the few opportunities that she has to hear the truth of the Gospel. The tension in the moment was like walking a tightrope; refusing to reject this child's movement towards God while at the same time holding onto Biblical truth. We must remember, *before we can flee anything we must be free from everything*. What does that mean?

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God." 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

This verse presents the problem with humanity. Paul shares that anyone in any of the categories explained will **NOT** inherit the kingdom of God. As it seems no one is qualified under his or her own merit to receive such a precious gift. Now, look at the solution in the next verse, "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were **justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.**" (1 Corinthians 6:11)

So many of the people Paul was speaking with had shared in the same unrighteous behaviors as the local community. The main difference was that they had been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Later Paul writes that we are to flee fornication because sexual immorality is not made for the body but the Lord is to be glorified in the body. Paul only tells them to flee fornication because Jesus Christ had set them free from the power of sin. This is what I mean when I say that we are powerless to flee from anything until we are free from everything.

I ask that we keep this young lady in prayer and that her eyes will be opened to the truth. Pray that my access and doors of communication remain open with this young lady and all others who are in the same situation.



DAYS OF
HOPE



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Learning to Listen

By Skyler Martin

*'Give every man your ear,
but few thy voice. Take
each man's censure, but
reserve thy judgment.'*
- William Shakespeare

In a time where everyone is incessantly giving their opinions about politics, religion, social action, and more, the act of *listening* to another person has become a lost art.

I don't mean pretending to listen or listening as an act of common courtesy, or listening in order to plan a response. I mean *actually listening*; listening in order to experience and understand the inner world of another person.

When we open our Facebook page or our Twitter account, the status bar begs us to tell what we are doing on any particular day, how we're feeling, or what we want to see happen. We are swamped with marketing and now even church programs that are centered around our own personal interests, desires, and concerns. Somehow we have become convinced that our thoughts and opinions are the ones that matter and that in our relationships to others, whether they know it or not, they need to hear what we have to say. Often we're willing to listen, but only as a means of securing enough clout with the person that they will allow us to finally say our piece.

During a recent campus visit, I sat down to visit with a 15-year-old. This young man and I often talk about the Bible and his desire to preach. For a few minutes, I offered some thoughts on ministry ideas he had. I wasn't sure how well he was receiving what I was saying. He was responsive but only enough to ensure that he had heard me. I could not tell if he agreed, cared, or took any of my words to heart.

After a short pause, he mentioned a book that he'd read recently. It was a drama fiction novella that contained similar themes to his own life and many kids who go through residential treatment. As he began expounding on the plot of the story, I began to notice something troubling. *I wasn't really listening to him.* Instead, I was looking for connections and segues to connect his statements to things I thought he needed to hear.

So I stopped. But the temptation kept rising, again and again, to make connections and prepare another response. For the first time in a while, I chose to stay quiet. Another temptation arose, this time it was to stay quiet as a way of being nice and to tune out of what he was actually saying. I caught myself and re-engaged. For forty-five minutes, I committed myself to look into his eyes and hear every word he said.

It was embarrassingly difficult at first but as time went on I

became genuinely interested in what he was sharing. I noticed his passion for the story and the specifics of the things he found interesting. By the time he reached the end of the plot summary, I had realized that he wasn't talking to me about some book he read and liked, he was giving me access to see what was in his heart. If I was truly listening, I could hear his deepest desires and greatest fears. I could see where God was working in his life.

This revealed something deeper in me; the fear that if I don't say the right things, in the right order, in the right way, God's mission to redeem people will fail. As embarrassing as it is, it also revealed in me the desire to be a kind of "answer man" or professional of sorts, as though the work of God was dependent on my ability to be clever or informed.

In reality, God is the one reconciling all things to Himself and He invites me to participate by being present to the work He's doing. I don't have to force my thoughts on someone. I can listen to their heart without reference to what I think about their situation. When I finally unplug from my need to "share" and plug in to what the Spirit is saying, I can become a message of unconditional love to that person. I can build an actual relationship with them. I can become an active representation of the God who listens to the prayers of His people, not to get something out of them or control them, but simply for the sake of the relationship.

People are being pushed and pulled all kinds of directions. Workers are pulled along by job expectations, students pushed to succeed, and residential youth pushed or pulled along from one facility to another and one treatment program to another. Hardly anyone stops to just listen; therein lies the need and the opportunity for them to know Love. Mennonite theologian, David Augsburger claims, ***"Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."***

If the message of God's love is what we are most interested in communicating, perhaps the primary way we can do this is by learning how to listen. May those in our communities come to know that they are truly loved by God by being truly heard by His people.

One young man is trying to break a window while others are flipping over the furniture. *What just happened?* Everyone was doing fine, the only thing that changed was the presence of an angry peer. Through mirroring, that emotion rippled across the room.

It seems that most of us are not really aware of our own emotional states, much less able to manage them. We can get carried away with mirroring the feelings of others. People who are frustrated drive us to anger. People who are excited get us all worked up. We don't even pay attention to it, we just ride the wave of emotion and duplicate what we are experiencing.

Another danger of mirroring is that we give others ownership of our own emotion.

I recently had a young man tell me, "Pastor Jon, he is making me so angry!"

Over and over again I see young people who are being blown to and fro in a storm of messy emotions; anger, sadness, frustration, depression, rage. If you ask these kids to tell you why they are so upset, they will almost always point to someone else as the source of the messy feelings. These kids demonstrate no healthy boundaries between themselves and others. They refuse to take responsibility for the action and emotion that is flowing out of them. It is very rare that I see a child in residential care who can emotionally differentiate from one of their peers in a healthy way. They are totally unable to separate themselves from others.

Working among these kids who are fractured in so many ways, I get a front row seat to really dysfunctional ways of interacting. I am learning that there are in fact healthy ways to manage the amazing gifts that God has given us.

'I know that you are upset, but I am doing OK right now.' *Slow down and read that phrase again.* That simple sentiment demonstrates a high level of relational intelligence. Someone who can look at a friend or a spouse, come alongside and empathize with her, and yet still hold onto their own emotional state as good, is a relational ninja! Being an empathetic listener without getting sucked into the hurricane of someone else's emotion is not easy.

Scripture actually promotes mirroring as a healthy way to interact with others. In Romans chapter fifteen, Paul encourages us to 'rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.' Mirroring can be a powerful tool to minister to those around us.

Paul also echoes the idea of healthy differentiation in the same passage, suggesting that we 'bless those who persecute [us]' and admonishing us not to 'repay evil for evil.' This teaching parallels the words of Christ, who taught us to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' (Matthew 5). These passages demonstrate a profound understanding of the need for healthy boundaries and the power of mirroring in interaction. When I refuse to get sucked in to the hate that others demonstrate, and choose to instead to express love to my enemies, I bring the Kingdom of God into an impossible situation.

God, teach me how to rightly use the gifts You have given!