

**TALKING PAST ONE ANOTHER**  
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Introduction

This summer while visiting friends in a nearby state I had a dream one night. For some reason I was in an inner city, somewhere in the United States. I was traveling with an African American, and the two of us had just witnessed a violent argument between two African Americans in a store. One African American from the inner city was selling merchandise to another African American who was not from the inner city. For some reason, a violent argument erupted which I witnessed.

I cannot remember the cause of the argument, but I remember the person "from" the inner city saying to the other who was not, "You will never understand, you are not from here."

I remember listening very intently at both sides of the argument and believing parts of what each was saying.

The two people arguing finally separated. I remember being so moved by what I had just experienced that, for some reason, I had the courage to speak to the inner city African American who did not leave the scene. I said to him, "I really do not know who is right and who is wrong. I don't know what should be done in this situation." And then I continued, "What bothers me more is that what I have just experienced is a small picture of our society at large. We speak, and argue vehemently from our perspective, always assuming that we are right." But what jolted me out of my dream was a statement I made to him with intense passion, "It seems like you were just talking past one another."

At that moment I awakened from my dream. Literally, my heart was pounding. The time was about 5:45 a.m. I began to think about the dream and its implications. I couldn't get away from the words, "I really don't know who is right or wrong, but it seems like you were talking right past each other."

By this time I was wide awake, and I began to think of the implications of my dream for MVNC. I was so moved and shaken by the dream that I moved out of bed to the next room where I had my portable computer set up and I recorded my dream on the computer.

"I really don't know who is right or wrong, but it seems like we often just talk right past one another." How often this scenario is played out in real life. And how painful--even at Mount Vernon Nazarene College.

Scripture verses flooded my thoughts like the verse for this school year: "And in Him you too are being built together to come a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit." Ephesians 2:22

You too...are being built together...with others who are different--very different--from you.

How can this be, especially in light of the conflicting expectations so often experienced on a Nazarene college campus.

- I. On reflection, I made several immediate observations:
  - A. Some issues with which we have to deal are non-negotiable. Biblical principles, for instance. Start with the ten commandments and continue through the teachings of Jesus. For the Christian, these are non-negotiable.

Listen again to the scripture: "And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."
  - B. Quite often, good people are divided over rules set by parents or employers, or lifestyle guidelines set by a college, a church, or a denomination.
    1. Honest differences arise

2. Good people differ
3. Example: MVNC Lifestyle Guidelines/Values document, *For This We Stand*. I can accept, and really expect, some genuine disagreements with our stance on some lifestyle issues and value affirmations. For those who differ, I ask for your understanding. Let me explain.
  - a. The sponsoring denomination for this college is the Church of the Nazarene.
    - 1) A holiness church in the early Methodist tradition.
    - 2) Takes seriously its responsibility to nurture believers in the holy life.
  - b. While acknowledging, and grateful for, the large number of students on campus representing over 30 denomination
    - 1) I cannot, will not, turn my back on the principles and priorities of the sponsoring denomination. If I did, the Board of Trustees of this College, who hired me, would have good reasons to fire me.
    - 2) The Church of the Nazarene has had a phenomenal commitment to higher education worldwide
      - a) 36 U/G level educational institutions worldwide
      - b) I have had the joy and privilege of working in three very different institutions around the world before moving to Mount Vernon five years ago today.
      - c) Nazarenes on this region (Ohio, West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky) have given over 32 million dollars to support this college during the past 25 years through educational budget (93-94, \$1,500,000)

- d) These people believe in the mission of this college and sacrificially support it. Many of these people are the parents and grandparents of MVNC students today.
  - e) I must not, I will not, turn my back on the very group that brought this college into existence and continues to nurture it.
- 3) Within these lifestyle guidelines, which reflect the standards of the denomination, there is some flexibility. There are also some non-negotiables.
- C. Even in this dynamic and sometimes misunderstood context, the scripture can be lived out: "And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."
- D. And yet, many issues that divide us and cause conflict are not biblical principles, nor the lifestyle guidelines or value affirmations of a sponsoring denomination.
- 1. Numerous problems arise just because we are all different-- temperamentally, culturally, intellectually, socially, spiritually. What is needed is for us to listen to each other, try to understand the other person, particularly where the other person is coming from, and respect the other person even though you may radically differ with the other person's ideas or behavior.
  - 2. Here are some very specific examples where we may feel some tension and need to listen to each other and try to understand where the other person is coming from:
    - a. student/administration differences
    - b. roommate problems
    - c. parental conflicts with their college-age son or daughter
    - d. conflict between couples in marriage

- e. staff/administration relations
- f. teacher/student encounters

(It is so easy for us to move into an us/them mindset)

II. Habit #5 of Steven Covey's book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, is "seek first to understand, then to be understood."

- trying to understand...before we jump to conclusions
- trying to understand...before we give our opinion
- trying to understand...before we criticize
- trying to understand...before we complain
- trying to understand...before we seek to be understood

A. What is the result of trying to understand?

1. Will we always agree? No.
2. Will some people abuse/misunderstand/take advantage of the attempt to understand? Yes.
3. Will you more clearly understand where the other person is coming from? Yes.
4. Will you always reach an acceptable compromise? Not always.
5. Does respect for the other person increase, even though you continue to disagree after discussions? Most often.

B. Respect. That is an important word. Respect, even though we continue to disagree.

1. We can choose to believe that God is at work in you as He is in me. And He is not finished with either one of us yet.
2. We can stand firm in our convictions and on our principles while genuinely seeking to understand where the other person is coming from.
3. Understanding, not agreement, is often the key to conflict management.

4. "And in Him you too are being built together (uniquely, providentially) to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit." Ephesians 2:22

III. What usually emerges out of our attempts to understand, before we seek to be understood?

A. Covey talks about another habit he calls, "Think win/win."

1. Are there appropriate compromises?
2. Should my "position" or "decision" be altered in light of what I have heard?
3. Can I address some concerns of the other while continuing to embrace my "position" or "decision"?
4. How can the insights of the other person enrich or enhance my thinking about the issue?
5. Is my way of looking at the issue the only way?
  - a. In many situations, win/win conclusions can be reached.
  - b. In other situations where biblical or moral principles, or value affirmations are involved, compromise is not and should not be reached.
  - c. Even more specifically, when the lifestyle guidelines of the college reflect the standards of the sponsoring denomination, but are not embraced by some students, tension and disagreements inevitably result.
    - 1) But even in these situations, we must seek first to understand before we seek to be understood.
    - 2) and attempt win/win agreements where possible...and leave the results to God!

B. Do you really believe that in Christ you and those with whom you differ--you too--by God's plan are being built together--really--to become a dwelling

in which god lives--right here at MVNC--by His Spirit? That's the key--by **His Spirit**.

- C. All of the potential for misunderstanding on a Christian college campus should drive us to our knees with the prayer of "Lord, teach us to pray."
1. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for my roommate.
  2. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for my teachers, or students, or colleagues.
  3. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for those in the dorm, apartment, office, or class.
  4. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for staff and administrators whom I do not understand or even appreciate.
  5. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for our chaplain who may lead the chapel services or preach in ways I do not like or understand.
  6. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for the school president who tries to balance all of the expectations on campus--many of them conflicting expectations between students, faculty, staff, parents, trustees, and administration--while keeping a vision for the institution before the faculty, staff, and trustees.
  7. By Your Spirit, teach me to pray ... for myself, in ways that are pleasing to God.
    - a. from give me, to make me--"Lord make me an instrument of Thy peace"
    - b. from "my" way, to "your" will--"I'll say yes, Lord, yes to Your will and to Your way"
    - c. from a focus on God's gifts to me, to a passion for his blessing on me--"Lord, make me a blessing to someone...today."

Conclusion

- A. Back to my dream. I don't want to forget the key statements in the dream.
- "You will never understand, you are not from here."
- "It seems like you were just talking past one another."
- B. These statements can and will characterize us at MVNC if:
1. We stay in our own little world.
  2. We stay with our own little circle of friends.
  3. We stay in our rooms.
  4. We stay in our own little comfort zone.
- C. These statements can and will characterize us at MVNC...
1. ...if we fail to work consistently at putting our Christian faith to work at the daily pressure points.
  2. ...if we fail to listen, to try to understand, to strive for win/win solutions.
  3. ...if we fail to pray daily for those "who are just different from us."
  4. ...if we fail to believe that "in Him (Christ) you and I...are being built together (only God knows how) to become a dwelling--a beautiful, diverse Christian community--in which God--God Himself--lives by His Spirit--His very own presence."