

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

In the face of empty promises and blowhard inaction, we often sputter that *talk is cheap*. In reality talk is our greatest resource — it may be our only hope — in overcoming human conflict. As we work to create environments where young children are nurtured to cherish similarities and value differences, the most important thing we can teach children is how to talk to one another. We must instill in them a need to talk, a skill in questioning, and a confidence in the power of talk — we will be equipping them to resolve the issues, broad and narrow, near and far, that cripple us today.

Several recent discussions have traveled to this point — that people can only learn to live and work together if we talk to one another. This is true for children in a classroom, members of a family, Republicans and Democrats, Serbs and Croats, and diverse cultures of all varieties (ethnic, religious, political, religious, lifestyle). If we rethink the Los Angeles riots, conflicts in Eastern Europe, and recent Senate hearings, it seems that the greatest conflicts erupt when people stop talking. Sides are clearly drawn, communication shuts down, frustration is vented through physical aggression. There are investigations, summits, conferences, and hearings, but consider the talk that is taking place. Just because we call something a hearing doesn't mean that anyone is listening!

In a society where words swarm us relentlessly, we become undone by their numbers and beat them away. Words often seem without value, but talk is quite different. When words link together to frame ideas and express emotions, therein lies the hope. But it extracts its due.

Talk must exist without limits. There must be good faith in the process, a belief that the talk is leading somewhere. Author Deborah Tannen (*That's Not What I Meant!* and *You Just Don't Understand*) talks about the difficulties of communication, especially across gender cultures. Although she doesn't offer up secrets to effective communication, she does reinforce the value of the ongoing effort. As

she suggests, there can be a total lack of communication even though both sides are trying very hard to communicate. Going forward is tough, but giving up creates insurmountable barriers.

Talk can be uncomfortable. If we want to discover another perspective, we must risk asking awkward questions. Living to protect others from conversational discomfort shuts us out. What other way is there to discover what it is like to be someone else? And uncomfortable questions lead to uncomfortable situations — to conflict. We must be willing to weather the emotional storms that brew through talk. Can we endure anger and frustration? Can we honestly express our own emotions? Can we stand to listen to another's rage and somehow communicate that our listening means something? Can we afford not to?

Talk requires that we both express and listen. It's fairly easy to hear what someone else is saying. Hearing is one-sided; we don't have to do anything. Listening is far more difficult because it requires that we not only hear the words, but that we try to understand the message. Talk is the earnest search for understanding in the words of another.

Talk must be based on trust. The most difficult and the most important part of quality talk is that each person must presume the good intentions of the other. This is easy to do when talk takes a positive direction; but when talk arises out of conflict or uncovers uncomfortable issues, it becomes increasingly difficult to assume and reassume that the other person is talking with good intentions. However, if we assume negative intentions, we devalue everything that is said.

In our interactions with children, we must model real talk — giving children our attention, our time, our empathy, our ideas, and our love. As skilled and confident talkers, they won't need to conquer the world; they'll be able to live in it.