

# A Manner of Speaking

When we talk about cultural diversity, we are often focused on what we can learn about others; but equally important is what we can learn about ourselves. It's frequently a surprise to discover how others see us, and more times than we might wish, an unpleasant revelation (we might wonder why this is so . . .).

With two daughters traveling the globe and two sons just itching to go, I am sensitive to how Americans are responded to, thought of, and treated in other parts of the world. So when Roger and I met a young woman in Maastricht, The Netherlands, who had lived in Chicago, I was eager to hear her story. She had studied at the University of Chicago, and enjoyed the experience, but, offered opportunities to live in America for a time, she chose to come home. "I could never LIVE in the United States," she shared.

Curiosity bubbled, so I asked, "Why not?"

"Well, and I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, I like Americans and everything. And I enjoyed going to school in Chicago. But there are some things about Americans that I just couldn't live with."

"An example?"

"Okay, if I say, 'Next week I'll call you and we'll have lunch and spend the afternoon together,' then it will happen. But Americans would say, 'I'll call you,' but they didn't call; or 'Let's meet for dinner and a movie,' and I never saw them again; or 'I'll meet you at Wrigley Field and we'll see the game.' But it didn't happen! And there I'd be at Wrigley Field by myself."

I had never heard that this was a piece of our national stereotype; but as I share this story with other people, the shameful fact has been confirmed. We, as Americans, are perceived as people who do not honor our words.

How does a behavior become a national trait? Where is the behavior learned? How is it passed from one person to another? If we think about this, it seems obvious that if we wish to change this perception, we must start with ourselves. Why do we make unrealistic, unthoughtful promises in our encounters with others?

In our relationships with parents, we are always making promises. "Your child will be happy here." "We will keep you informed." "We will work with you." Certainly, parents are counting on us to honor our words and live up to the standards we set forth. Can parents in your program count on your words?

When you say, "I'll call you back right away with that referral," do you?

When you say, "We'll solve the biting problem immediately," can you?

When you say, "I'll be there every day when you arrive," are you?

When you say, "You can count on me," is that always true?


Children will learn the value of words from us. When we tell children to use their words, we are giving them an important tool for living in a democratic society. But what if, by our own example, we are teaching them that their word isn't all that important, that words are tools for manipulation, rather than for communication. "We never do that," you might want to say; but how often do you say to children:

"Tell Anthony you're sorry," but Rebecca is still quite angry.

"It won't hurt," but, of course, it will.

"Your Daddy will be back in a minute," but it's really hours until pick-up time.

"Everything will be all right," but things aren't going to feel good again for quite a while.

We must never force children to lie about their feelings, we must perform to the minute on the promises we make, and we must live as people of our word. The children are watching. 

*Bonnie Anderson*