

If we could learn to communicate, we could teach the world to sing

As one fascinated by both successful and unsuccessful communication, I watch the world closely in its attempt to withhold and exchange information, feelings and ideas.

I watch myself try, fall short and try again to do the same. A never-ending source of amusement, my shortfalls and I are also a source of continual practice.

But it was a story I heard last week from Le Dahn Hoang, a young man who had just finished business school in Vietnam and was working as a volunteer, that got me thinking.

Hoang was among a team of college graduates, from the international peace group Initiatives of Change, who had traveled from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles by van to learn about the successful work done in the United States toward racial reconciliation, as well as areas still needing to be addressed.

Honest conversations about problems, members of the group believe, are the footholds of peace.

During a discussion I sat in on, team members were reporting on volunteer activities they were involved in in their own countries. Hoang discussed

his work with a group that brings basic hygiene education to the Mekong Delta, particularly on the issues of AIDS and even more so, birth control.

One day, Hoang said, a man who had been in a class came back into the clinic upset and pulled him aside.

"The condom doesn't work," the man bemoaned. "I use it and I still get children." Sure enough, his wife was pregnant again.

Hoang asked the man to show him how he put the condom on and the man slipped it over his two pointing fingers, just as he was shown.

Of course, we all laughed, somewhat at the expense of the poor farmer.

Afterward, however, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why would that seven-time father think the condom was to be used in any other manner? He had never seen or heard of one before.

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No doubt the volunteer who originally demonstrated used those two fingers and may have been embarrassed to mention the organ on which the condom should be placed, or perhaps used a medical term unused by that population.

A banana, the object I've seen often used, could be as problematic in an area where the population has no one to explain where the condom actually goes once they get home. Written directions, usually included, are only good for those who are literate.

Using an anatomically correct object to demonstrate something that will save lives and could help stave off poverty seems obvious, yet the world is filled with shame that prohibits that. And so we continue to send the wrong messages and perpetuate that very shame.

What if the farmer never bravely came back? What if he simply told everyone he knew that he had tried the condom and it didn't work, or worse, he showed others how to use it in the manner he understood? Everyone touched would have a false belief based on miscommunication.

It happens all the time. When it does, the involved parties are more deeply entrenched in their understanding of being right.

The government may believe that the farmers are too lazy or proud to wear condoms and the farmers, in turn, may believe that the government is useless to them. Each holds the resentment like a fine piece of silver and polishes it with other wrong assumptions until it sparkles like the truth. By then, they are sure of being right.

The example demonstrates something I must remind myself of always. The way I communicate is based on a set of values, beliefs, information, knowledge and ideas that I hold. My natural tendency is to believe that others either do or should hold those same beliefs and understandings, but that's not necessarily true.

* Teaching others has taught me that if my students shake their heads up and down when I ask if they understand, it often means no. Most of the time, I have been unclear.

Only when I'm willing to pursue the question with follow-up questions that include the class repeating what I just said can I be sure that I'm understood. Only when I am willing to share my ongoing concerns do I have a chance of finding out their error and correcting my thinking.

After all, in the end it is I, not them, who has the problem needing to be solved and the resentment dispelled. Life is too short. The only silver I want to polish anymore is hooked around my wrist.

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