

Communication has its barriers

By PAT BORDMAN

What advice does a 63-year-old father of five children 18 to 25 years of age offer for effective communication?

"All you can do is keep your fingers crossed and your mouth shut," said Sydney Harris, syndicated columnist with the Chicago Sun-Times and the father in question.

Last week at Fairlane Manor in Dearborn, some 250 listeners were glad Harris didn't take his own advice. They were glad to hear from this graying and deeply tanned author, teacher, and lecturer during the first of two YWCA Town Hall events this year.

Harris acknowledges that there is an "essential basic need to communicate." But there are some basic dilemmas to face in trying to communicate, he told his audience.

The first dilemma, according to Harris, comes with the words and statements themselves. Harris feels that our culture pre-disposes us to certain choices of interpretation. Further, the exact circumstance in which a statement is made may influence the interpretation of that statement.

To illustrate this idea, Harris told the story of a little boy.

"He came to his father and asked him, 'Dad, what is sex?'" said the speaker. "The father launched into a story of the flowers and the bees. 10 minutes later had gotten into the sanctity of the family level.

"The little boy sighed, looked sadly at the identification card in his new wallet and said, 'I don't see how I can get all that into this little space marked sex.'"

In that case, stated Harris, the ambiguity of the boy's statement led to a misunderstanding of his intent. Some ambiguities are built into our language; the comment written onto the menu at a restaurant, "Customers who

think our waiters are rude should see the manager."

Other ambiguities occur due to unconscious projection, "projecting our own version of the thing onto something else that may have an entirely different context," explained Harris.

"When I travel," he related, "I sometimes take along a bridge book in a wifely effort to improve my deplorable game. Recently, on a plane to San Francisco, I was deeply involved in such a book, when the stewardess came by, paused, and looked over my shoulder for a moment.

"As she moved along, she gave me a quizzical wink, and whispered, 'That looks like a pretty hot sexual manual you're reading.'"

"I was startled and looked down at the heading with fresh eyes. It was entitled, 'Free Responses After the Initial Pass.' This stewardess was projecting."

MISCONCEPTIONS and misinterpretations occur because words are not only ambiguous, but also confusing.

Harris, who is also a member of the usage panel of the American Heritage Dictionary, stated that "for the 500 most commonly used words in our language, there are more than 14,000 different dictionary meanings."

"Language and words are in constant flux," he added. "Not only do they not mean the same things to different people, they don't mean the same things at different times, or even in different parts of the same country."

An example of this flexibility was noticed by Harris with the word square.

"Square is an interesting word that has changed its meaning 100 degrees in my own lifetime," he said. "When I was a boy, to be square was to be solid, and honest, and trustworthy, and fair dealing. Then, that word somehow turned itself entirely around and a square became someone who is naive, and in-

active, and totally out of it."

ANOTHER WORD which has changed meaning over the years and with different groups is the word "rock."

"It originally meant a weapon for bashing, then a tool for hammering, today it denotes a non-metallic mineral to the scientist."

"But the teen-ager, identifies it with music, a jewel thief will think of a diamond, a priest may refer to St. Peter as a rock on which his church was built, and of course, an insurance agent will genuflect towards Prudential."

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to communication, Harris feels, is that the participants each bring their own private language to the conversation.

"That language, he said, may use the same words, but be based on different feelings, values, and opinions which cannot be separated from the spoken word."

"Words themselves may be the least important component in human speech," Harris went on. "We are forever translating from someone else's private language into our own, and much, if not most, communication is blocked at the very beginning by the unconscious assumptions we make about what is being said, or by the speaker that what he says is what is being heard."

HARRIS BELIEVES that the basis of communication is feeling.

"When there is a total failure of communication, it is ultimately due to a lack of common feeling and experience to share," he said.

"Language barriers themselves are not important," he said, because prisoners who want to escape can communicate by tapping in code on a wall and traders who want to bargain together can do it with their hands and their eyes.

"But where the lives of people do not touch at any point, there can be no communication," Harris stated.

The generation gap is really a communication gap, the speaker maintained. This communication gap arises, Harris feels, because of a lack of common feelings and experiences to share.

"Young people cannot emotionally identify with the past anymore than many of their parents can identify with the present," he explained. "And a real effort has to be made on both sides to find a common bridge for their diverse life experience because they truly live in two different worlds."

There has always been change between the generations, he acknowledged.

"But now it is going at an electronic rate," he stated. "Things that used to change in 10 years now change in one year. Young children of 12 know as much as we did at 17."

"They're exposed to enormous amounts of experience. The whole process is like a speeded up movie. There is really no time to adjust. They're being exposed to so much sensory input. You might say they're being flooded by it, and this makes the gap wider and wider."

BUT HARRIS said he does not despair in his role as professional communicator.

"It starts with self-honesty," he said. "Trying to find out who you are and why you want to be what you want to be. You can't get close to someone else until you are perceptive enough to understand your own limitations and your own ambitions and not take them as absolutes in the human condition. That is very hard to do."

"Human communication is more than a matter of sending messages back and forth. True communication is a joint activity of two or more people thinking together, solving problems together, making decisions together."

Gray Panther to speak on families of the future

"Families of the Future" will be discussed by Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, at 6 p.m. April 10 at Mercy College in Detroit.

The lecture will be open to the public. There will be no admission charge. It will be held in the McAuley auditorium on the Mercy campus, 8200 West Outer Drive at Southfield, Detroit.

Ms. Kuhn, who is often called the "wrinkled radical" because of her advocacy for the aging, will be the first speaker in a series of lectures on the families sponsored by Mercy College.

Now 75, Ms. Kuhn writes and speaks frequently on her favorite subject "aging." In 1970, she was forced to retire from her social work position when she reached the age of 65. She and four friends formed an action group later dubbed the "Gray Panthers" by the media because of the members' radical actions and dramatic techniques. The organization now numbers more than 50,000 members in 40 states.

For the past decade, the Gray Panthers have been fighting the system which relegates older people to non-productive roles. Because she believes the elderly should not be segregated, Ms. Kuhn actively recruits

young persons to work for human liberation and elimination of age discrimination.

The primary goal of the Gray Panthers is to raise the consciousness of older Americans so that they will continue to lead useful lives.

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27 Probation After Death

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