On Listening

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Nearly two decades ago, I traveled across Texas to meet the CEO of a successful company to talk about funding for violin scholarships. We had barely finished shaking hands when the words came out of his mouth: “I had no idea you were black.”

I remember the details of that day with vivid clarity. I was the director of the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas. The CEO was on the board of an important foundation whose financial support we were seeking.

His salutation stopped me in my tracks. This wasn’t the way I expected to begin a conversation about financial aid or any other topic. I didn’t respond immediately. Instead, I thought of the lessons of my father, a man who was prone to passionate and sometimes regrettable outbursts as a young man but who, as an adult and a parent, had taught my brother and me to pause, contemplate, and listen in situations like this.

So I paused. And I listened as my host wondered aloud why there were so few minority cellists, how he had noticed this imbalance as a patron of the venerable Aspen Music Festival, and how the classical arts community could better recruit artists of color. In reply, I spoke passionately about our programs at the Butler School and offered my enthusiasm for an artist named Eliesha Nelson — a former student of mine who had recently won a coveted position in the viola section of the Cleveland Orchestra.

This enthusiastic exchange of ideas quickly overshadowed my initial shock at how our conversation had begun. I shudder to think how differently the meeting may have gone had I responded immediately, or labeled his behavior without getting to know his character.

Meaningful understanding — honed through unexpected or uncomfortable experiences, nurtured through the type of liberal education we offer at the University of Richmond and in like-minded institutions throughout our nation — happens every time we open ourselves to someone who is different from us, whether because of ethnic background, sexual orientation, wealth, religious belief, political affiliation, or ideology. To achieve true understanding, we must commit ourselves to listening, even when what we hear knocks us off-balance. These conversations may not always be easy, but they will be educational; they challenge us all to broaden our minds and perspectives.

At Richmond, we pursue opportunities to create interactions like these every day. Sixty percent of our students participate in study abroad programs, bringing fresh perspectives back to campus when they return. Our academic programs expose students to new ideas and ways of thinking, and our small classes enable faculty members to engage students directly in the complexity of problems and solutions. Through living-learning communities and interdisciplinary academic programs such as Integrated Qualitative Science and Philosophy, Politics, Economics, and Law, students learn to connect disparate disciplines — and their competing views of the world — to advance knowledge.

The problems we confront today are knotty and complex, and addressing them effectively will require more perspectives, not fewer. As educators, we all likely remember a time when a student’s response to a reading or lecture revealed an entirely new way of understanding a problem, or years ago as students
when we stayed up late debating an issue back and forth with classmates — solving the world’s problems emboldened by youth and caffeine. One of the most important things these experiences teach is this: Engaged citizenship is complicated.

Despite the rancor of the presidential election, such experiences also teach us that differences in opinion need not lead to acrimony, name-calling, or unrest. What often recalibrates our perspectives and leads to progress are the knowledge, empathy, and understanding that emerge from candid and substantive conversations as we take the time to listen to those who are unlike us. That is the promise of liberal education, a promise that prepares educated citizens who can engage meaningfully with one another, meet challenges with resilience and compassion, and discern new possibilities for the world in which we live.