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The Honor System

by Howard Meharg, UNISON Editor

Gary Smalley, counselor to the masses through his video tapes and TV presentations, makes a strong case for what he calls “honoring” another person as the first and foremost tenet in building and maintaining relationships.

He uses an old violin as a prop in his first sessions which he holds up—strings hanging loose and in an apparent state of disrepair. He then asks someone to take a look inside the sound box of the instrument and read what he sees inside. It read “Antonio Stradivari, Milan, 1756.” This brings a gasp from members of the audience. When Smalley tells the group that the violin is worth between 250 thousand to a half million dollars, the “wows” are clearly audible.

We can look at such an instrument with respect for its workmanship, the reputation of its maker, and, of course, for its monetary value. We can't help but respond with a sense of awe.

Another human being is far more valuable. There is no price high enough to represent the value of a spouse or of one of our children. Another human being is a miracle and an amazing creation. Why should we not look with awe on another person? A gasp of appreciation is totally appropriate. Most certainly, as a guiding principle and starting point for loving relationships, the notion is undeniably powerful.

I'm struck by the contrast I see in the ever escalating use of demeaning names all of us use on each other and the dehumanizing effect this has on each of us. It is no accident that in a war the enemy is most often called everything except a name describing a human being. The Germans were “Krauts”, the Viet Cong “gooks”, the Japanese “Nips”, and these are only a few examples. It's easier to kill a gook, a Kraut, or a Nip than it is another human being. If another human is reduced to the stature of a bug or worth no more than garbage, killing becomes relatively easy.

Listen to the language of some parents to the kids. They're called turkeys,

idiots, brats, and rug rats, and these are the mild terms. Some adults, and most teenagers are in to far more demeaning terms for one another. Most are designed to show the lowest form of contempt and include the all familiar references to excrement, garbage, and genitals. Add to this the multitude of ethnic labels and we have an arsenal of words which are hurtful and hateful (to put it mildly).

What is even more significant is that each time we demean another by applying such a label we make it easier to kill them! I don't mean to overstate this. I believe such dishonor one to another literally destroys positive relationships and makes it possible to physically harm or kill another person. We simply come to the point where we look at the other person as less than human, therefore dispensable! It is bad enough to be the recipient of the label. The effect is just as deadly for the one who delivers the words.

Seeing another person as having honor implies huge effects in daily living. It implies courtesy, manners, respect, and caring. When an individual of great respect enters the room, we offer assistance, we smile, we might even rise to our feet, we might applaud. Honoring one another becomes the antithesis of competition, the put-down, bullying, back-stabbing, and speaking ill of another individual. It implies loyalty. It elicits praise. It says thank you, please, and excuse me when necessary. Some random acts of kindness might even be in order!

Talk about it. Try it in your choirs.