

The Power of Words (Or Even Just Looks)

By Bob Naeher

I was walking down a street in Albany on a beautiful summer day. The sun was shining, birds were singing, I had just enjoyed a terrific lunch, and I still had a bit of the runner's high left from an early morning run. I had on my "Life is Good" cap, and there was a bounce in my step.

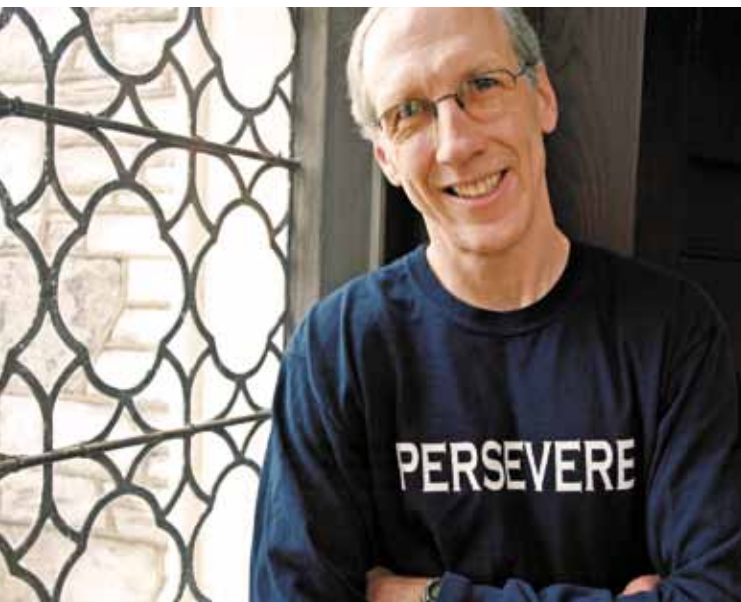
And then a car slowed down and three teenage female heads leaned out. Now, many older people don't understand and are uncertain of how to react to teens. Some are even fearful. But I, who spend my days with teens, know they are idealistic, intellectually open and vibrant, insightful and perceptive, and honest and straightforward. It is for all this and more that I respect and love working with teenagers. All of this was vaguely in my mind as the girls shouted, "HEY, GRANDPA!" and burst into laughter. I saw the driver, a woman my age, look a bit embarrassed as the car pulled away. Not thinking of myself as the grandfatherly type, I looked around to see whom they were talking to, but the only other person in sight was another young woman trying not to laugh.

Ouch. I felt a little different through the rest of the afternoon. My knees creaked, the bounce was replaced by stiffness, and my energy and enthusiasm were gone. I began to feel like the worst stereotype of what I'd been called. Was I growing hair in my ears?

Seeing my glum face when I got home, my wife asked what happened. "Some girls called me grandpa." When I gave her the details, she said she knew exactly what happened.

"The driver was the mom of one of the girls and she was checking you out," my wife wisely said. "The girls caught her, and they busted on her by calling you grandpa."

I was instantly struck by the brilliance of her insight. Far from being a doddering figure, I was "check-out-able." Well, maybe not, but it felt better to think that. And with that



History teacher Bob Naeher says words affect perceptions.

readjustment of perception, the bounce returned to my step, and I went back to my normal summer routines of cycling, kayaking, and in general pretending that I'm not getting that much older.

What this experience brought, aside from a renewed appreciation for my wife's wisdom, was a greater awareness of the power of others' words to shape our perceptions of ourselves. In writing a dissertation on Puritan prayer, I was impressed by the Puritans' recognition of the power of our speech to shape our understanding of ourselves and the world. Puritans, in praying extemporaneously (i.e., choosing their own words rather than reading from a prayer book), engaged, I had argued, in what noted Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt has called "self-fashioning." These girls' words demonstrated, additionally, the power of our words not only to shape our perceptions, but to shape others' perceptions as well.

And it is not only words that can shape perceptions. My brother is a well-respected administrator at an independent school in Connecticut. Several years ago he became utterly infatuated with a younger woman, and, to make a long story short, they now have a regular Monday date and spend a couple of hours over lunch. He simply glows when describing the fun he has with her, and it is clear how she makes him feel. His wife, I should add, knows all about this.

As I hear my brother talk of this woman, I am struck by how much we can impact others' feelings and perceptions of themselves not only with our words, but by our very attitude toward them. This other woman is actually a young girl, whom we'll call Ann, and she cannot speak. She is my brother's niece, and she has Niemann-Pick disease, a rare disease in which an enzyme deficiency causes cell death, neurological problems, and organ failure, and which has left her, at the age of six, incapable of doing much except breathing. She needs constant care and attention, and has already outlived her doctors' predictions of her lifespan. My brother, seeing the strain that caring for Ann has put on her mother, takes Ann out to lunch each week, giving his sister-in-law a couple of hours to clean and take care of things she can't do while caring for her daughter. My brother takes Ann to the mall or

*He can't help but be built up by seeing,
in her eyes, what she sees him to be —
a really cool uncle!*

a park, pushes her around in her stroller, feeds her while he eats a sandwich, and in general enjoys looking in her eyes and seeing her pleasure in simple distractions and in being with him.

Now, this puts my brother in a good light, which is not my intent. He's my younger brother, after all, the same guy who was such a royal pain in the neck when we were kids. But he's grown up to be a pretty decent guy, and he saw an opportunity to help someone and acted. He also found that he gets way more than he gives, and I'm interested in how that works. He gets reflected back to him, in Ann's eyes, some pretty special things like love and affection. He can't help but be built up by seeing, in her eyes, what she sees him to be—a really cool uncle who does cool things with her. If she can communicate all of that so powerfully, with her extreme physical limitations, what potential communicative, and shaping, power might we have?

Here's a shirt I'll be wearing the rest of the day. It reads, "persevere," on the front, and on the back, "be determined, be stubborn, endure, hang on, hold fast, keep at it, stick to it, pursue, persist, press on, get it done." Ann's mom designed this shirt, and it summarizes her attitude about fighting this disease. It is now sold on the Web site of the National Niemann-Pick Disease Foundation to raise awareness and funds for research. **e**

Robert J. Naeher is chair of the history and social sciences department. He gave this talk as a Monday morning inspirational speech during Morning Reports.