

Cutting Corners

By Hap Hansen

Many of us hear what has been said about us or our friends. Unfortunately, few of us really listen to what has been said about us. We take short cuts and cut corners. We jump to conclusions about what we have heard, but if we had taken the time to really listen to what had been said, we very likely would have reached a better conclusion. We may have cut the right corner. Most of us hear well. Few of us listen well.

Probably the best example of someone who both heard and listened well came from a comment from Ralph Waldo Emerson about some of his contemporaries. He said, "The louder they talked of their honor, the faster we counted our spoons!" He knew how to hear and he knew how to listen. He also knew that many of his friends knew how to cut corners.

One of the best examples of someone who heard, but did not listen, comes from the military. It seems a new soldier was on prison guard duty for the first time. The private was instructed that if prisoners were running away in an escape attempt, he was to shout, "Halt" three times and if they didn't stop, he was to fire a burst of gunfire over their heads. Sure enough, on his first night of guard duty, five prisoners broke out and were running away. Probably trying to cut corners and following precisely the instructions he had heard, the guard shouted, "Halt three times!" and then promptly emptied his carbine in a burst over their heads. The prisoners fell to the ground and immediately surrendered. The soldier heard the instructions, but didn't listen. But he cut a major corner and did not realize why. Fortunately, his instructions were to fire over their heads and not at their heads!

Hearing is pretty easy for most of us. Listening isn't. In order to truly listen, we must not only hear the words being spoken, but we must also listen for the emotion behind the words. Listen for voice inflection. Interpret the body language, which, though silent, may be screaming loud and clear at our senses.

Don't cut corners. Listen. In this age of instant communication, with the aid of electronics, we can hear the sounds of thousands of people. Telephones, e-mail, television, radio and other communications make it easier for us to hear what others have to say. But unless we see them face to face, or listen to the underlying ideas they may be giving us, we may only be hearing the words and ignoring the ideas, thus cutting the wrong corners.

Listen carefully so that when someone talks loudly of their honor, we will know whether or not to count our spoons.