

Niskayuna High School Speech 20 June 1991

I'd like to say how appreciative I am of this honor, and I have many people to thank. I would not have been here without the help of two groups of people: first, my family for their support from the beginning of my life with the horn, taking me to rehearsals, getting me a good instrument, putting up with the sounds of a beginner practicing, and providing an environment where classical music is important. The second group is the community of music teachers and performers here in the Capital District. The fine music program here at Niskayuna provided many opportunities for me to perform, and it was due to the dedication of the teachers that it was as good as it was. The Music Department is totally different now than it was when I graduated, with two exceptions: Bob Christensen, who was instrumental in the process of my receiving this honor (thank you, Bob) and Mel Schiff.

Mel was my principal contact with the Music Department, and I've always been thankful for his insistence that Niskayuna not have a marching band. For him, the music came first. When I came home from the Oberlin Conservatory during the summers, I would go up to the High School and see what was going on, and whenever I saw Mel, he would say in his gruff way, but with a twinkle in his eye, "Ward, you owe it all to me." I would like to extend a special "thank you" to Mel, especially since he is retiring this year.

I've been asked to say a few enlightening words, and although I'm usually used to communicating through my horn, I'd like to say a little something about how playing in an orchestra has taught me a lot about life.

In my profession, as you might expect, one of the most important things to be able to do is play one's instrument, competently and musically. But there is another skill that is equally important: listening. If I didn't listen to the orchestra, I would play in the wrong way, play out of tune, or just play in the wrong style, and pretty soon I'd be not listening to myself play in a subway station with a hat out.

Listening is so important in the orchestra, that I began to draw some parallels between it and life outside the orchestra. How many times have you observed two people having a conversation and seen that each was just not hearing or wanting to hear what the other said? That's always been hard for me to hear, because it sounds like two instruments playing really out of tune. But sometimes you see a couple who are communicating perfectly with a wonderful ease and simplicity. I can imagine some beautiful, ringing chords then.

But what is the nature of listening? It's not just the sounds of the instruments in the orchestra that we hear. It's the content of the music, the rise and fall of the rhythms and melodies, the tension and release of the music – its emotional content. Likewise when

we listen to someone in a conversation, it's not the words that they say, but what's behind them that's important. A conversation with a friend would be almost meaningless without the emotional intent behind the words, but it's something we often take for granted. Listening seems to be intertwined with understanding, empathy, compassion and connection with others. Yvonne Rand, a wonderful teacher of Buddhist philosophy once said that "90% of what people say is about themselves." It reveals a lot to have your ear tuned to that frequency, and sometimes found unexpected common ground with someone, even in the heat of a bitter argument, when I listen in that way.

Orchestra life has also taught me a lot about humility. I remember once when I was auditioning for a position in the Minnesota Orchestra, and played what I thought was the best audition I ever played, and I was all set to go on to the second round. I was quickly deflated when the committee voted me out. That brings to mind another saying: "Listen as if you might be wrong." To step aside from a puffed-up place of being "right" can only help the lines of communication. It's extremely difficult to truly listen and at the same time think that you're "right." Flexibility and openness are necessities in orchestra life – every night the person you are listening to is going to play it a little differently, and adjustment is one of the most essential ingredients in music.

So far I've talked about listening to your friends, music and people around you. But there is another aspect of listening that's perhaps even more important: listening to yourself. As a musician, my life to a large extent revolves around sound, and as a result, I also appreciate quiet, especially after playing a Mahler Symphony while sitting in front of the trumpets, trombones and tympani. The world is filled with noise of all kinds, but it is only in the silent moments that we have a chance to sit with ourselves and hear those tiny voices within us that are our own personal truths. I wonder about the joggers I see in the San Francisco hills, dutifully exercising their bodies, but totally oblivious to the world around them and to their inner voices because they are plugged into their Walkmans. They are missing something, or trying to escape from it. I remember my first car, a rusty old mustard-yellow Toyota. After the radio died, I took long trips in that car, and found that there was a great opportunity for some inner reflection while tooling along on the open road.

In the orchestra, I must listen to others, but I must also compare what I hear from them with what is coming out of my instrument. Otherwise I won't be able to play in tune or in good ensemble with them. When I'm practicing at home, I have to listen to myself and compare it to how I want it to sound – if I don't listen to my own playing, how can I improve? Our lifelong task as musicians is to hear ourselves as others hear us, yet it is tantalizingly difficult to know your own playing, just as it's very hard to know yourself in a true, deep way.

Listening to music, other people and ourselves is one path toward that end which we are all striving for: gaining a sense of inner self. If there is one commencement gift that I could give to all you graduates, it would be the ability to listen and hear all of what is going on around you, without judgment and with great awareness.

Thank you for listening.

Robert Ward
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