

## Mt. St. Mary's

Thank you, Dr. Rehm and Dr. Powell and thank you all for being here this evening. I'm honored to have been introduced by such impressive speakers, and I'm most honored to be invited to speak with you – and I do mean with you, since my preference is always to listen, and to be in conversation, rather than to make speeches. I'll hope that my brief remarks will stimulate questions and comments from you, and then we can truly engage with each other.

I'm particularly pleased to be here, because I know how important the Mount is, as a mighty vehicle for instilling in young people the values and beliefs they will take into the wider world.

I Believe the goals of the mount and my radio program are similar: to offer information about the whole range of human experience, the wide universe of ideas that will eventually translate into productive exploration, and to present each subject with enthusiasm, in the hope of providing an incentive for further learning.

I consider myself fortunate to be standing here with you, in that I was born to parents who regarded education as dangerous. They both arrived in this country in the early 20th century – my father from Beirut, Lebanon, with a high school education; my mother, from Alexandria, Egypt, with an eighth grade education. Her inability to speak English was an embarrassment to her.

My sister and I were raised hearing a single message: – that we should learn to become excellent stenographers and eventually first-rate secretaries. But most of all, that we should marry and have children and remain within the Arab community. Long after they were gone, I came to realize that there was fear on their part – a fear that education would separate us from them and create a world where our interests and dreams would not be theirs. Ours was not a world in which higher education was considered of value for girls.

My learning – both as a child and now as an adult – has come primarily through listening to others, each and every day. In particular, to teachers, athletic and drama coaches, friends, my spouse, and our children, all of whom have taught – and continue to teach me a great deal.

For the last 27 years, I've had the privilege of working in public radio, listening to the guests and to the callers on my program. The hallmark of the program has been from the outset to offer an opportunity for civil and civic debate over the important issues of our day – allowing all to hear the various sides of the large and small questions of this world from different perspectives.

The guests themselves are all well-educated in the usual sense of the word. But in one particular area, some are far more highly skilled than others – in their ability to listen.

Washington isn't the only place where this is true. Certainly, we have politicians and bureaucrats and administration officials who don't feel they need to listen to each other. Many are locked into their positions even before they arrive in Washington, and, once they get here, they use their education as an opportunity to stand firm. Others, as we've seen, are somewhat more open to consider alternatives, and a few are even open to changing their minds. A few.

I wonder if you remember the theme that was part of our vocabulary back in the eighties and nineties? Reading is fundamental. Well, I agree with that wholeheartedly. The slogan I'd like to see for the coming decades is: listening is fundamental. In this day and age of e-mail, voicemail, office memos, and text-messaging, we hardly even hear each other in real time anymore, much less listen.

In fact, I believe many of us may have forgotten how to listen, and not only to those politicians whose views may be different from ours and with whom we disagree. We have forgotten how to listen to our spouses, our children, even our friends. We ask ourselves why the divorce rate is so high? Why is there so much litigation in this country? Why is there so much violence? Why do we miss the signs that people are sad, miserable, and even have the potential for violence, and then wake up only to find that – because we didn't listen, some horrible catastrophe has occurred?

On a major scale, after 9/11 we learned that agencies of the federal government refused to share information that might have helped us realize the potential for disaster. Instead, each agency kept its secrets, refusing to talk, and refusing to listen. Now there's debate about whether we should be engaged with Syria and Iran, whether we should not only talk but listen to what those countries have to say about the state of the world. I would ask you: might we not try to move this endangered and fragile world toward a more stable axis of cooperation, rather than to shut out of our hearing those we label the axis of evil?

On a more personal level, however, I believe we can achieve progress, one relationship at a time.

By quieting our inner voices of disagreement, competitiveness, and attempts at one-upsmanship, we honor the voice of the speaker. The act of listening becomes an expression of generosity and compassion, which can lead to the creation of a new and more harmonious society. True listening is a form of spiritual hospitality, by which you open yourself to the ideas of another; you invite strangers to become friends, and friends to become even better friends. Listening has always been a way of sharing, of using a pause to reflect, rather than to react. Listening is a form of engagement, of opening the mind and the heart to another. I would suggest that by listening instead of talking, we may become more attentive to the whole person, and by that very engagement, learn more about ourselves.

Today's world involves taking the education and the talent god gives us, and going out into the world to use it, to display those gifts to the fullest. But I most firmly believe that what the world needs now – more than great talkers – are great listeners. Great listeners who are teachers, students, friends, spouses, parents, children, and citizens.