



Listen Up

by Mike Fitts

The following is an excerpt of the commencement address delivered by President Mike Fitts at the first Tulane graduation ceremony over which he presided on May 16, 2015.

As you venture onward from here, my advice is to keep listening.

You may think that you already know the importance of listening. After all, you wouldn't be here today if you hadn't fine-tuned the art by mastering the lectures of Tulane's remarkable faculty.

But the importance of listening doesn't end once you leave the classroom. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful tools you will have as you build your lives after Tulane.

There are three fundamental reasons. First, we live in an era of information overload. Listening skills help you cut through the clutter to find meaning. Second, we live in a society of increasing polarization. Listening makes you a bridge-builder, and in turn can make you a more effective leader. And third, we navigate the world through our personal interactions. Listening has always been at the core of strong relationships.

Obviously, we are all living in an amazing moment in history. The explosion in platforms spreading new information and ideas has made this the best time for taking in knowledge. But our fast-paced, technology-saturated world can overwhelm us. We may be able to hear more, but we are listening less.

Today's information overload also makes it easier to access only the information we agree with. We filter out views unlike our own.

Count on the political arena to provide a telling example. Members of the Democratic and Republican parties have always disagreed on a number of issues. But now they disdain one another. Recent studies at Stanford have shown that almost half of the members of each party now view members of the other as less intelligent and more selfish than themselves. And up to half even say they don't want their children marrying members of the other party. So we're struggling to get engaged in more ways than one.

That is one reason you so often find great leaders—those who can transcend divisions to achieve common goals—described as great listeners.

PAY ATTENTION

Listening is a skill to continue sharpening.

Listening might sound like a passive activity, but, in fact, it's one of the most powerful means of participation. Psychologists have even found that the great listeners are more effective leaders than great talkers.

My last, and most personal, observation is the importance of listening to members of your family and others closest to you. They're the ones who often give you the most candid insights on the world. Pay special attention to listening across generations. Perhaps my most formative conversations were with my own mother when I was growing up—and my two daughters years later—on many of the same topics.

My mother was born in the early part of the 20th century and initially pursued a career as an economist at the Federal Reserve. However, as was expected of women in her generation, she ultimately left that path to raise a family. In retrospect, I realize she struggled with this decision, given her 1960s commitment to social change. I recall dinner table discussions with her about her aspirations, which, as a young male, I didn't fully understand.

Years later, these same themes emerged in conversations with my own daughters.

They are building careers in a completely different world but still face a work environment that is not entirely supportive of personal aspirations. I now see how listening to generations of women in my family has taught me to be a more thoughtful manager. When these conversations repeat at millions of dinner tables, society advances.

I can say with great confidence that Tulane has sharpened your ability to listen. As students here, you have lived in a resilient and culturally vibrant city, pressing you close to people with different backgrounds, experiences, social classes and races.

As graduates of Tulane—the university with the greatest commitment to service—you are tuned in to recognizing the needs of others. This graduating class performed well over half a million public service hours. Our graduates today listened to the children of New Orleans, discovering what would inspire them to thrive. They listened to nonprofit groups to understand their greatest needs. They listened to each other to organize a thousand classmates in service projects.

It fills me with optimism to know you are, as a result of your education and this social involvement, the world's next great leaders.

So, do not lose your curiosity, your empathy and, most of all, your power to listen.