



Chapter 18

SHUT UP AND LISTEN

*A man of knowledge uses words with restraint . . .
Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,
and discerning if he holds his tongue.*
King Solomon, The Book of Proverbs

In early 2006 our nation was up to its ears in congressional hearings for Judge Samuel A. Alito, appointed by President Bush to replace exiting United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The Senate Judiciary Committee—eight Republicans and seven Democrats—must confirm the president's appointment in a formal inquiry, called, interestingly, a hearing. In the weeks leading up to the inquisition, senators, when pressed for their opinions on the president's choice for the High Court, invariably would reply, "We'll have to wait to hear from the judge when he's before our committee."

At Judge Alito's hearing in January 2006, each of the

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fifteen senators was allotted thirty minutes, on the nation's behalf, to draw out the court appointee on any topic or issue. Regrettably for Judge Alito and the public, the fifty television cameras chronicling the proceedings caused amnesia among the committee members, who forgot everything but the opportunity to grandstand.

The *New York Times* actually ran a bar chart on page one to illustrate the lopsided ratio between each senator's rhetoric and Alito's responses. Only two of the fifteen questioners yammered less than the man they were supposed to be interviewing. One senator, Joseph Biden Jr. of Delaware, pontificated to the tune of four thousand words (about the length of three chapters in this book), leaving only a few minutes for the judge he was supposed to interview. The hearings finally wound to a close, and a sad day for democracy became my lead in a chapter on the lost art of listening.

In my life it's safe to say that I have never learned a single thing while I was talking. My willingness to close my mouth and open my ears, on the other hand, has granted me free admission to a great education. "Let the wise listen," King Solomon said, "and add to their learning."

As the head of a public relations firm, people pay me to advise them; they want me to talk. And while I take seriously

that words are my stock in trade, I also know that the quality of my inventory rises or falls with what I've taken in before I speak. In the process, I have learned that good listening is an act of the will and an exercise of the intellect. The trick is to let the moment pass when you might, short term, have the floor and hold attention. To dominate a meeting or conversation is not power; informed, good judgment is power.

Some years ago a prominent international figure was invited to meet with the leaders of an organization that eagerly sought his counsel. When the day of the meeting came, this group's top brass gathered at headquarters, electric with anticipation. Sure enough, the visitor's car pulled up to the office building and the organization's president, obviously excited, stepped forward to welcome the great man.

As the president and his guest strode into the building's top-floor conference room, an entire executive department rose to its feet. After brief introductions, the visitor took his seat at one end of the table and the president began to speak. He began to speak, and he did not stop. Like an artist at a command performance, the president held forth about a vision of momentous effect. He was eloquent. He was in his zone. He was nervous and more than a little enchanted with the sound of his own voice. This movement, he declared,

called for like-minded groups to form a coalition to span the globe.

At some point, he might have yielded the floor to his guest. He might have sought the renowned man's insights, let his famous guest say *something*. After all, this man had the global connections and influence that the speaker needed. But the president was busy digging his project's grave and burying it under his own words. In a comfortable boardroom surrounded by gifted professionals, he squandered what turned out to be his only audience with the great man. Years of talking had robbed him of the impulse to listen.

Time expired and the meeting ended. The president escorted his guest down in the elevator and waved him off. As his car pulled out of the parking lot, the one man who could have best advanced the project turned to a fellow passenger and said, "Who was that fellow in there doing all the talking?"



Once when a large church found itself in a crisis about to hit the newspaper, the pastor called a telephone conference of key advisers: a couple of attorneys, some staff members, and PR counsel. From my hotel room in another city, with the receiver in one hand and my pen in the other, I joined the conference and listened as voices on the line shot out reactions, opinions, warnings, recommendations. After everyone

else had spoken, the pastor said, “Mark, I haven’t heard from you. What do you think?”

My silence at this point was more habit than tactic. But habit can work for you. In a crisis, the right first thing is not to react to immediate information but to gather and assess the facts. As it turned out, keeping my opinions on pause bought me time to craft a better case. And I needed a good case because when I finally spoke, it was to gently and resolutely challenge much of the advice the pastor was receiving.

That was a case when my silence on the front end opened a later chance to be heard, and I’m glad to have waited. Solomon must have known of the human urge to get in a first word as well as the last when he wrote, “He who answers before listening—that is his folly and shame.”

The advice to shut up and listen contradicts the human desire to be noticed or known, but not every good thing is easy. To never close my mouth, employ silence, genuinely hear another person, absorb new information, to believe that every moment requires my input is shortsighted and ultimately sad.

Otherwise life is like . . . well, it’s like standing on a balcony overlooking a breathtaking panorama and using the entire time to stare into a mirror.