I would like to propose, as an hypothesis for consideration, that the major barrier to mutual interpersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve or disapprove, the statement of the person, or the other group. . . . Although the tendency to make evaluations is common in almost all interchange of language, it is very much heightened in those situations where feelings and emotions are concerned.

Real communication occurs, and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding. What does this mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view, to sense how it feels to him to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about.

I can suggest a little laboratory experiment which you can try to test the quality of your understanding. The next time you get into an argument with your wife, or your friend or with a small group of friends, just stop the discussion for a moment and for an experiment, institute this rule: “Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker’s satisfaction.” You see what this would mean. It would simply mean that before presenting your own point of view, it would be necessary for you to really achieve the other speaker’s frame of reference—to understand his thoughts and feelings so well that you could summarize them for him.

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But if you try it you will discover it one of the most difficult things you have ever tried to do. However, once you have been able to see the other’s point of view, your own comments will have to be drastically revised. You will also find the emotion going out of the discussion, the differences being reduced, and those differences which remain being of a rational and understandable sort.

This procedure gradually achieves mutual communication. Mutual communication tends to be pointed toward solving a problem rather than toward attacking a person or group. It leads to a situation in which I see how the problem appears to you, as well as to me, and you see how it appears to me, as well as to you. Thus accurately and realistically defined, the problem is almost certain to yield to intelligent attack, or if it is in part insoluble, it will be comfortably accepted as such.

See also pages 146-47 of Practical Argument