

Words That Make a Difference

Everyone needs encouragement.

Take Mary Ann Bird. Mary Ann was born in Brooklyn in 1928 with a severe cleft palate. She underwent seventeen surgeries before she reached adulthood. As you can imagine, her misshaped mouth and teeth, along with her garbled speech, made her an item of curiosity to the other kids—and not in a positive way.

In an article she wrote for Guideposts magazine (January, 1985, p. 115), she said, "I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me."

That changed in the second grade when she was in Mrs. Leonard's class. Here's what she wrote in Guideposts:

"The time came for the annual hearing tests given at our school. I could barely hear out of one ear and was not about to reveal something else that would single me out as different. So I cheated.



"The 'whisper test' required each child to go to the classroom door, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, while the teacher whispered something from her desk, which the child repeated. Then the same for the other ear. Nobody checked how tightly the untested ear was covered so I merely pretended to block mine.

"As usual, I was last. But all through the testing I wondered what Mrs. Leonard might say to me. I knew from previous years that the teacher whispered things like 'The sky is blue' or 'Do you have new shoes?'

"My time came. I turned my bad ear toward her, plugging up the other just enough to be able to hear. I waited, and then came the words that God had surely put into her mouth, seven words that changed my life forever.

"Mrs. Leonard, the teacher I adored, said softly, 'I wish you were my little girl.'"

Simple words of love and encouragement.

I've had people tell me, "You told me once _____, and that made a difference in my life." I don't even remember some of those conversations. I don't say that with any sense of self-congratulatory pride. I've also said things with quite the opposite effect. A young man messaged me a few years ago telling me he loathed me for the longest time

because of something I said to him. I don't even remember the conversation, but he certainly did—and my words had a negative impact.

These moments underscore for me that we encourage—and discourage—people in ways we may not even be aware.

So what if we approached encouragement with a lot more intentionality? In recent years, I've begun praying on my way to meetings and lunch engagements, "Lord, let me be an encouragement to this person."

I wonder if Joseph prayed such prayers. He was known so much for his encouraging words and actions that we are more familiar with his nickname Barnabas: "Son of Encouragement" ([Acts 4:36](#)). I see at least three ways Barnabas earned this nickname:

- He encouraged anyone and everyone to follow Christ ([Acts 11:19-21](#)).
- He encouraged others to grow in their walk with Christ ([vv. 22-24](#)).
- He encouraged Paul to serve Christ ([vv. 25-26](#)).



We are surrounded by people like Mary Ann Bird:

- People who feel on the outside looking in
- People who keep getting knocked down by life
- People who don't feel loved
- People who want to be useful to God but don't know how
- People who think they are only good at one thing: hiding their constant discouragement
- People who just want to be noticed—by anyone

Let's be people who encourage with intentionality. And if we do it enough, encouraging others will no longer be something we think about doing; it will just happen naturally. Encouragement will become a part of who we are.

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" ([Eph. 4:29](#)).