
THE ART OF CONVERSATION



This guide offers you the principles of the art of conversation and methods through which you may approach its practice

The Intersecting Monologues

“I really do believe that we can all become better than we are.”

– JAMES BALDWIN

The trap we fall into is to treat our conversational partners as someone to be convinced. In other words, we treat them as a prop to our own ideas, comments and assertions, expecting them to bend to our monologue. We occupy the fixed place from which we engage with a shifting world. Only by being aware of our self-centeredness are we able to practice conversation in the spirit of broad-minded collaboration, not narrow-minded ideology.

It was, I believe, Doris Lessing who asserted that there is no such thing as dialogue, only intersecting monologues. Yet I would suggest that there is a rich, vibrant place for genuine conversation, defined by Theodore Zeldin as that situation where two or more people share their beliefs, opinions, memories, feelings and experiences and are open enough to enter this situation willing to leave it slightly different.

Relating to Them

Symptomatic of our partisan divide and ad hominem attacks on friends, neighbors and colleagues is a lack of compassion and empathy. *“Compassion is easiest to feel when you have a sense of commonality with someone else,”* found [this study](#). It is like a muscle that we either fortify by exercising or allow to wither.

Can you identify assumptions that are made about you by others? Perhaps a relative still stereotypes you by experiences from your childhood, or a work colleague assumes you are the same at home as you are at work? To what degree are you sure that your perceptions of someone else are true? It is a feature of our times that we seek certainty, when we should instead be willing to lean into uncertainty and question our beliefs.

The more we segregate ourselves, whether intellectually, geographically or socio-economically the more we lose our ability to relate. Part of conversation’s attraction is its capacity to allow us to relate to someone else. As the Jesuit intellectual, Walter Ong suggests, in conversation, *“... persons commune with persons, reaching one another’s interiors...”*

I was reminded of this by John A. Powell who, [interviewed here](#) by Krista Tippett on NPR’s On Being, observed that, *“We are connected. What we need to do is become aware of it, to live it, to express it.”* To understand others, we must talk with them. In so doing, we also allow them to know us. This is not the same as agreement, but it is a recognition of our common humanity. That’s a good place to start.



Relating to Ourselves

Michel de Montaigne declared conversation is exercise for the mind. It addresses not only our ability to relate to someone else, but also our ability to relate to ourselves. Paraphrasing Susan Sontag, we talk with others to examine and discern our own thoughts.



In this day and age, we live in self-affirming bubbles. Instead of critical thought, we've vacuum packed our minds. If we are to pierce that hardened carapace, then we should reframe our conversations as ones where each of us wishes to hear the other; where we wish to discuss and explain, instead of justify and prove. What we may find is that our own awareness of our views shifts and morphs. Amazingly, according to a [study reported in the New York Times here](#), when people supporting particular political policies are "asked to explain how these policy ideas work: they become more moderate in their political views." As individuals, we get to sharpen our views by investigating them with a critical eye and a conversational partner.

Conversation also allows us a pathway towards our authentic selves. By investigating our personal views, beliefs and opinions, we reveal and illuminate our true personality instead of some superficial persona that we construct in order to project to the external world. Meaningful dialog peels away the masks and layers, moving us closer to something real.

Openness

Being open to others requires an absence of agenda and an inclination towards inquiry. Curiosity, according to the famed eighteenth century essayist, Samuel Johnson, is a "thirst of the soul." It isn't just that asking questions results in the pleasure of knowledge and insight, but that it also releases us from the anguish of not knowing.

Juxtaposed with the anxiety of ignorance is a desire for certainty. Our brains are predicting machines. Ambiguity is not only difficult for us, it is an experience that we take illogical steps to avoid or to deny outright. Curiosity, however, helps us to discover the world and our place within it. We wander to the fringes of our awareness and experience and explore what else there is to know. Questions are more powerful than answers.

"Try to love the questions themselves... you need to live the question."

– RAINER MARKE RILKE

Openness demands that we do not objectify others or delineate their capacity to reveal themselves to us. Commentator David Brooks

[recently extolled](#) the work of theologian Martin Buber, who articulated the profound intimacy that can emerge from being fully open, a situation that emerges when two or more people are totally immersed in their engagement, when they mutually offer themselves and embrace the other in a total, unselfconscious and selfless way. Openness renders entirely permeable the walls between us.

Difference and Identity

It is worth accepting that we will have disagreements instead of trying to force compliance to one (our) point of view. Much more valuable is sincere engagement without the need for compliant agreement. In fact, it is important that we actively seek difference. Birds of a feather may flock together, but the implications of our social segregation are disturbing. As Bill Bishop's book *The Big*



Sort points out, the homogeneity of American society is perpetuating our shrink wrapped perspectives and lack of compassion. We are constructing personal lifestyles where difference is removed and, consequently, we are unable to deal with people that are not like us. Rather, we should be grateful that we are engaging with others whose perspectives, experiences, opinions and feelings are not the same as our own.

Current events have left many angry and bemused, or gloating and antagonistic. Our contemporary culture has left us ill-equipped to cope with conflict. In reflecting on anger, psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett [observes](#) that, *"Buddhism teaches that anger is a form of ignorance, namely of other people's points of view. If, in the midst of your fury, you can manage to see your opponents not as evil but as frustrated and trying to make a change, anger can actually cultivate empathy for the other side. In this sense, some angers are a form of wisdom."*

Time

The understanding and intimacy that can be achieved through conversation is not likely to arise within a short time span. Conversation is at its most potent when it is allowed space to drift, unforced. Patience is a virtue that our contemporary culture and virtual media have done little to nourish.

Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah [says](#) that we can use conversation to sidle up to our differences and incrementally accumulate the competency to delve into more provocative conversations around dissonance. We must allow time for this accretion of trust and respect. Yet our good fortune is that often we already have a relationship with many of the people we encounter in our everyday lives. The fertile soil for meaningful conversation already exists. Our work now is to tend to it.



Silence



This is not how to get through the difficulties of our conversational encounters...

We are swift of voice in modern society. Silence, however, is a way we can be a detective of our own thoughts, as well as our attitudes to listening. We should allow for conversational pauses. By giving silence a chance to shine, we give the conversation room for its own growth and self-determination, as well as an opportunity to quell our more hyperbolic tendencies in favor of more considered reaction. It is in these spaces that we incubate and bring to fruition the hidden workings of our hearts and minds, surfacing ideas.

Our discomfort with moments of silence or contemplation is, in truth, an opportunity for reflection and an offering to others. In our silence, we give voice to others. It is a remarkable gift to be fully present with another person. That interaction is not a zero-sum situation, but accrues wholeness to both people. Listening is deeply fulfilling.

“It is not speaking that breaks our silence, but the anxiety to be heard.”

– THOMAS MERTON

Courage

We applaud acts of courage though exhibit little of it when it comes to conversation. Often there are faux displays of brave confession on various media, but these may be nothing more than conversation as therapeutic entertainment. True courage in conversation requires a degree of vulnerability. This may take time. It demands that we step into discomfort. Nonetheless, as [Brené Brown points out in her research](#), if we are to find real harmony in our lives and in our relationships, we must be courageous, and therefore learn to accept vulnerability. In a society that has come to think that everything we want is effortless and cheap, it will be disorienting to realize that wonderful relationships will come with a cost. Most of us, though, will accept that the price of this uneasiness is worth the joy in our relationships and the sense of purpose we share with our family, friends, neighbors and colleagues.



Good luck with your conversations

**“Conversation distinguishes the
human being from the animal and the
civilized man from the barbarian.”**

– MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

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