

Let's Talk—The Lost Art of Conversation

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, November 5, 2006
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“Each and every one of us had ancestors who sat around a fire together, ... In those circles people spoke from the heart. ... It is your heritage. The time has come to remember the circle.” That comes from the book *Wisdom Circles*.

A bit over a decade ago, I got deeply interested and involved in dialog circles—small groups of people who come together to intentionally involve in genuine conversation. Circles come in all manner and fashion. Some meet regularly over a period of years, the focus of their exploration undulating and pulsating with the changing interests and circumstances of its participants.

Others are eight or ten people who come together six or eight times to delve into a particular topic or issue or area of life. Some have set boundaries, rituals and ways agreed to by the circle itself. Others are less structured, more like a quilting bee.

As I said, all manner and fashion and I have, over the years, been involved in several types of circles, and enjoyed and benefited deeply from each and every one of them. The elements of circling are not alien to us. We often use many of them here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture—sometimes intentionally, sometimes without even thinking—and we always feel different when we simply sit in a circle, facing each other, with nothing between us.

It stimulates genuine conversation and allows us to think creatively together in order to discover shared meaning, access personal wisdom, and advance collective growth. It is an integrated process that can produce tangible results within individuals, groups, and within cultures.

In my opening remarks a couple of months ago, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of 9-11, I commented that when we listen to others non-judgmentally about what is important to them and why, and when we muster the courage to talk openly to others about what's meaningful to us and why, the world begins to change.

Big things happen when small groups talk to each other. Deep connections are formed in conversation; connections that bind us and that overcome the difficulties of difference; connections that make us brave.

That's why we should talk to each more and more genuinely. The basic principles of genuine conversation are deep listening, active silence, and authentic expression. These three interact in an organic fashion and elements of each are present in the others so they function holistically.

And you know how we Ethical cultivators feel about the organic and the interdependent! They are dear to our hearts so genuine conversation, whether formal or spontaneous, should come naturally to us. But that's not always the case.

I have kind of two themes this morning. *Let's Talk*, which is what we're going to do throughout the day here—during Social Hour immediately after our meeting here, and on

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

into the following Membership Community meeting that Christine will shortly be urging you to attend.

And we'll even be doing some of it right here in this hall. Our experience this morning is going to be participatory, should you choose to participate. And it might even be interactive, but that will be up to you. More on that later.

We talk to each other around here, but we could do better. Often are conception of talking is what *we* do, it doesn't really involve the other person. We wind up talking *at* people rather than *with* them. Talking, as I have outlined, involves listening, too. And a welcomed silence that allows us to consider what we've heard and what we're about to say.

Those are high standards, especially considering that we've fallen out of the habit of truly conversing. So I hope to offer a few tips along the way this morning, and a demonstration or experience that may help us rediscover a lost art.

Which brings us to my other theme, or the premise from which the first arises, *The Lost Art of Conversation*. I believe we've lost the ability to talk and listen to each other deeply about our lives and what we hold important. And in the process of loosing the art of conversation we've lost contact with each other in fundamental ways.

The sharing of ourselves through conversation is one way we used to bridge our differences. It was the way we recognized and experienced our common humanity. It was the way we attained and shared our wisdom, and the way we came to consensus.

Today we're pretty good at small talk, at polished cocktail party prattle. And there's more than one accomplished raconteur among us. These are skills we've had to develop lest our society fall into complete silence. But we've taken the old adage, *don't discuss religion or politics*, dogmatized it and let it expand—as dogma's are wont to do—to where it's come to encompass everything of meaning or anything upon which we might not have complete accord. And we've brought that stagnation of conversation home in a way that has sanitized even our personal interactions.

We avoid our differences because we're afraid they'll devolve into confrontation. Along with losing the art of conversation we've lost the ability to disagree civilly and productively.

I think that's one of if not the main contributing factor to the polarization in our country today. We let differences slide in order to be nice. We delude ourselves into thinking we're all in agreement when we have no idea if we are or not. That can lead to underlying tensions and nasty surprises.

But if we intently listen to and respectfully question each other, if we speak with gentle courage in the expectation that we too will be heard, we can ease that tension and avoid those unpleasant surprises. Genuine conversation involves letting go of ourselves and becoming fully attentive to others. It involves speaking from the heart and, I believe, compassion arises naturally when we listen and speak from the heart.

So my intent this morning is to get you talking in a different way about the things that are important to you, and important to those around you and important to those near you. Some of us do that to a certain extent sometimes in safe situations with those we know and trust when we're feeling like it. But, let's face it, that's not very often.

We simply don't talk to each other—at and past each other yes, but not to and with each other. We've lost the art of genuine conversation. We oftentimes talk without even

conversing, not paying much attention to what the other person says and only slightly more to what we ourselves say. We've lost the art of simple, honest, human conversation.

So that's my theme or themes this morning, that we aren't talking to each other in meaningful ways and that we ought to be. Our exchanges with each other have become routine and guarded, even our casual greetings have become rote. Have you ever caught yourself responding to someone's *how are you* with your own *how are you*—or had someone else do the same to you—and then just let it pass, neither one of you hearing let alone responding to the question?

If not, I'm willing to bet something similar has happened to you—times when you've not been heard or responded to, times when you yourself are barely aware of what's been said to you or even that the other person's speaking. That's a sad commentary on our times and on us.

There's an election coming up this week. I hope that doesn't come as a surprise to you because it is a chance for each and every one of us to express our values by voting for the candidate whose positions best reflect our own. One way we learn, shape, and hone those values and practice recognizing them in others is through conversation, genuine conversation.

Margaret Wheatley asked in the introduction to her book, *Turning to One Another*, a theme that resonates with Ethical Humanists, "I wonder if you believe, as I do, that this world needs changing?" I think she'd have our agreement on that!

She also said, "I believe we can change the world if we start talking to one another. ... Listening and talking to one another heals our divisions and makes us brave again."

I think she'd find us in accord on that, too.

She was, as she made clear, talking about genuine conversation. "Not" in her words, "mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. "Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen."

That's pretty much what I want to cover this morning; the need to speak, the need to be heard, and the need to listen. It's how we come to understand others and have them understand us on a deeper level than the superficial acquaintanceship we've come to be satisfied with. Having people in our lives on that surface level may meet a social need, but it leaves unfulfilled a deep yearning for togetherness.

How do we go about recovering the lost art of conversation? How do we begin to once again talk to each other respectfully and courageously about the things we value? Practice. A practice. Genuine conversation is an ethical practice, an expression of our Ethical Culture beliefs. Call it a spiritual practice if you like, one every bit as transformative as other means.

The founder of our society and movement, Felix Adler said "Spirituality is the consciousness of infinite interconnectedness." Some might call that awareness wisdom—insight into the ways we are connected and how experiencing that connectedness strengthens us, and that the strength of each of us is vital to the strength of all of us. Genuine conversation is a way of doing this, of meeting heart to heart, of learning from each other's lives and of honoring each other's experiences.

And speaking of experience, it's time we had one. My talk this morning is not going to be any longer, or at least not much longer, than usual, but we are going to have an

intermission—a bit of a break. In anticipation of that, I want you each to take a moment and think of something about yourself that most people here at the Society don't know.

It can be something serious but it need not be. And it certainly doesn't have to be anything dramatic or embarrassing, just something about yourself that most people here don't know. This is where those of you who are new have an advantage; we don't know much if anything at all about you so you have more to choose from than the rest of us.

By way of suggestion, maybe something from your childhood or from your education, a new pair of shoes or a friend or teacher from junior high. Or something from your young adult years or from a previous professional life, when you got hooked on movies or a job you had.

As I said, nothing dramatic. A hobby or a memorable vacation. Anything at all will do. Just grab the first thing that pops into your mind, as mundane as that may seem to be, and hold on to it. Think about that for a moment.

A few weeks ago, a colleague of mine, Ethical Culture Leader Michael Franch, delivered in a sermon at a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Maryland. He was talking about his recently deceased brother in an introspective and touching way and said:

“Every one of us is made up of good and bad traits, good and bad actions, what we might call (what Felix Adler called) plus qualities and minus qualities. To quote Adler, ‘idolizing the plus qualities in human beings mars our discernment as truly as does recoil from the minus qualities.’ The important point, said Adler in his poetic language, is to ‘surmount those walls which surround the shrine’ in the other. If we don't try, he said, we ourselves are spiritually dead. But we try to see below the surface ... humbly, the effort brings deep understanding and connection, not only to the person but to our larger human community.

I mentioned a week ago during our Remembrance Sunday experience, that community life, congregational life, is about intimacy and ultimacy. The congregations of traditional leap-of-faith religions approach intimacy through ultimacy—through a common, absolute, for-now-and-forever acceptance of fixed answers to the ultimate questions, to questions of origin and destiny. Ethical Culture sets those questions aside and goes about it the other way around. We find ultimacy in and through intimacy—intimacy with each other and of course with nature of which we are an integral part.

Michael Franch and I were both echoing Adler in different ways and contexts, referring back to his urging to explore in many ways our infinite interconnectedness, to find our likenesses. We are similar, but we are not identical. We involve in the same activities for different reasons and have different emotional experiences when we do. Likewise, we can have the same emotional experience from vastly different activities. But how do we come to know that if we don't dig deeper into each other and allow others inside us?

So, go back to that something you've latched onto and let's put some depth to it. Let's say you've remembered something as simple as a new pair of shoes as a child. Add that you got a thrill from those shoes because you got a new pair only once a year.

Name that one special person or experience from junior high responsible for your everlasting love of learning, or that someone you loved going to the movies with, or that you went alone. Or maybe you left that job, stepped away from corporate life, because of a clash of values. Those surface things that we're so used to are the surface of something deeper. Was that hobby taken up because of something going on in your life or to bond

with someone else? Was that vacation in search of your roots or the meaning of an ancient land? Find the next layer down into that deepness and stay with that for a moment.

It's through genuine conversation and deep sharing—sharing of deeper things—that we affect each other. The protagonist in Marie Arana's recent bestseller, *Cellophane*, is told, "Something happens when a person speaks his heart. Others measure themselves against it. They want what that person has—they want to feel what he feels, to love as he loves, to speak as freely as he has spoken." Maya Angelou continued that riff, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Now, I'm not talking about baring your innermost self with complete strangers or being indiscriminate with your emotions. I am not urging an indulgent public exercise of what had better be done in private. But I am urging a bit more openness and a lot more attention to one another through conversation.

Okay, it's just about intermission time. In a moment I'm going to ask those of you who are comfortable doing so to find another who is also on their feet, go over to them, and tell them that something they don't know about you, including the more in-depth embellishment.

Don't wait for a response. That may come later but not now. This is just the first step, not the conversation itself. Just introduce yourself, *Hi, I'm Tony*, make your disclosure, *I was a skydiver, I made 288 sport parachute jumps in my wild and well-spent youth*, and then add a bit of depth, *Each and every one of those jumps scared the daylight out of me and facing that fear made me feel alive in ways I never had before*. Do that, and then let go of it. It may or may not come back to you later. That's not the point, the giving and receiving is.

So just leave it with that person and go back to your seat. But remain standing as maybe someone will want come over with something to share with you. If they do, just receive whatever they have to offer and hold on to it with care and appreciation. You've got room to do that because you've just let go of whatever you said.

It's perfectly okay to remain seated and not participate or to simply stand to let others know they can come over to say something to you. You can participate partially or fully but neither is mandatory and no conclusions will be drawn from either except that this was or wasn't for you this morning. This can be an experience or a demonstration and the choice is yours.

Okay, let's take a moment and open up just a bit to one another. If you're game, stand up, move about, and find that someone you're willing to share a piece of yourself with. Once you have, let go of it, leave it with that person and return to your seat.

Didn't that feel good? You may have just started, made, or deepened a friendship. Who knows? In only takes one person, albeit a brave person, to start a genuine conversation.

We have a social hour following this meeting. If you want to follow up with someone on what you've learned about them that might be a good time. But if you do, do it in a way that takes it one level deeper. Pick up on the second part and pick out the dynamic. Repeat in your mind what was said to you and listen, really listen and try to relate to it.

If you heard that someone got a new pair of shoes only once a year, ask yourself what role family finances played in your childhood. Did you, too, have that one special teacher or classmate that impacted your life? If so, how? And we all had that special someone we shared precious experiences with in budding adulthood. Who was it, what did they—or do they—mean to you? And I'd bet that more than one of us has had a professional clash of values. What were they?

And I genuinely hope that I'm not the only one here that did risky things just to take a bigger bite out of life. I still do, they're just not as threatening to life and limb as jumping out of airplanes!

If you want to talk with that person who has spoken to you, if you want to enter into genuine conversation with her or him, take it from that point. Hear what they've said, take it in, sit with it, relate to it, and then talk to them about what it elicits within you. That's really the lost art of conversation. The listening, the pausing to digest, the relating, and the caring watchfulness for what else may be being said, what more may lie deeper below the surface.

Delving into questions of deep personal import takes courage and it takes sensitivity. Philo of Alexandria said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." We're so caught up in our own battles we often don't know about the battles of others, even those we want to be close to. Sometimes we don't even know they are battling. Sometimes they don't, either.

My father had a stroke when I was 19 and died a year and a half later. It was during that period that I took up skydiving. But it wasn't until writing for this morning that it struck me that while he was dying I was seeking ways to look death in the face too. Each and every time I found myself hurtling toward earth at lethal speed, firmly gripping the ripcord, I held life in the palm of my hand in a profound way, in a way my father no longer did.

So be aware that someone may have just told you a lot more about their self than you recognize or than they yet realize. It's through genuine conversation that these things surface.

The change our world needs is not going to come from governments or large organizations, national programs, new policies, treaties, conventions, or laws. If you're looking to those you're looking in the wrong place.

The change we need will be led by people, everyday people, by those you just spoke to and who just spoke to you. Look around you. It is through you and through them that change will happen. But change won't happen if we're not talking to one another about the things that are important to us—about our deepest beliefs and our highest hopes, about our comforts and our fears.

We don't have to let go of or alter the way we are or what we believe. But we do need to evince a genuine curiosity about how others are and what they believe—what they hold dear. If there's any letting go to be done it's to let go of our need to debate and convince. It's a refreshing experience just to take in another human being, to absorb their cares and feelings, to experience life with them.

That takes time and it takes a bit of discretion. Walk up to someone on the street and ask them what they think about when they look at the stars and they'll likely try to get away from you as fast as they can. Ask that same question of one you love on a starlit night and you'll get an entirely different response. Timing and context are everything.

If I were to ask you if you have faith in the future, how would you respond? If you were asked what you believe about others, what would you answer? I happen to think we're a pretty sharp group of highly actualized individuals. But in most situations I know that I'd be caught flat-footed by questions like that. I think about them. I think about them a lot. But I don't have many chances to talk about them with others.

Genuine conversation requires considerable intentionality. Rilke said in his *Book of Hours*, "I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world." What we do in small circles ripples out into the world.

We each experience life differently. It takes courage and it takes time to get to know how others see things, to learn what they think about when they think their deepest thoughts. But when people think together, wisdom emerges.

I spoke earlier of my experience in circles, in small groups that come together for genuine conversation, for meaningful dialog. The reason it came to mind and the reason I've talked about it this morning is the deep and meaningful experiences I had in those circles. I remember those in them and how they made me feel. That period, those circles, those people impacted the way I am today,—the way I think and the way I feel.

It's wasn't my original intention to use this as a platform to launch a new program here at the Society, at least no more so than usual. I'm always on the alert for new and interesting things we can do together. But if any of you would like to talk about circles, about small groups, don't hesitate to come up to me during Social Hour.

I think we could probably benefit from a program of dialog circles here at the Society and it's something I'm interested in initiating. But in the interim, let's take advantage of every opportunity to engage each other in genuine conversation. We've had a taste of how to do that this morning; one I hope will spill over into the rest of our day together.

We do not travel the world alone. Ethical Humanists do not seek the guidance of a cosmic companion, but we do not travel alone. We have something more real than the intangible or the imagined, we have each other.

So let's talk.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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