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Time to Talk Things Over

MAN IS THE ONLY CREATURE who can talk himself into trouble, but he is also the only creature who by talking things over can find a way out of trouble. The history of any improvement in politics, business or society, is a course of persistent, reasonable, confrontation of facts and differing ideas with one another.

Anyone who unswervingly refuses to submit his ideas to the test of dialogue will be quite unfit to meet the demands of existence in these days. Everyone, whatever side he supports in discussion of art, religion, government, business or education, must recognize that technological extension of human capacity to do things has worked a radical change upon our environment and demands new ways of thinking, feeling, valuing and deciding what is to be done. The ideal society in an age of total communication is the civilization of the dialogue.

It would be fatal to the values in our way of life if we were to give in to the technological forces which threaten our personal reception and communication of ideas. We could become so busy tending our time-saving devices that we have no time to marshal and express our innermost thoughts and ideals; we could lazily allow the mass media to deaden our minds with singing commercials and ready-made opinions; we could shush one another in dimly lighted television rooms instead of talking, debating, and expressing ourselves in the joint discovery of exciting and inspiring new facts and ideas.

Discussion takes for granted that everyone has had experiences which may contribute something of value to the group. It recognizes that one does not possess the whole truth, but seeks, pursues, and finds some part of it.

Dialogue is the language of the adventurer, confronting new things, seeking to enlarge his territory, wanting to expand his knowledge, eager to deepen his understanding. Monologue is the language of the primitive-brained man who thinks he is the centre of the universe. Dialogue is constructive because it adds to knowledge; monologue is destructive because it evidences fear that a creed or opinion is in danger of being disproved by question and answer.

Conversation

It is important for most people to talk and to be heard, to voice their problems, to get things off their minds. A really satisfying talk is one of the greatest pleasures there is.

Conversation has four main purposes: to give information, to get information, to persuade, and to show a human interest in other human beings. No measure comes before the high court of Parliament until it has been long prepared by the grand jury of the talkers.

Conversation is the simplest form of dialogue. It was conversation, in this form, in the age of Socrates, an age without books or their latter-day substitutes, which laid the foundation of the civilization we enjoy. It was conversation of which the New Testament was composed. It was conversation among scholars in a bookless world which revived learning at the end of the dark ages.

Good conversation stretches your mind. Even if no usable conclusions are reached through a conversation, there is profit in the exercise, for we have churned up our minds so as to see new views. But to make the best of it, people must realize conversation as a mental occupation, and not merely a dribbling into words of casual thoughts.

Conversation consists of both transmission and reception. One man put it neatly when he said: "I like so much to talk that I am willing to pay my audience by listening in my turn." To speak and to listen brings into the midst of the group masses of experience, anecdote, cross-lights, quotation, historical incidents, the whole range of minds centred upon the topic from all points of the compass.

There can be a lively diversity of views expressed without appeal to any book of rules of order. You do not need an elaboration of formality, just ordinary politeness. For example, a brilliant conversationalist is not one who holds a group spellbound, but one who draws everyone else in.

Intelligent conversation is only fit for intelligent society. It is downright abhorrent to narrow-minded people who are fixed on a plane of the commonplace and dull. Nothing can be more deadly boring than this: two persons saying words about something in which neither is interested. Rag-bag conversation about threadbare things is unprofitable, depressing and futile. You would die of shame if you heard it played back on a tape recorder.

The mistake that many earnest and persistent talkers make is to suppose that to be engrossed in a subject is the same thing as being engrossing. The self-centred person talks without reference to his listeners' interests. If he has been reading about dinosaurs or water pollution or the state of unrest in mid-Africa, he brings out all that is in his mind on the topic.

Story-telling is not conversation, but parlour entertaining. The person is a bore who, on the sidewalk or in a café, on the train or in an office, buttonholes you to listen to anecdotes and jokes pulled out of the air. As Ernest Dimnet wrote in *What We Live By*: "Stories are the stupid man's wit."

Dialogue

Dialogue is conversation with a purpose. It is reason's only weapon. It is a civilized operation, democratic and constructive, and those who refuse dialogue are playing a game with some serious overtones. There was no dialogue in the primitive medicine-man's manipulation of people's passions. There was no dialogue for Stalin, who refrained from debating his views in favour of exterminating his opponents physically or compromising them personally.

Democratic institutions and political freedom cannot survive without discussion, criticism, and deliberation. Are we too busy enjoying life to engage in a dialogue designed to make possible the continuation of life? Or too ignorant? Or too lethargic? Or too parasitical? All these entered into the decline of the Roman Empire.

To take useful part in reaching decisions is to seek understanding through consideration of alternatives. In this debate, traditions and dogmas rub each other down. We attain insight and understanding.

A dialogue is not a bargain-basement transaction with haggling and bickering, a low form of negotiation. Neither is it a situation in which A confronts B in a contest, but a conversation in which each presents facts and each considers the other's facts. It is a reasonable exchange of ideas, bringing into being a new body of knowledge. It takes you out of the doldrums of fiddling with good intentions into the region where you act with knowledge and understanding.

Monopoly of the conversation has no place in dialogue. The ball must be thrown back and forth. There is give and take. Participants expect to find things out by examining ideas and facts from several points of view.

This exercise reveals the true personality of those taking part in it. It dissolves the solemn humbug and punctures the know-it-all; it unveils the person who speaks in malice or in self-interest. It reduces prejudice and builds up mutual confidence, the hallmark of social intercourse among equals.

See from other viewpoints

Impartiality in listening to points of view is a great aid to the making of good judgments about what is being discussed, and this requires that we try honestly to see things through the other person's eyes.

Many irritations in society are due to the fact that some people do not recognize problems which others think are important. Two cultures may have institutions that look very much alike to the outside observer, and words in their languages which are so alike as to suggest the same meanings, but the realities are different.

When we go abroad we are accustomed to accommodating ourselves to evident differences, such as those of dress, language and architecture. Where we run into trouble is in the little differences: the taste of coffee in England, the siesta hour in Italy, the sounds in the narrow streets of Paris, the rosary of devotion formed by the 24,000 bell-ringing shrines in Benares. These things, nevertheless, are an essential part of the everyday life of people living in those places.

This is not to say that we must be pleased by all sights and sounds. It is quite possible to form and hold a strong opinion of our own and yet to realize that it is after all only one point of view.

In praiseworthy dialogue we show respect for the other man's opinions, and try to push the right button to open him up so that we learn his real thoughts. It is easy and immature to recognize only the spurious and mistaken in a man's contentions: it requires more effort and intelligence to recognize and admit the excellence of some of his ideas.

There are certain simple rules associated with effective dialogue. Much that passes for dialogue is not that at all, but merely the noise made by contending propagandists. Such a debate is governed by the rules of the prize-fight: "Shake hands . . . ready . . . gong!"

Good dialogue requires common substance, a topic about which the participants are informed and to which all can make a contribution by original thinking. It requires a large measure of goodwill. It begins in an act of faith: the assumption that those who converse will speak in honesty for the purpose of reaching understanding, and with generosity toward one another.

The ground rules for dialogue do not call for that glowering acquaintance with Bourinot or Robert's *Rules of Order* so insisted upon by militant chairmen, but only those appropriate to mutual enlightenment and to growth of knowledge in all those participating: "Use reason; be fair and gracious."

A good way to start a dialogue is by asking questions and listening to the answers. When Napoleon noticed that his councillors were simply echoing whatever he said he was quick to call them to order. "You are not here," he told them, "to agree with me, but to express your own views."

It is by comparison of views that we reason our way toward truth. We increase the odds of finding the best solution to a problem by considering alternatives.

Do some homework

The man who believes in dialogue does not come to the conference table with a fistful of fast deals but with a head full of constructive ideas. He has studied the subject so that he does not need to waste time in quibbles about trifles or to indulge in off-the-cuff masterminding. He has something to contribute that is relevant to the topic.

When approaching a dialogue, it is well to sketch out your theme roughly. The actual presentation will see the details changed in many points, but the general idea of what your points are and where they fit into the debate ought to be clear in your mind. Then get busy collecting materials, the facts you will need so that you may present your case effectively. Marshal your thoughts in orderly array.

If the dialogue is to be about an important matter, it is beneficial if all who will participate prepare a sort of "white paper" or preliminary brief, and circulate it. Then everyone will come to the table with an over-all view of the problems, prepared to discuss the way in which the varying ideas or proposals may be reconciled.

"Facts" are worse than useless unless they are accurate. Inaccuracy does not necessarily mean deceitfulness, but may take the form of not being particular to be exact.

Facts are different from opinion. Look at the confusion caused in many conversations when people apply differing opinions to the same body of facts. They confuse belief with evidence, and insist upon the truth of a statement because they believe it to be so. Truly, it is not things, but people's opinions about things, that trouble mankind.

Mutual understanding is helped by clear definition. Make sure that everyone knows exactly what your language means. It helps, often, to define conflicting arguments with clarity, so as to arrive at the critical point free of non-essentials. To do this honestly you need to understand not only the technicalities but the nature of what is proposed. If the point is not clear to you, say: "Well, if my view of this is not acceptable, could you make some proposals?" This leaves you free to modify your view if given convincing reasons.

Make sure that the real problem is brought out into the open. There are no solutions to unknown problems. Einstein is quoted as saying: "The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution." And John Dewey summarizes the procedure

well in his *How We Think*: first there is awareness of the problem, resulting in perplexity; then definition of the problem by analysis and observation; then consideration of different solutions; selection of the most effective solution; verification of its fitness to attain the desired result.

Sweeping generalities must be broken down if they are to be digested into something useful. Small problems are more easily solved than large ones, but at the same time the pattern of the whole must be kept in mind. People discuss and debate certain fragments of a total situation. For example: war in Vietnam, hunger in Africa, poverty in America, missiles in the sky. The overriding concern of mankind is not the survival of this or that nation-state or the saving of some people from hunger: the over-all issue at stake is the survival of the human race.

Keep to the point

In discussing the small problems within the large picture it is necessary to stick to the point. The truly basic elements in a good pictorial composition are unity and simplicity. No picture can be strong, and no spoken presentation can be effective, if it tries to tell several stories at once.

Most of us, when we get on a subject we think we know, are likely to say too much. The centre of the answer to a question should be the point of the question and the circumference no wider than is needed to answer the question adequately. Irrelevant particularities slow down conversation and sometimes bring it to a complete stop. Everyone knows the feeling of frustration caused by people who digress from the point in a spate of words and never omit an unnecessary fact.

Dialogue is seeking truth. St. Thomas Aquinas said: "An angel perceives the truth by simple apprehension, whereas man becomes acquainted with a simple truth by a process from manifold data." The search involves having willingness of mind to reach out to that which is not yet understood, or even to something which at first repels you. When one idea supplements another it is surprising how often a joint truth emerges from the dialogue of persons who started with divergent beliefs.

Some solutions to problems may seem harsh, but no true values are destroyed by learning the truth about them. Pontius Pilate stands condemned in history not because he asked a great question: "What is truth?" but because he did not wait for an answer.

The honest person in a dialogue is he who does his best to learn and to tell the truth, confesses to uncertainty when he is uncertain, does not pretend to knowledge he does not have, and is candid and fair.

The benison of silence

Sometimes it is well to converse mostly in pauses. Mozart is quoted as saying: "My rests are more important than my notes."

There are, of course, modes of silence: that of

listless ignorance and that of intelligent attention. To ask oneself what can be left unsaid is a golden attribute in diplomacy and it plays a big part in that everyday tact that helps people to get along better with one another.

Sometimes it is well, during a dialogue, to remain silent even though it makes you appear eccentric. One man, popular on committees, carried a little card which he set up on the table before him. On it he had written: "Keep quiet." James Simpson, the clerk who became chairman of Marshall Field and Company, smoked cigars so as to be sure he would keep his mouth shut in conferences. Perhaps he was copying the geese migrating over the mountain Taurus, which is full of eagles. The geese took up stones in their bills to restrain their gagging, thus passing over the eagles without being heard.

Silence is not to be confused with listening. Every participant in a dialogue has the duty to listen. Listening intently and asking pertinent questions provide you with the needed information for orderly mental processing.

Listening that is merely courteous is not good enough: you need to be interested in what is being said, keen to learn what is in the speaker's mind. This has the added advantage of assuring him of your entire fairness and predisposing him to a like attitude.

When you listen attentively you may learn about options that are not at once visible. You listen to the facts, but you concentrate on finding what they all add up to. If you are too busy thinking of what you are going to say next you miss the points and end up in the confusion of a completely unrelated line of talk.

There is little room in dialogue for hot and hasty words. The only downright prohibition in the rules governing dialogue is against losing your temper, even in the face of the most petulant or waspish remarks.

Dialogue should be marked by urbanity. Begin in a friendly way, express your views coolly and without passion. If you assert your ideas with vehemence you will be suspected of wilfully trying to shout down the ideas of others, because the expression of knowledge and conviction is in its nature cool and unimpassioned.

Show respect for other people's knowledge, say what is needful and civil, speak compactly, and emphasize a point by increasing the earnestness of your tone, not the volume of your sound.

You will be called upon sometimes to converse with people who rub you the wrong way. Concentrate, then, upon the topic, whose facts are impersonal. Even if you cannot acquiesce, be sympathetic with the other person's ideas and desires, so that you disagree without being disagreeable.

The dialogue is more an occasion to seek light than an occasion to generate heat. It is more conducive to mature judgment than would be a shouting match

between two small boys. The ideal participant in conversation or dialogue is not the man who comes to it with a ready-made theory which he refuses to abandon. He does not say "Yes, yes" or "No, no", but an enlightened "Yes, but" or "No, and yet."

To sit still and be pumped into is not an exhilarating experience. Everyone in a dialogue should contribute; no one should be denied his word; no one person should dominate. There are some, possessed by a sense of mission, who will seek to seize and hold the floor. They have a vast capacity for talk and great cleverness in evading requests to state clearly what all the torrent of words is about. As the Straw Man said in *The Wizard of Oz*: "Some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't they?"

In the interests of fair play, those who share in a dialogue should see to it that the zealot is kept within bounds even though he takes it as a personal affront.

The value of dialogue

To some people the world is so filled with antagonisms and uncertainties that the resolving of differences of opinion seems to be impossible. To others, life is so complex as to be meaningless.

Neither view is right. By talking together reasonably we may iron out the antagonisms. By exchanging views we may bring meaning into a life which is too complicated for an individual to grasp unaided. Through dialogue we enlarge our minds so as to grasp new ideas and to reconcile the new with what is old. In dialogue we are putting to use those qualities which differentiate human beings from the lower animals: intelligence and the communication of ideas.

Many Canadians have come to believe that dialogue may be a more effective setting for nation building, or social reform, or community revival, than is the battlefield. The heart and soul of dialogue is this: to realize that there is no once-and-for-all answer to a complicated historical or social problem, but only an answer as of now based upon knowledge of what is going on.

People have different ideas even about what is a solution. Some are satisfied with a temporary settlement, and are content to have a continuing dialogue in which every new settlement is a step toward a final solution. Others pursue their purposes with a sense of finality; they want things settled once and for all; they wage for all or nothing.

It seems more rational to take the first course: to seek a philosophy which is adequate for the circumstances of our time. We must recall that ages are no more infallible than individuals. Every age has held many opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd. The way to progress appears to lie in talking things over with one another, exchanging and enlarging our ideas, so that we grow into our future. That is dialogue.