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A Few Thoughts About Conversation

from Stephen Miller, author of *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*.

Many books give tips about being a good conversationalist, but let me try to define the essential requirement for good conversation by quoting Edith Wharton on Henry James's conversation. She speaks of the "sheer abstract 'fooling'...that was the delicious surprise" of James's conversation. Another writer says roughly the same thing about the conversation of Patrick Leigh Fermor, the English travel writer. Fermor, he says, "has absorbed so much of what he's seen in life and can wring it out with no apparent effort, at least in conversation, all in a spirit of affectionate play." A good conversationalist must have a sense of playfulness.

A good conversationalist does not spend much time giving advice or asking for advice. And it goes without saying that a good conversationalist does not tell lengthy anecdotes or make dogmatic statements. It is important not to be earnest. Does being playful mean that one should avoid expressing an opinion? Not at all. But opinions should be expressed in a tentative way-as ideas thrown out for consideration. A good conversationalist should enjoy disagreement-even seek it out-but disagreement should be expressed in a good-humored fashion.

It is not easy to be a good conversationalist because-as David Hume said-we are naturally arrogant and narcissistic. We want to dominate; we want to talk about ourselves. If we learn to curb these passions and give our sense of playfulness full reign, we are likely to be better at the art of conversation.

It is not easy to be playful about some subjects-notably politics and religion. When major political issues agitate a nation, playfulness in conversation is regarded by some people as frivolous, even irresponsible. The eighteenth-century French writer Fontenelle said: "I hate war. It ruins conversation." It would be sad if what Hume called the conversable world is seen by many people as a place to offer opinions as if they were challenges to a duel: "Here's where I stand. Do you have a problem with that?" If that happens, many people will retreat to the solipsistic safety of the Internet.

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Stephen Miller is a freelance writer whose latest book is *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (Yale). His essays and reviews have appeared in many magazines, including *Partisan Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The American Scholar*. He has worked for the National Endowment for the Humanities and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He has also been a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He has an M.A. from Yale in English and a Ph.D. from Rutgers in comparative literature.

Miller is on the advisory board of The Bumpspark* Project, a non-profit effort to bring the world's great minds together in great conversations. **For more information and further thoughts on conversation, visit www.bumpspark.org.**