

## Social Relations

# Talking

*Good conversation is like good sex. You can't get more out of it than you put into it.*

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

AS MUCH AS I ENJOY CDS AND CAMCORDERS, I STILL prefer a few things from the pregizmo era. Books, for instance, have been around for half a millennium, but they are still the best, most efficient means of conveying printed information. And for oral communication, despite the advent of pocket phones and videophones, the best way is practically as old as earth and air—and as shamefully neglected. It's the face-to-face conversation.

It was John Seely Brown who brought my attention to the value of good, old-fashioned talk. He is the chief scientist of Xerox and, as director of its Palo Alto Research Center, one of the inventors of the personal computer. As such, he is about the last person in America one would expect to endorse a means of communication that involves no technology whatsoever. All the same, he extols conversation as "the most efficient method of communication there is."

The subject came up unexpectedly. During an interview on the state of modern technology, Brown was explaining to me that the Strategic Defense Initiative, better known as Star Wars, was a lousy idea because it had to work perfectly the first time, and, as everyone over the age of 12 knows, nothing ever works perfectly the first time.

"I have a simple axiom," he said. "The only thing that is expected is the unexpected." Then, as if to prove that very idea, he lurched into his argument that the whole problem with Star Wars is that it isn't a







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conversation. Conversation involves, as he put it, "a series of attempts and repairs." It is a matter of back-and-forth, of give-and-take. I say something dumb; you correct me. You offend me; I set you straight. The conversation fixes itself as it goes along, or it dies trying. *Star Wars*, by contrast, is a one-shot deal. If it doesn't work, there's no chance to fix it. We're all vaporized.

**T**HE BEAUTY OF CONVERSATION IS THAT it allows constant feedback as people try to make themselves clear to one another. Most of this occurs verbally. If I say something that doesn't make sense, you can ask me to explain it. But, in a face-to-face conversation, there are other ways to communicate. One tends to think of a conversation as consisting of an active speaker and a passive listener, who swap roles as the conversation proceeds. In

*Every conversation is only half spoken. The other half is nonverbal, but it requires as much attention as the verbal half.*

truth the listener is just as active as the speaker—or at least should be.

While A is busy explaining what's wrong with the Red Sox this year, B is no less busy giving signals as to how this chatter is going down. B may look interested (eyes up, body inclined forward) in the part about how Roger Clemens's macho behavior is the source of all the team's problems, thereby giving signals to A to keep talking. B may act puzzled (eyes narrowed, head cocked) at the idea that Clemens's fastball is politically inappropriate, causing A to explain that part a little better. B may look impatient (eyes turned away, fidgeting hands) with the long-winded review of the Red Sox' all-too-well-known World Series history, which should cause A to get on with it. Or B may look bored (blank face, distracted manner) at the prospect of another conversation about the doomed Sox, which should provoke A to shut up for a second or shift over to the Celtics.

The point is that every conversation is only half spoken. The other half involves a nonverbal language that requires just as much attention as the verbal one. All too often, however, people are grossly inattentive to it. They might as well be yakking on the phone for all the interest they take in these visual cues.

The military, interestingly, has been keenly aware of the importance of such

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nonverbal communication. Leading U.S. generals were worried that during a nuclear attack, key government planners would not be able to communicate effectively if they were hooked up just by telephone from their various underground bunkers. In the early eighties, one defense agency awarded MIT's Architecture Machines Group (the forerunner of the celebrated Media Lab) a contract to address the problem.


The MIT engineers developed a series of plastic masks to represent the faces of the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, and so on, one set for each participant to re-create (albeit eerily) the experience of being in a regular meeting with those dignitaries. The image of the actual person would be projected inside each mask, lighting up a George Bush mask, for instance, with Bush's televised face. Each

*For men, conversation is an opportunity to solve problems. For women, it provides a chance to connect emotionally.*

mask would be mounted on gimbals, so that as the officials sadly shook their heads in response to Dan Quayle's latest suggestion, their masks would all twist slowly back and forth. This was called the Talking Heads project. Expressive as it was, the military never implemented it.

In her engaging best-seller, *You Just Don't Understand*, Deborah Tannen views the communication gap as a gender issue: men regard a conversation as an occasion to solve problems, while women see it as a chance to connect emotionally. In my experience, those two approaches are rarely gender-based, and they account for only some communication problems. I would divide the world differently—into those who speak the nonverbal language of visual cues, and those who don't. For surely a woman who is frustrated by the way her husband addresses her concerns will give off little nonverbal flickers to indicate her dissatisfaction. The real problem is that the man simply doesn't notice them.

Or it may be a matter of not reading those cues correctly. Nonverbal language is not necessarily any more universal than, say, English or Swahili. I know people whose faces are seemingly frozen in a permanent frown of boredom. Actually, that is simply their way of listening attentively—or so I have come to think. Others are too animated for their own good, expressing a keen interest even where none, in



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fact, exists.

Beyond personal idiosyncrasies, ethnic and cultural differences can sometimes lead to dreadful foul-ups. I once had a little trouble with a Greek shopkeeper along those lines. I was ordering 10 pastries in a little shop in Crete, and, since I wasn't entirely convinced that *deka* was the word for 10, I underscored my request by flicking up 10 fingers at him. He recoiled as if he had been shot: in the Greek nonverbal lexicon, I had placed a hex on him for life.

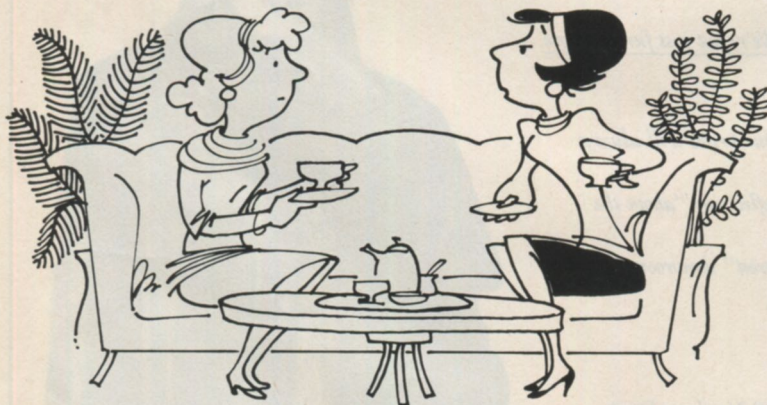
WHEN RUNNING ON ALL CYLINDERS, THOUGH, conversation is a wonderfully expressive means of communication, and it offers a useful model for overcoming individuals' isolation from one another in other settings as well. As TVs, for instance, become more directly "interactive," allowing viewers to select for themselves the camera an-

*Of course, the principles of good conversation apply to that other intimate act between adults.*

gle on a sports event, they are obeying the principles of conversation. As it is, television networks have too little feedback to go on—just Nielsen numbers, which say nothing more than how many people watched. They don't reveal what they might have watched *for*—what they liked. By this standard, the TV industry would do well to watch its audience as intently as its audience watches TV.

In this presidential election year, one wishes that the process would be more of a conversation. The campaign went best in the early stages of the primaries, when there was still time for the candidates to talk one-on-one with the voters. That was also the time when the candidates were most able to discuss substantive issues like health care and industrial policy, instead of merely lobbing hand grenades at one another's character, as they would do later. Unable to read the individual voters' faces, they couldn't see their alienation. In the pivotal New York primary, despite all the fireworks, the lowest percentage of voters in a decade went to the polls.

And, of course, the principles of conversation apply in that other intimate act between adults. A woman I know once clarified matters for me on this score when she told me that the many tedious books on *How to Satisfy a Woman Every Time* could all be condensed to two words: *pay attention*. If she likes it, he can tell. Similarly, if he likes it, she can tell. The same principles apply out of bed as well. □



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