

Conversation: The Sacred Art-- Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction

Diane M. Mills; Woodstock VT: SkyLight Paths, 2013

The art of conversation is an essential practice for resilient aging, especially with new research showing the importance of social participation to vitality in later life. Good conversational skills are central to the movement among seniors to create their own mutual support groups, to Aging in Community. A living community can emerge when group members commit to attentive, appreciative interactions.

Diane Millis' heartfelt volume is a rich resource for deepening conversations.

We need to develop our capacity for greater presence in our daily lives and relationships.

Millis offers guidelines for everyone to enrich 'ordinary' conversations as well as for group leaders and participants who want to:

*increase capacity to listen deeply,
become more self-aware and attentive to others,
and learn how to move beyond the conventional topics to exploring purpose,
meaning and values in conversation.*

Great conversations are enlivening (we come alive when we talk together about what matters), enlightening (we hear ourselves saying things we hadn't known we knew), encouraging (our courage grows when we hear ourselves speak truth at the invitation of another) and, not least, enjoyable (we give and receive joy).

The sacred art of conversation involves centering ourselves first, listening mindfully to the other, and attending to the spontaneous mystery between us. Millis outlines three specific skills to foster our ability to connect: attentive, receptive, and compassionate presence. Practicing these skills builds our capacity to respond compassionately to others in the moment.

We are practicing the sacred art of conversation whenever we encourage one another to behold, to be on the lookout for the myriad ways in which the sacred is springing forth in our lives – both those that seem familiar and especially those that appear to be strange.

Pacing is everything. We connect better when we take the time to pause before a conversation, within it, and afterwards. Breathing deeply during these pauses helps us attune to the other, to let go of what we **have** to say.

The Appendices provide three types of useful concrete information. First, the author outlines the process whereby she runs interfaith Journey Conversation groups.

Members engage deeply with each other on topics central to their spiritual journey – making good use of silence and developing conversational skills. The chart on contemplative questions for conversation, as opposed to usual social questions, gives practical guidance to the conversational novice – e.g., good preparation for attending a gathering with many strangers. Contemplative questions are guided by “what wants to be said”, the language and experience of the other. Contemplative questions evoke reflection, encourage another to keep noticing the sacred in their lives.

The second appendix outlines strategies for appreciatively focused conversations at home and work.

Appreciatively worded questions more often evoke rich responses that help participants notice and name signs of life and energy that they may have forgotten or overlooked.

Such questions center around three themes: historical (inquiry about a time when things were at their best), inner-directed (about individual's core strengths or values), or future-oriented (about person's hopes and dreams).

The last appendix lists a variety of prompts for journey conversations – for two people, or for a more formal group. These are organized around quotations from many faith traditions. For example, questions about a Victor Frankl quote invite stories of when you or another chose one's attitude toward difficult circumstances, rather than be swept away by them.

Conversation – the Sacred Art sets out lofty goals for conversation along with specific strategies to strengthen our conversational skills – for our spiritual growth and for benefit in daily conversations and in groups.

Book Review
Ellen Ryan
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