

Straight Talk

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It was baseball's Yogi Berra who said, "It was impossible to get a conversation going. Everybody was talking too much."

One of the things I've always cherished is a good conversation. My childhood longing for satisfying conversation—for a "salon" of intelligent and informed acquaintances who discuss the meaning of life and the issues of the day—this longing led me to study the *ethics* of conversation, which in turn revealed much about the hidden barriers that lie between human beings who are trying to communicate.

Yogi Berra was *right*. Too much talk really does impede conversation. This is a reality that most people understand intuitively. There is no conversation without listening, and it helps if everyone present listens to everyone else.

"Airtime." Define it as the length of time someone speaks. In a conversational group, how much "airtime" does each person occupy? From the perspective of simple percentages, if there are five people in a conversation, and each person really *is* listening to the others, then each person would **speak** about 20% of the time and **listen** 80% of the time.

That's statistics and a bit simplistic. Some people are introverts and some are extroverts, so of course there are individual variations. Some people are well-informed and others are interested in learning, and that makes for differences as well—legitimate differences.

Perhaps.

In my study of the ethics of conversation, what stood out was the way that the simplest measure of participation—"airtime"—was a pretty good measure of whether a conversation was free of the hidden barriers to understanding.

It's easier to see this point with an example. In one of the earliest experiments on airtime, in the 1980s, a woman researcher reasoned that when two people have a face-to-face conversation on a topic both have in common, each should speak about 50% of the time.

She recruited volunteers whose sole task was to have a conversation with her. The conversation was monitored by observers who were out of sight. The researcher knew about the observers and the volunteer subject did not.

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In the experiment, the researcher sought to maintain a conversational balance of 50% airtime.

In some of the conversations, the 50% balance was stable. Remember that these conversations were on topics familiar to both participants, so there was no “expert” and “learner” distinction. Some people were introverts and some were extroverts. The researcher had to ask more questions to draw the introverts out, and exert herself a bit to keep up with the extroverts.

But overall, the researcher found it relatively easy to compensate for the introvert-extrovert factor. What she could not do was to maintain 50% of the airtime when the volunteer was male. On average, when paired with a man, she was able to claim only 20% of the airtime.

This experiment was more than 25 years ago. In the more recent research, the emerging idea is “mutuality”—people in a conversation together agree to work together to ensure that real listening occurs. Factors that today we call “diversity”—differences in race, sex, national origin—can result in conversational imbalance.

In studies of organizations, it seems that even when there is wide diversity within an organization, decision-making conversations often fail to tap the knowledge and perspectives of staff members whose backgrounds diverge from the group’s leaders.

The lesson I take away from this research is that airtime is a rough but reliable indicator of what’s happening in a conversation. In any setting, we can notice whether there are people who aren’t saying much, and try to create a little airtime for them—give them a chance to participate more.²

As Unitarian Universalists, we hold as a shared value respect for the inherent worth of every person. It’s easy to think of this principle as an inspirational ideal that leads us to take a stand against injustice or oppression. It’s easy to think of it as a foundation for our political views or our ideas about public policy.

It may be harder to apply it in our everyday life: to notice “airtime” in our decision-making conversations—even in our ordinary conversations. But most of us try to live our lives in an ethical way, a way that reflects our core values. We hope to express our values in the decisions we make, in everything we do and say.

² Sometimes people engaged in decision-making fail to hear all points of view because they fear disagreement, especially disagreement with their own views. It’s useful to think of good leadership as the willingness to seek diverse perspectives. Gandhi said, “Honest disagreement is often a sign of progress.” Universalist Hosea Ballou, writing in America’s 19th century, said that “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.” This idea of “agreeing in love” means to me agreeing, in a kind and friendly way, that we are all committed to a project, even if we sometimes disagree about how best to achieve it.

We might think of the values we most trust and cherish as tools hanging on a pegboard in some internal tool-room.³ What we seek is to live in a way that means all the tools are off the pegboard and actively in use somewhere in our lives. What remains in the tool-room is the pegboard with the outlines of those tools, not the tools themselves. The tools are in our hands, working in the world, not gathering dust in our hidden tool-room.⁴

If we try to live our lives in a way that reflects our core values, surely it is important to draw into conversation those who may be silent not because they have *nothing* to say, but because they have not been able to claim the airtime. As we go about the activities of daily life, a useful question for each of us is: How much airtime am I claiming?

Of course, while speaking from this pulpit I'm claiming all of it....

Life is not a pulpit.

Airtime is about the form of our conversations. The other important ethical question is about substance: the *content* of what is being said; the truth or untruth of what is said. The accuracy. The honesty.

I can't quote research on this point, but speak only from my own experience.

I've found that it is not possible to control what other people say. They may be wrong, they may be misinformed, they may be malicious, they may be unenlightened. None of that is within our control. The only conversational statements that are within our control are the statements we make.

³ "Pegboard" by Ted Kooser:

It has been carefully painted
with the outlines of tools
to show us which belongs where,
auger and drawknife,
claw hammer and crosscut saw,
like the outlines of hands on the walls
of ancient caves in France,
painted with soot mixed with spit
ten thousand years ago
in the faltering firelight of time,
hands borrowed to work on the world
and never returned.

⁴ I like this Muslim teaching: "Seem what you are; OR, be what you seem."

We alone control the content our own airtime. What do we say in the time we have? One key tool, a core value for most of us, is the truth.

It helps to stick to the truth. Mark Twain said that he liked to stick to the truth because then he didn't have to remember what he said.⁵

In my study of ethical conversation, sticking to the truth is perhaps the most useful guideline I have found. That doesn't mean we're justified in saying something simply because it happens to be true; a little discretion is advised. But it's part of living in accordance with our values to make sure that the words we *do* speak are truthful.

Now it's a fact that rumors are often more interesting. But I haven't figured out how passing along rumors, especially negative rumors, helps anyone, and rumors can cause a lot of harm—so I do my best not to pass them along.

It's the same old story. I can't control what other people say, and sometimes people report rumors. But I can control what I say. So when someone passes along one of those interesting tidbits of information, it's often useful to reply, "That sounds like a rumor."

The response may be to offer up authentication. More typically the other person says something like, "Oh, yes, but isn't it *interesting*?"

We cannot always know what is true, but we usually can figure out whether we know or don't know. Whenever we interject into a discussion the acknowledgement that we *don't know* whether something is true, it changes the conversation. The conversation becomes more truthful, more respectful, more ethical—simply because the rumor is lifted up as a rumor.

Let me propose a rule of thumb for all of us.

If we hear a negative rumor about someone we know, we might consider using whatever airtime is granted to us in our lives to check in with the subject of the rumor about its accuracy.⁶ If we're not willing to do that, maybe it's a good idea to remain agnostic. And if we're agnostic—if we don't "know" whether the rumor is true—then a commitment to ethical conversation would seem to require that we do not repeat the rumor.

Every day we find ourselves in conversations that may have an impact on other people.

⁵ Mark Twain also said: "Honesty: the best of all the lost arts."

⁶ A related point is the need to check facts with the putative source, including checking with the source about motive. Rumors that are based in truth very often contain mistakes of fact or, while true as far as they go, lack the full factual context. These errors and omissions can lead to a "gloss" of motive that accompanies a rumor—often a negative ("A must really dislike B because A said [something horrible] about B"). This gloss can sound completely convincing until we hear the full context from A. Note, too, that this formulation of the rumor probably does B no good at all.

We affect the people in conversation with us.

We affect people who are under discussion.

We affect the quality of life in our community.

We have the opportunity, in the simplest and most ordinary of conversations, to speak with compassion and listen with awareness.

Each conversation is an opportunity to build relationships based on trust and truthfulness.

Each word we speak, each question we ask, each moment of attention we offer to another human being is an expression of our values.

May we practice only the values we cherish:

Speak the truth. Listen with love. And, sometimes, be silent.