The Crisis of Conversation: From Endangerment of Communication to Compassion, Curiosity, and Compromise

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We live in an era characterized by uncertainty, fear, and increasing isolation in the face of change. Human history is ripe with examples of reactivity toward change at both the individual and the collective levels. As familiar ground becomes disrupted during times of transition, prevalence rates of diagnosable psychological disturbances tend to peak. It becomes particularly tempting to gravitate toward political, religious, scientific, philosophical, and other ideologies—on whatever side of whatever fence—based on their promise of an emotional safe haven or of romanticized return to the perceived comforts of a bygone time.

As it becomes apparent that such promises may be illusory or impractical, without appropriate psychological and ecological resources, flexibility and creativity give way to overzealous efforts to stay the course. Ideology crystallizes into dogma, propagating divisiveness and psychological polarization—which psychologist Kirk Schneider defined as the “elevation of one point of view to the utter exclusion of competing points of view” (The Polarized Mind: Why It’s Killing Us and What We Can Do About It, 2013). In our current era, to bypass the problematic outcomes of polarization, distractions abound—virtual thrills at the personal level and disengaged and dysfunctional communication at the social level. Meantime, at the collective level, nationalism, fundamentalism, and authoritarianism are becoming increasingly central in several societies around the globe.

Perhaps the crisis of our time could be best described as the endangerment of conversation—which originates from Latin for “the act of living with.” In conventional terms, we typically think of the word conversation less in this way, as a state of being-in-the-world-with-others, and more in terms of dialogue which is intended to bring about that state. At our worst, we gravitate toward one-sided dialogue which reinforces our existing beliefs to the point that its goal becomes lost and we are left with, in the words of Simon and Garfunkel, “people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening.” It is for this reason that I believe a reminder of the greater sense of conversation deserves particular attention today.

While I am defining my terms, I should also mention that the Chinese symbol for crisis (with reference to the crisis of conversation in our time) signifies not only a sense of danger but also of opportunity. Having discussed the dangers, let’s turn now to the inherent opportunities. It is typically during times of crisis when we also become particularly attuned to what is most important to us by virtue of its absence or the threat thereof and, in turn, to make decisions most in accordance with our values. It also is a time in which we engage with others whom we ordinarily may not readily interact with, unexpectedly coming together to think through and begin working toward a common goal—i.e., toward a greater conversation. Sometimes such relevant dialogues can be spontaneously sparked in neighbor’s yards or in line at the grocery store or in a restaurant, other times they begin with a hesitant “Can we talk?” and then proceed behind closed doors. Sometimes they take place among family or acquaintances, other times among strangers. Sometimes they take place free of charge, other times they involve a professional relationship between therapist and client. Irrespective of the specifics of the journey toward conversation, it always begins with a conscious choice. We reach out of our comfort zones to listen to and work toward understanding how others’ experiences have brought them to believe and feel the way they do.

The magic synergy of conversation arises from a simple equation. By giving ourselves permission to dare to see past the surface of the other, we begin to attune to the essence of the other. It is in that encounter that we begin to notice the 85% of the human element (or spirit) that we share in common, regardless of the remaining 15% comprised of points of difference and disagreement—which at our worst we tend to squander time stewing and bickering about.

When the process goes well, out of this encounter also emerges a greater sense of compassion. Rather than project, blame, or attempt to hold discomfort at a distance via distraction or dysfunction, directly dealing with crises cuts through defenses and other barriers, and a more empathetic and forgiving attitude emerges—toward both ourselves and others—thereby planting the seeds for transforming isolation into intimacy and enmity into empathy. We recognize and appreciate both the everyday trials and triumphs experienced by each person, while also maintaining a sense of reciprocity—i.e., the ability to reach out and the effort to accept and understand another person’s or group’s perspective, even if we do not agree with it, while maintaining and living by our own values. Without attempting either to override or conform to either perspective but rather commit to including both as part of a conversation greater than ourselves, each side is capable of becoming transformed and deepened by the other in a sustainable way. And out of this attitude of compassion and curiosity arises the possibility of negotiating and compromising based on the 85% that we can agree upon—in order to accept the 15% that we don’t.