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Arlington Street Church
7 February, 2010

Talking the Talk

I have 4,750 unread e-mails in the inbox of my work account. The subjects of only 100 conversations will appear on any given page; try as I might, on days that I receive more than 200 messages, I inevitably miss the overflow. Nonetheless, they wake me up with a start at all hours. They multiply day and night.

But e-mail is not my idea of talking.

E-mail, Facebook, blogs, texting, tweeting: to each its own place in the new pantheon of communication. But I'm worried – I'm really worried – that somewhere along the way, we're forgetting how to talk to each other.

Here's David Dudley, editor of *Urbanite* magazine in Baltimore:

“On a [recent] sparkling Sunday afternoon, ... I found myself in our local ... park, sitting on a blanket with my 5-year-old daughter, consumed by an e-mail

that appeared on my brand-new iPhone.... [My daughter] chattered on ... about peanut butter and birds and how to sing *This Land is Your Land*, while I tapped out my reply. Hitting 'send,' ... I blinked up to see all the other silently staring parents, slumped on benches or standing around, buried in the screens of their own smartphones. The kids ignored them; they ignored the kids....”¹

There are some of you who will argue the benefits of anything that prevents North American parents from hovering around their kids like helicopters. Okay. But what ever happened to friendliness, or ... conversation? Daniel Menaker, crusader for traditional, face-to-face connection and author of *A Good Talk: The Story and Skill of Conversation*, writes, “Not to be apocalyptic, but I'm very worried....” Me, too. I think of political commentator Walter Lippmann's prescient words, written in 1914: “We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves.” And I would actually sign on to Daniel Menaker's declaration of a cultural crisis. David Dudley calls it as he sees it: “a nation of hyper-connected hermits, thumbs furiously working our BlackBerrys, each of us a master of an every-smaller personal universe.”

Let me be quick to say that I'm talking about degrees. Our newest ways to communicate – as the old Bell telephone ads used to say, to “reach out and touch someone” – have their place among the sainted non-verbal remedies for the age-old “you never call me” lament. They can cut through isolation and

¹ David Dudley, “We Need to Talk” in *AARP, The Magazine*, March and April, 2010. Many thanks for the foundation of this sermon!

loneliness in an uplifting and healing way. But I'm concerned with their underbelly: the ways technology further isolates us and makes us more lonely. And I know that technology is not to blame; it's a symptom, not the cause. To find cause, we can start by examining one of the roots of our addictive love affair with virtual communication: a fever-pitch obsession with work; the ways in which this always-on connectivity floods our days – and nights! – with all-urgent demands.

A significant amount of what passes for conversation in this society feels so utilitarian, so results-oriented. I often think of the time I spent in Perú, where no one would dream of engaging in business before an involved series of exchanges about the health and well-being of everyone in the other person's extended family, whether or not you have ever met these people. My favorite – in translation, now – was always along these lines:

“And how is your father?”

“O, your father is dead. I'm terribly sorry. How is your mother, then; how is she getting along without him?”

“O, it's been 25 years. I see.”

Still, it took no getting used to. And if it sounds like a big waste of time ... it's not. When you've inquired about the health of someone's grandmother, and attended to the litany of her challenges, you feel different about the person with whom you're speaking. You feel *connected*. Authentic connection is the stuff of relationships.

By contrast, “The closest things to conversation I've had recently,” writes David Dudley, “were threads of comments on Facebook posts – intermittent volleys of confession, gossip, and one-liners from my socially networked 'friends' online [and he puts *friends* in quotation marks].” Note that the “improbable mix of personalities” on anyone's Facebook page “has never shared real-life space.”

In their book, *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century*, psychiatrists Jacqueline Olds and Richard S. Schwartz speak of the paradox of our isolation in the midst of connectivity: both our mobile society and technology “widen and weaken our connections with other people,” says Dr. Schwartz, who sometimes finds himself having to explain to potential clients why therapy sessions are best conducted in person. They ask, “Can't we do this over the phone,” as if that were already a little too intimate.

Moreover, writes Daniel Menaker, “There's a bleed from the Internet into ordinary conversation. People seem to feel freer now in person to [engage in] the kind of rant and denunciation [we] run across in anonymous postings online.” Another word for that behavior is incivility, or just plain rudeness. There's a reason that the words *human* and *humane* are etymologically linked. Manners, the exercise of civility, is the stuff of civilization.

Let's reflect together on some alternatives to all this bad behavior, shall we?

Daniel Menaker “places the golden age of conversation in the preindustrial

era, among the salons and coffeehouses of 18th-century Europe, and credits talk back then with helping to ... weld together a civil society.” But here is reformer John Dewey at the end of the nineteenth century (and I find it oddly comforting that our current morass is not a new phenomenon): “The Great Society created by steam and electricity may be a society, but it is no community,” he writes. “The invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life.” Mary Parker Follett, an early management guru, responded to this “invasion” by seeking to make *community centers* “into institutions for overcoming civic apathy, furthering mutual understanding among groups, and creating a local framework for the integration of churches, trade associations, lodges, and youth groups.... [T]he face-to-face communication [that] started at the level of the community center,” she reasoned, “would remain the surest way of creating solidarity.”²

Talking – *real* talking – is important! And at least as important as talking is *listening*.

I enjoy exactly one small victory for real talking and listening. If my daughters, now in their 20s and 30s, had their way, they would do everything – really, virtually everything – with some version of an mp3 player, a smartphone, a computer, and a TV at hand or in hand, turned on, and turned up ... all at once. But I am not impressed with their capacity to multi-task. And so those

² Historian Jean Quandt, *Small Town to Great Community*, pp. 39, 41

toys are banned from the dinner table, which is my small victory of claiming digital harassment-free territory. I'm the mother, and I said so.

Actually, they don't complain about it, and maybe, in some small way, it's a relief for them, too, a kind of haven. It's the only regular time we make to talk, uninterrupted ... except by each other.

It's a start, and I commend it to you: hewing (or blasting out) even a little time and space to pay attention: find our hearts, open our ears and lift our voices, and really talk ... really sing, play instruments, dance, make art, paint the children's faces and make a parade or a protest march, garden and cook and picnic or, in some way, make something beautiful, together, in the public square, celebrate the gifts of our common wealth.

And I would be remiss if I omitted making the case for coming to church. Podcasts notwithstanding, there is no substitute for being together. As he lit our chalice this morning, George Whitehouse read Rev. Kenneth Patton's beautiful words:

We arrive out of many singular rooms....

We come to be assured that brothers and sister and cousins surround us,

to restore their images on our eyes....

It is good to be with one another.³

³ Rev. Kenneth L. Patton, reading 443, "We Arrive Out Of Many Singular Rooms," in UUA, *Singing the Living Tradition*

Here, we come to see and to be seen, to know and to be known. There is no substitute for taking one another's hands at the close of the service, as we go forth into the new week. Social bonds, writes professor of public policy Robert D. Putnam, *social bonds* are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. Regular attendance at church, he says, is the equivalent of doubling your income. And you never know what good might come of it.

I think of this news story from late 1997. At the time, John Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retiree from the staff of the University of Michigan hospital, and Andy Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, knew each other only through the bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. John had been on the waiting list for a kidney transplant for three years when Andy approached him and offered him one of his.

“When we were in the hospital,” John says, “Andy said to me, 'John, I really like you and [I] have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn't hesitate to do this all over again.'” Andy adds, “Obviously, I feel a kinship [with John]. I cared about him before, but now I'm really rooting for him.” The photograph that accompanied this news story revealed that in addition to the differences in their professions and generations, John Lambert is black and Andy Boschma is white.⁴ “That they had bowled together made all the difference.”⁵

4 Emma Jackson, “Buddy Had Kidney to Spare,” *Ann Arbor News*, 1/5/98

5 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, p. 28

My spiritual companions, we are immersed in the promises of communication and connectedness through technology, but some of those promises come at a very high price. May we look deeply into our lives and seek to redress the balance of the time we spend with one another: virtual time and real time, time at the keyboard and time looking into one another's faces and joining hands. I want for us not isolation and loneliness, but beloved community and the warmth of the human touch. Let the spiritual healing of these great social ills begin here, with us.

Now, please don't e-mail me your best and brightest thoughts on this topic. Let's talk!