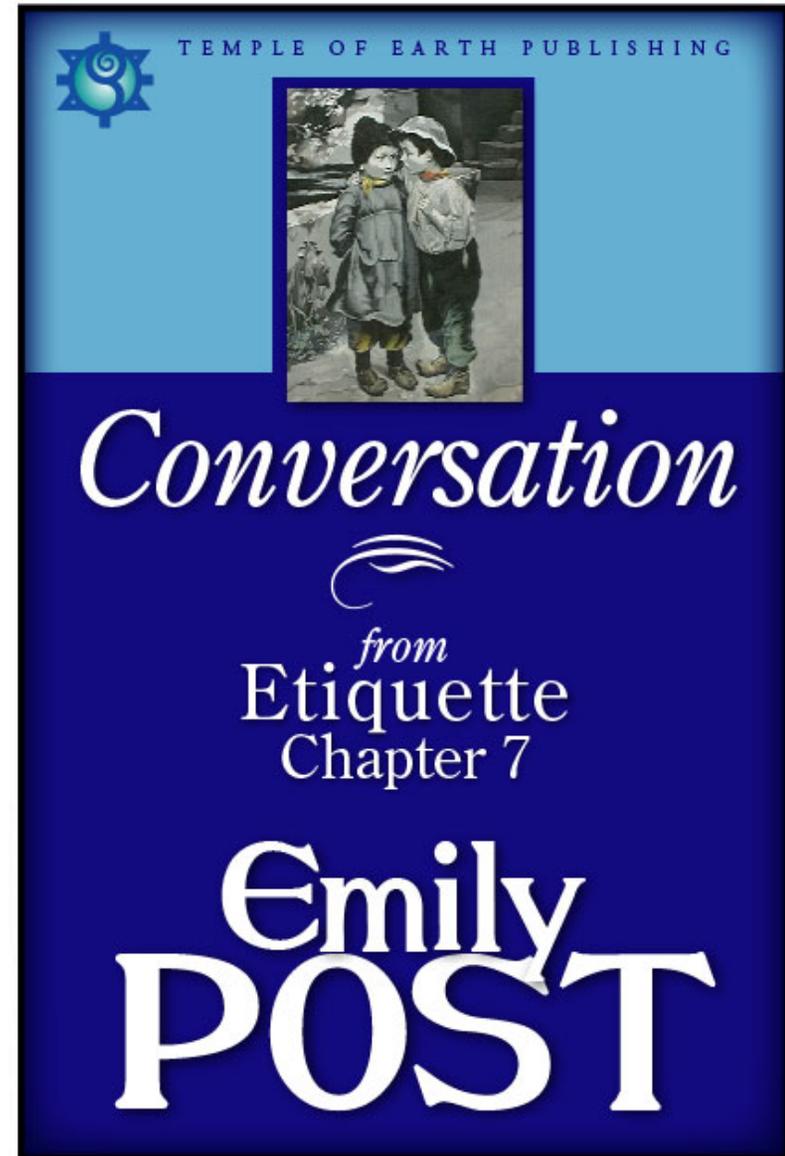


**CONVERSATION – from ETIQUETTE, Chapter 7
Emily Post**

Though much of Emily Post's classic tome "Etiquette" is no longer relevant as a guide to contemporary manners, a great deal teaches timeless principles of good manners everywhere. Chapter 7: Conversation is perhaps still the most relevant today, helping to remind us that the conversational art is one of reciprocity and mutual respect.



NEED OF RECIPROCITY

Ideal conversation should be a matter of equal give and take, but too often it is all "take." The voluble talker—or chatterer—rides his own hobby straight through the hours without giving anyone else, who might also like to say something, a chance to do other than exhaustedly await the turn that never comes. Once in a while—a very long while—one meets a brilliant person whose talk is a delight; or still more rarely a wit who manipulates every ordinary topic with the agility of a sleight-of-hand performer, to the ever increasing rapture of his listeners.

But as a rule the man who has been led to believe that he is a brilliant and interesting talker has been led to make himself a rapacious pest. No conversation is possible between others whose ears are within reach of his ponderous voice; anecdotes, long-winded stories, dramatic and pathetic, stock his repertoire; but worst of all are his humorous yarns at which he laughs uproariously though every one else grows solemn and more solemn.

There is a simple rule, by which if one is a voluble chatterer (to be a good talker necessitates a good mind) one can at least refrain from being a pest or a bore. And the rule is merely, to stop and think.

"THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK"

Nearly all the faults or mistakes in conversation are caused by not thinking. For instance, a first rule for

behavior in society is: "Try to do and say those things only which will be agreeable to others." Yet how many people, who really know better, people who are perfectly capable of intelligent understanding if they didn't let their brains remain asleep or locked tight, go night after night to dinner parties, day after day to other social gatherings, and absent-mindedly prate about this or that without ever taking the trouble to *think* what they are saying and to whom they are saying it! Would a young mother describe twenty or thirty cunning tricks and sayings of the baby to a bachelor who has been helplessly put beside her at dinner if she *thought*? She would know very well, alas! that not even a very dear friend would really care for more than a *hors d'oeuvre* of the subject, at the board of general conversation.

The older woman is even worse, unless something occurs (often when it is too late) to make her wake up and realize that she not only bores her hearers but prejudices everyone against her children by the unrestraint of her own praise. The daughter who is continually lauded as the most captivating and beautiful girl in the world, seems to the wearied perceptions of enforced listeners annoying and plain. In the same way the "magnificent" son is handicapped by his mother's—or his father's—overweening pride and love in exact proportion to its displayed intensity. On the other hand, the neglected wife, the unappreciated husband, the misunderstood child, takes on a glamor in the eyes of others equally out of proportion. That great love has seldom perfect wisdom is one of the great tragedies in the drama of life. In the case of the overloving wife or mother, some one should love *her* enough to make her *stop and think* that her loving praise is not merely a question of boring her hearers but of handicapping unfairly those for whom she would gladly lay down her

life—and yet few would have the courage to point out to her that she would far better lay down her tongue.

The cynics say that those who take part in social conversation are bound to be either the bores or the bored; and that which you choose to be, is a mere matter of selection. And there must be occasions in the life of everyone when the cynics seem to be right; the man of affairs who, sitting next to an attractive looking young woman, is regaled throughout dinner with the detailed accomplishments of the young woman's husband; the woman of intellect who must listen with interest to the droolings of an especially prosy man who holds forth on the super-everything of his own possessions, can not very well consider that the evening was worth dressing, sitting up, and going out for.

People who talk too easily are apt to talk too much, and at times imprudently, and those with vivid imagination are often unreliable in their statements. On the other hand the "man of silence" who never speaks except when he has something "worth while" to say, is apt to wear well among his intimates, but is not likely to add much to the gaiety of a party.

Try not to repeat yourself; either by telling the same story again and again or by going back over details of your narrative that seemed especially to interest or amuse your hearer. Many things are of interest when briefly told and for the first time; *nothing* interests when too long dwelt upon; little interests that is told a second time. The exception is something very pleasant that you have heard about A. or more especially A.'s child, which having already told A. you can then tell B., and later C. in A.'s presence. Never do this as a habit,

however, and never drag the incident into the conversation merely to flatter A., since if A. is a person of taste, he will be far more apt to resent than be pleased by flattery that borders on the fulsome.

Be careful not to let amiable discussion turn into contradiction and argument. The tactful person keeps his prejudices to himself and even when involved in a discussion says quietly "No. I don't think I agree with you" or "It seems to me thus and so." One who is well-bred never says "You are wrong!" or "Nothing of the kind!" If he finds another's opinion utterly opposed to his own, he switches to another subject for a pleasanter channel of conversation.

When some one is talking to you, it is inconsiderate to keep repeating "What did you say?" Those who are deaf are often, obliged to ask that a sentence be repeated. Otherwise their irrelevant answers would make them appear half-witted. But countless persons with perfectly good hearing say "What?" from force of habit and careless inattention.

THE GIFT OF HUMOR

The joy of joys is the person of light but unmalicious humor. If you know any one who is gay, beguiling and amusing, you will, if you are wise, do everything you can to make him prefer your house and your table to any other; for where he is, the successful party is also. What he says is of no matter, it is the twist he gives to it, the intonation, the personality he puts into his quip or retort or observation that delights his hearers, and in his case the ordinary rules do not apply.

Eugene Field could tell a group of people that it had rained to-day and would probably rain to-morrow, and make everyone burst into laughter—or tears if he chose—according to the way it was said. But the ordinary rest of us must, if we would be thought sympathetic, intelligent or agreeable, "go fishing."

GOING FISHING FOR TOPICS

The charming talker is neither more nor less than a fisherman. (Fisherwoman rather, since in America women make more effort to be agreeable than men do.) Sitting next to a stranger she wonders which "fly" she had better choose to interest him. She offers one topic; not much of a nibble. So she tries another or perhaps a third before he "rises" to the bait.

THE DOOR SLAMMERS

There are people whose idea of conversation is contradiction and flat statement. Finding yourself next to one of these, you venture:

"Have you seen any good plays lately?"

"No, hate the theater."

"Which team are you for in the series?"

"Neither. Only an idiot could be interested in baseball."

"Country must have a good many idiots!" mockingly.

"Obviously it has." Full stop. In desperation you veer to the personal.

"I've never seen Mrs. Bobo Gilding as beautiful as she is to-night."

"Nothing beautiful about her. As for the name 'Bobo,' it's asinine."

"Oh, it's just one of those children's names that stick sometimes for life."

"Perfect rot. Ought to be called by his name," etc.

Another, not very different in type though different in method, is the self-appointed instructor whose proper place is on the lecture platform, not at a dinner table.

"The earliest coins struck in the Peloponnesus were stamped on one side only; their alloy—" etc.

Another is the expounder of the obvious: "Have you ever noticed," says he, deeply thinking, "how people's tastes differ?"

Then there is the vulgarian of fulsome compliment: "Why are you so beautiful? It is not fair to the others—" and so on.

TACTLESS BLUNDERERS

Tactless people are also legion. The means-to-be-agreeable elderly man says to a *passée* acquaintance, "Twenty years ago you were the prettiest woman in

town"; or in the pleasantest tone of voice to one whose only son has married. "Why is it, do you suppose, that young wives always dislike their mothers-in-law?"

If you have any ambition to be sought after in society you must not talk about the unattractiveness of old age to the elderly, about the joys of dancing and skating to the lame, or about the advantages of ancestry to the self-made. It is also dangerous, as well as needlessly unkind, to ridicule or criticize others, especially for what they can't help. If a young woman's familiar or otherwise lax behavior deserves censure, a casual unflattering remark may not add to your own popularity if your listener is a relative, but you can at least, without being shamefaced, stand by your guns. On the other hand to say needlessly "What an ugly girl!" or "What a half-wit that boy is!" can be of no value except in drawing attention to your own tactlessness.

The young girl who admired her own facile adjectives said to a casual acquaintance: "How *can* you go about with that moth-eaten, squint-eyed, bag of a girl!" "Because," answered the youth whom she had intended to dazzle, "the lady of your flattering epithets happens to be my sister."

It is scarcely necessary to say that one whose tactless remarks ride rough-shod over the feelings of others, is not welcomed by many.

THE BORE

A bore is said to be "one who talks about himself when you want to talk about yourself!" which is superficially

true enough, but a bore might more accurately be described as one who is interested in what does not interest you, and insists that you share his enthusiasm, in spite of your disinclination. To the bore life holds no dullness; every subject is of unending delight. A story told for the thousandth time has not lost its thrill; every tiresome detail is held up and turned about as a morsel of delectableness; to him each pea in a pod differs from another with the entrancing variety that artists find in tropical sunsets.

On the other hand, to be bored is a bad habit, and one only too easy to fall into. As a matter of fact, it is impossible, almost, to meet anyone who has not *something* of interest to tell you if you are but clever enough yourself to find out what it is. There are certain always delightful people who refuse to be bored. Their attitude is that no subject need ever be utterly uninteresting, so long as it is discussed for the first time. Repetition alone is deadly dull. Besides, what is the matter with trying to be agreeable yourself? Not *too* agreeable. Alas! it is true: "Be polite to bores and so shall you have bores always round about you." Furthermore, there is no reason why you should be bored when you can be otherwise. But if you find yourself sitting in the hedgerow with nothing but weeds, there is no reason for shutting your eyes and seeing nothing, instead of finding what beauty you may in the weeds. To put it cynically, life is too short to waste it in drawing blanks. Therefore, it is up to you to find as many pictures to put on your blank pages as possible.

A FEW IMPORTANT DETAILS OF SPEECH IN CONVERSATION

Unless you wish to stamp yourself a person who has never been out of "provincial" society, never speak of your husband as "Mr." except to an inferior. Mrs. Worldly for instance in talking with a stranger would say "my husband," and to a friend, meaning one not only whom she calls by her first name, but anyone on her "dinner list," she says, "Dick thought the play amusing" or "Dick said—". This does not give her listener the privilege of calling him "Dick." The listener in return speaks of her own husband as "Tom" even if he is seventy—unless her hearer is a very young person (either man or woman), when she would say "my husband." Never "Mr. Older." To call your husband Mr. means that you consider the person you are talking to, beneath you in station. Mr. Worldly in the same way speaks of Mrs. Worldly as "my wife" to a gentleman, or "Edith" in speaking to a lady. *Always*.

In speaking about other people, one says "Mrs.," "Miss" or "Mr." as the case may be. It is bad form to go about saying "Edith Worldly" or "Ethel Norman" to those who do not call them Edith or Ethel, and to speak thus familiarly of one whom you do not call by her first name, is unforgivable. It is also effrontery for a younger person to call an older by her or his first name, without being asked to do so. Only a very underbred, thick-skinned person would attempt it.

Also you must not take your conversation "out of the drawing-room." Operations, ills or personal blemishes, details and appurtenances of the dressing-room, for

instance, are neither suitable nor pleasant topics, nor are personal jokes in good taste.

THE "OMNISCIENCE" OF THE VERY RICH

Why a man, because he has millions, should assume that they confer omniscience in all branches of knowledge, is something which may be left to the psychologist to answer, but most of those thrown much in contact with millionaires will agree that an attitude of infallibility is typical of a fair majority.

A professor who has devoted his life to a subject modestly makes a statement. "You are all wrong," says the man of millions, "It is this way—". As a connoisseur he seems to think that because he can pay for anything he fancies, he is accredited expert as well as potential owner. Topics he does not care for are "bosh," those which he has a smattering of, he simply appropriates; his prejudices are, in his opinion, expert criticism; his taste impeccable; his judgment infallible; and to him the world is a pleasure built for his sole pleasuring. But to the rest of us who also have to live in it with as much harmony as we can, such persons are certainly elephants at large in the garden. We can sometimes induce them to pass through gently, but they are just as likely at any moment to pull up our fences and push the house itself over on our defenseless heads.

There are countless others of course, very often the richest of all, who are authoritative in all they profess, who are experts and connoisseurs, who are human and helpful and above everything respecters of the garden enclosure of others.

DANGERS TO BE AVOIDED

In conversation the dangers are very much the same as those to be avoided in writing letters. Talk about things which you think will be agreeable to your hearer. Don't dilate on ills, misfortune, or other unpleasantnesses. The one in greatest danger of making enemies is the man or woman of brilliant wit. If sharp, wit is apt to produce a feeling of mistrust even while it stimulates. Furthermore the applause which follows every witty sally becomes in time breath to the nostrils, and perfectly well-intentioned, people, who mean to say nothing unkind, in the flash of a second "see a point," and in the next second, score it with no more power to resist than a drug addict can resist a dose put into his hand!

The mimic is a joy to his present company, but the eccentric mannerism of one is much easier to imitate than the charm of another, and the subjects of the habitual mimic are all too apt to become his enemies.

You need not, however, be dull because you refrain from the rank habit of a critical attitude, which like a weed will grow all over the place if you let it have half a chance. A very good resolve to make and keep, if you would also keep any friends you make, is never to speak of anyone without, in imagination, having them overhear what you say. One often hears the exclamation "I would say it to her face!" At least be very sure that this is true, and not a braggart's phrase and then—nine times out of ten think better of it and refrain. Preaching is all very well in a text-book, schoolroom or pulpit, but it has no place in society. Society is supposed to be a

pleasant place; telling people disagreeable things to their faces or behind their backs is *not* a pleasant occupation.

Do not be too apparently clever if you would be popular. The cleverest woman is she who, in talking to a man, makes *him* seem clever. This was Mme. Recamier's great charm.

A FEW MAXIMS FOR THOSE WHO TALK TOO MUCH— AND EASILY!

The faults of commission are far more serious than those of omission; regrets are seldom for what you left unsaid.

The chatterer reveals every corner of his shallow mind; one who keeps silent can not have his depth plumbed.

Don't pretend to know more than you do. To say you have read a book and then seemingly to understand nothing of what you have read, proves you a half-wit. Only the very small mind hesitates to say "I don't know."

Above all, stop and *think* what you are saying! This is really the first, last and only rule. If you "stop" you can't chatter or expound or flounder ceaselessly, and if you *think*, you will find a topic and a manner of presenting your topic so that your neighbor will be interested rather than long-suffering.

Remember also that the sympathetic (not apathetic) listener is the delight of delights. The person who looks

glad to see you, who is seemingly eager for your news, or enthralled with your conversation; who looks at you with a kindling of the face, and gives you spontaneous and undivided attention, is the one to whom the palm for the art of conversation would undoubtedly be awarded.