

# WHATAYA KNOW, WHATAYA SAY?

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“Whataya know, whataya say?” That was a slang greeting in the 1940s. I don’t know if people used it in real life; I’ve only heard it in movies from that period, usually coming out of the mouth of a gambler or a crook, some kind of Runyanesque “street guy.” But I’ve always liked it because it’s friendly and curious, straightforward and inviting. It’s much more than “hello” or “how are you?” both of which can get you a one-word reply that may not even be true.

As I contemplated the concept of Conscious Conversation, “whataya know, whataya say?” popped into my head, because conscious conversation – whether as a way of speaking in general or as a technique for discussing important issues and trying to solve problems – is essentially straight talk, plain talk, with other people. Not rude or insensitive or intrusive, just *real*.

Throughout my life and career, I’ve tried to engage in conscious conversation without calling it by that name. I thought of it as mediating, facilitating and mentoring. In recent years, I’ve started calling it *connectedness*: speaking and behaving with the intention of recognizing commonalities to resolve the conflicts caused by differences. I’ve done this within and between advocacy groups, businesses and governments on opposing sides of an issue. Connectedness encompasses mutual respect, kindness, empathy, and the idea that we are all connected in a fundamental way despite our differences. So, in a sense, conscious conversation is the language of connectedness.

This has heartfelt meaning for me because, along with my other activities, for 35 years I’ve been a senior advisor to Global Citizen’s Circle. It was founded in 1974 in the aftermath of a turbulent decade of assassinations, wars, racial tension, and government upheaval as a way of gathering concerned people of diverse backgrounds and opinions to address critical issues of our time. Its original mission remains: “to foster diversity, discussion, and constructive change in ourselves, our communities, our nation, and our world.” In essence, it *is* conscious conversation turned into action – and it continues (see <https://globalcitizenscircle.org>).

In today's world, with its tweets and texts and short social media postings, the world's general public is losing its grasp on language, making genuine conversation a rarity instead of regularity and most of it can't be called conscious. We've changed language in ways that diminish rather than enhance: turning words into numbers and single letters, making acronyms for everything, and turning nouns into verbs. This turns people, places and things into actions.

Have you heard the great expression: "We're human *beings*, not human *doings*"? Action, right action, *is* a wonderful, important thing. But the irony is, you can't *do* right without *being* in your "right mind" –that is conscious of what's going on around you, aware of others, honest with yourself about your shortcomings as well as your strengths. Our thoughts are our inner language, and if we can't speak well in our own minds, using a broad vocabulary to identify and describe our beliefs and feelings, it's very hard to have sensible, meaningful and productive conversations with anyone else: the boss, the employee, the citizen, the leader, the partner, the child – anyone!

When I was growing up in the 1950s, social norms said don't talk about sex, religion, or politics. Fortunately for me, I grew up in a community of activists, readers and thinkers. We talked about everything. Among my friends, no subject was taboo. In the 1960s the civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, and peace movements helped drive thoughtful, caring people away from polite chat to meaningful conversation, *conscious* conversation.

Sadly, it also created stronger barriers between *us* and *them*. We could talk amongst ourselves, but not too well with *the other*. one side became "pigs" and the other side "commie outside agitators."

That situation is even more problematic, today. There is a lot of real hate and miscommunication going on, worldwide, and a lot of it is directly *connected* to *unconscious* language, biases and very little conversation. In the U.S., President Trump's declaration of "fake news" (what he doesn't like, agree with, or wants to hide) trying to suppress and disparage a free media, mirrors what we see in nativist leaders fostering *fear of the other* to keep people divided (Presidents Recep Erdogan of Turkey and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines; Norbert Hofer's Freedom Party in Austria; Marine Le Pen's Freedom National Rally party; Nigel Farage, the architect of Brexit; etc.).

“Political correctness” was meant to reduce hate speech and foster positive change but sometimes now it’s in conflict with free speech. Fear mongers use attacking that as an excuse for rancorous defaming of immigrants and all types of “the other.” It’s their rationale for the vilest expressions of disparaging all but those who used to be in charge in the “good old days” (*before* racial, national, gender and other forms of diverse inclusion). In a world of changing demographics, we desperately need a more conscious and compassionate understanding of the other.

I agree with the concept of conscious conversation and how its use can create true communication in every sphere of personal, social, political, and global life. But, whether in business, government or civil society, we must examine the language we use internally and sometimes adjust it when we’re talking to people outside our own spheres. We have to speak more simply and directly. We also have to remember that a key part of conversation is *listening* consciously as well as *speaking* consciously.

We have to remember that empathy doesn’t mean “I feel just like you do,” it means “I think I can understand how you feel.” We have to invite participation by asking “How can I help?” rather than always take the lead by saying “Here’s how I can help you.” Most important, we must bear in mind that even the *most* conscious conversation isn’t the goal, it’s the means to an end. And whatever our experience or expertise, we always should be prepared to say: “I never thought of it like that.”

Conscious conversation is not just a synonym for conflict resolution or civil discussion of major issues of the day. It’s also reading to our children and teaching them to love and respect language. It’s answering their questions as straightforwardly as possible, whether they’re toddlers or teens. At work, it means letting your co-workers and your staff feel that you’re a helpful colleague. In activism, it means speaking truth to power with conviction, without having to vilify. It requires *hearing* what people mean, even when you don’t like some of the words they use. Conscious conversation means we must be prepared to have some difficult conversations: if we don’t try, we will remain divided and entrenched in our respective righteousness.

How do we put conscious conversation into practice? There’s no pat or single answer to that. It depends on who you are, where you are, who else you’re working with, and what you eventually want to accomplish. My

advice is to practice being a more conscious person and as well informed as you can be about the issue you're dealing with. Always be prepared to try. And don't be deterred if you fail. Consciousness is alertness. What I call connectedness is unity. I believe the combination of the two forms a foundation for creating a happier, healthier world.

So, whataya know, whataya say?!

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