

THE SILENCE BEHIND THE WORDS

Dr. David Norris

The most important thing to know about “Conscious Conversations” may at first seem obvious, but in practice it’s anything but obvious: it isn’t the conversation that’s conscious, but rather the act of conversing. The word “conversation” derives originally from the Latin *conversari* and later the Old French (14th Century), which means “to live, dwell, inhabit”. When one is conversing, one is dwelling in a particular space usually together with one or more other people, though sometimes only with oneself. It’s the space in which one speaks that can be conscious, not what one says.

The second most important thing to know is that we are always already in a conversation. Or as Martin Heidegger, the 20th Century German philosopher, put it, we always already find ourselves residing in the house of language. When conversing with other people the conversations are out loud expressions, while conversing with oneself takes the form of internal thoughts.

Though many have since used it, I believe it was David Bohm, the renowned quantum physicist, who originally coined the term “thoughting” to make the distinction between real thinking and merely having thoughts. Most of us are all too familiar with the constant stream of internal chatter, the constant flow of judgment and evaluation about everything and everyone (including oneself) that we know as “the little voice in our heads”. In fact, we often wish we could turn that little voice off.

While we may believe that this flow of thoughts is evidence of thinking, it’s actually not. Rather, it’s evidence of how the brain/mind works to manufacture an automatic and repetitive torrent of mind chatter. This manufactured internal dialogue isn’t thinking because it’s not intentionally generated. Instead, it’s a triggered phenomenon produced by reactive mental and emotional processes based on stored memories of past experiences. Hence, the past based “thoughting” rather than present based “thinking”.

When engaged in thoughting what is always implicitly present is a concern for oneself. In other words, because the thoughts that stream by are always in relation to an experience from the past, the one who experienced it is necessarily close at hand in the background. It’s not that we are thinking

about ourselves, but rather that our thoughts are recognizable and familiar because they are part of the story in which each of us is the main character. And regardless of whether these thoughts cast us in a positive or a negative light, they clearly belong to our catalogue of habitual opinions, beliefs, values and memories.

On the other hand, because real thinking occurs in the present, unattached to any past experience, no one is associated with it. It is literally a moment of empty silence, which is the pre-requisite for genuine creativity. Creativity is always from nothing, which is why actual thinking occurs so infrequently.

So much for the thoughting of the interior world. Now let's address it in the external public domain. In 1946 George Orwell published an essay entitled, "Politics and the English Language". In it he claimed that the English language, particularly in the political realm, was in "a bad way," because the public discourse "consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house." In other words, for the most part, political discourse is usually nothing more than the mechanical and automatic thoughting of the interior little voice switched to external loudspeaker.

The current political discourse in the United States and many other countries (and languages), is for the most part people talking at each other, not with each other; and most of what is being said takes the form of predictable prefabricated word torrents gushing into an ocean of opinion. Almost all of it is automatic and reactive, very little of it is consciously created. It's not the discourse, which is unconscious, but rather the space in which the discourse is taking place. That space is anything but empty; it's already always full of the thoughting manufactured by so many individuals and groups. And to quote Orwell again from the same essay: "this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity... [so that] words, like cavalry horses answering the bugle, group themselves automatically into the familiar dreary pattern."

As counter intuitive as it may sound, the pre-requisite for conscious conversations is the capacity for silence. Heidegger probably said it best in "Being and Time": "He who can be silent when in conversation with another can better claim to understand than the one who never stops talking.... Only in authentic speaking is silence actually possible. In order to be

capable of silence one must have something to say, that is, one must have a real and rich self-awareness.”

The silence Heidegger refers to here is not the absence of speaking, but rather the space from which one is listening. And the “rich self-awareness” is not an understanding of one’s own personality, but a grasp of our fundamental essence as human beings. The Zen Masters of ancient Japan referred to this essence as *sunyata*, absolute nothingness, which is at the silent core of all existence including the heart of what we are as human beings. Here again is Heidegger: “This silence is language; it can be much more expressive than any words. It is the original alignment of one existence with another, which language allows to come into being. Only because man is capable of such silence is he also capable of authentic speaking. If he ceases to be rooted in this silence all his speaking becomes mere chatter.”

Human beings have always faced serious problems. But for the first time in our history as a species these problems are existential. Nuclear annihilation and environmental collapse, for example, carry the possibility of extinction. They are the kinds of problems that can only be solved by working together. And therein lies the difficulty. To work together requires genuine communication, which in turn requires thinking rather than thoughting. It is not a question of how sincere we are as we communicate, but rather how aware we are of where we are speaking and listening from. Conscious conversations are conversations rooted in that silence, which is not the silence between the words, but the silence behind them.

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