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I've lost my conversational mojo – can I relearn the art of small talk?

A good friend of mine, who started a new job six months ago, is about to meet his colleagues face to face for the first time. They have been buddied up in pairs to make socialisation less daunting, he said. It sounded like breeding pandas, or children being dropped off at summer camp, rather than grownups working in the civil service. Having interacted only through remote meetings, he knows everything about their interior decor and nothing about them. Small talk's going to be weird, he texted me. A few seconds later, my phone buzzed. "What *is* small talk again?"

Damned if I know. I've lost my conversational mojo, too. I used to pride myself on being a good listener, quick on my feet, self-aware. But I've noticed signs that I'm slipping. The first time someone asked how I was, after months of social isolation, I forgot to reply. I'd grown accustomed to seeing conversations as things that happened on TV, that didn't involve me. When I did speak, my throat gurgled before the words emerged, like taps being run for the first time in a holiday home. The last time someone initiated a conversation with me, I babbled for eight minutes about how I'd been growing pineapples from other pineapples. I rambled on about water rooting, suckers and slips, the available research on crown splitting¹ as observed in the Niger² delta. My friend was not interested in pineapples. He had only asked what I'd been up to. The self-evident answer was, "not enough".

Other friends have shared similar anxieties. They find speaking tiring now, they say. They lose their train of thought. Group interactions feel welcome but strange. What's going on here: have we forgotten how to do it? I asked Rob Kendall, communications expert and author of *Blamestorming: Why conversations go wrong and how to fix them*. "I'm reminded of the Regent honeyeaters," he tells me. This once ubiquitous Australian bird is now endangered to the point where they no longer hear other honeyeaters, and are forgetting how to sing. It's a bleak analogy, but one that makes sense after a year of Zoom³ and masks: learning to process facial expressions and body language all over again feels overstimulating, even draining.

But Kendall argues that the pandemic has only exacerbated something that was happening in the culture anyway. Young people, who grew up immersed in the messaging services we are now all reliant on, are famously call-averse. Verbal conversation can be inconvenient, not to mention an opportunity to misspeak in a fractious world. Initiating one with someone we don't know well, or haven't seen in a while, is a risk, too – requiring what Kendall calls "crossing the threshold", or "a willingness to be uncomfortable when we don't know the depth of a relationship ... [trusting] we won't mess up." [...]

When I was young, small talk was a dirty word. I hated making polite conversation with strangers, and that quintessential British pastime, discussing the weather. People like me have now got our wish: bus stops and supermarket queues are no longer the social spaces they were. We live in a frictionless world of reduced human interaction, and constant, high-grade stimulation through our phones. I never thought I'd miss meaningless chit-chat, but I do.

"Small talk isn't about the weather, it's a way in to making connection," explains Kendall. "At a deeper level, that's a sacred thing." He is sceptical about a world in which we might have 10,000 social media followers, but few friends. We are communicating more than ever, through texts, DMs⁴ and voice notes – and yet these connections are shallower, unable to replicate what flesh and blood presence gives us. "In

¹ *crown splitting*: an agricultural technique

² a river in Africa

³ a video conferencing app

⁴ direct messages

the Zulu⁵ tradition, people greet each other by saying ‘Sawubona’, which means ‘I see you’,” Kendall says. “And the other person replies, ‘I see you, too.’” [...]

40 Some practical tips are needed, I think, and who better to provide them than a hairdresser, the unofficial therapists of the world? I call Jordanna Cobella, who runs her own salon in London and created The Mindful Hairdresser, a course for Wella⁶ that teaches hairdressers the importance of emotional intelligence. She is a firm believer that building rapport is a skill that can and should be learned.

45 “With people going through so much at the moment, I don’t bombard them with questions. You won’t get a real reply,” she says. How would she recommend we talk to people we don’t know well – for example, other parents at the school gates? “Saying hello has become awkward,” she acknowledges. “Are they an elbow person, a waver, a lean in, a lean back?” People’s sense of personal space is likely to be affected for some time, which makes body language more important than ever. Use the principle of reciprocity, Cobella advises: rather than ask a direct question, offer an observation of your own, perhaps relating to the environment, or your shared reason for being somewhere. She’s also a big fan of compliments. “It steers things away from Covid, and as long as it’s genuine, you’ll feel more confident for making them feel better.” If you want to reduce your social anxiety, putting someone else at ease might be the best way to do it.

50 I tell Cobella I was nervous about Zooming with her the morning after I hacked at my own hair with herb scissors. She laughs, and says that addressing awkwardness, naming elephants in the room and using humour to shoo them out, is a key part of connecting (I notice she doesn’t compliment my cut, though). Cobella is optimistic about the future, and believes that desperate loneliness might actually have boosted our conversation skills. She talks about walking Harvey, her doxiepoo⁷. “Normally, people talk to dogs and completely ignore the owner. Now they’ve started saying hello properly to me, before him! We end up as a circle of strangers, having a lovely chat.”

60 I decide I need to seek more expert advice, this time on a scenario drawn from my life. For a colleague’s upcoming 40th, I’m planning a weekend away at a hotel, and larger group conversations than I’ve been in for some time. To be honest, I’m not sure how far compliments or a buddy system will take me in the roustabout world of an all-male seaside trip. (My friend Tom says that if conversation turns to football, it will be a sign everyone has given up hope.)

65 My biggest concern is: can I banter? I miss group frivolity, the feeling of belonging that communal laughter provides. But I have become used to intense, one-on-one conversations in parks. I don’t feel funny any more – I feel like a bummer. In fact, I’m worried about bumming the lads to death with my endless tales of IBS⁸ and existential dread, and it’s possible many of them are worried about the same.

70 “At the moment, a lot of us feel overwhelmed by other people’s pain, on top of our own fragility,” says Elizabeth Oldfield, host of The Sacred podcast, which explores her guests’ values. “Listening to someone be honest about how they’re doing takes a lot of emotional energy, but it’s an important part of intimate conversation in established friendships.” She is a master at having deep chats with difficult people, so I meet her in a park to try to steal her techniques. Does she have any advice for someone who is worried about bringing others down? Or that they might have been monologuing about pineapples for eight minutes? She thinks for a moment. Setting expectations, even an agenda, can lighten the mood, she says. “Something like, ‘I’m a bit nervous about being social again, and we’ve probably all got pent up stuff to express, so why don’t we make a plan? I’ll listen to you for five minutes without interrupting, reflect back what I hear, then you do the same for me. And after that we do something fun, or talk about other things?’”

80 Such as what? We’ve all been experiencing personal stagnation. What is there to talk about? According to Oldfield, now is the perfect time to let people around us open up their interior world, rather than simply

⁵ an African ethnic group

⁶ a hair product brand

⁷ a breed of dog

⁸ irritable bowel syndrome

relating circumstances. She recommends putting some thought into asking more creative questions, and shares a few options she keeps in her back pocket:

What are you interested in at the moment?

85 What is your mental screensaver – the thing you’re pondering in the background when not thinking about other things?

What are you finding life-giving?

What are you frustrated by?

90 Or, if talking about work feels like safer ground, or you don’t know the person that well: what are the best and worst bits of your job at the moment?

I’m still not sure this will fly at the seaside. Looking for reassurance, I turn to an Oxford professor. Robin Dunbar is head of the social and evolutionary neuroscience research group at the university’s department of experimental psychology. He also has the extremely cool accolade of having a number named after him. (Dunbar’s number is the cognitive limit of stable, meaningful relationships it is possible to have: 150.)

95 According to him, my worries are moot.

“Conversation levels have zero effects on boys’ relationships,” he states bluntly. Huge if true, I think. Most gender differences are nonexistent or marginal, he goes on, and inculturation⁹ has a huge, complex role to play, too. Yet the *social* worlds we live in really are different. Having recently published a study of 10,000 male and female brains, “there are very robust differences about where stuff is being processed in relation to generic features of the social world. Women [also] have far more white matter, the wiring between units, which is the critical bit. Their social skills are much better than men’s.” The central element of male friendships is doing things together, rather than talking. As long as I turn up and have a go on the pedalos, I’ll be in the club, Professor Dunbar suggests. Vaguely dispiriting, yet affirming, too.

105 I think about something else Oldfield advised – that conversation is at its most rewarding when people discover a new thought in the moment. While she skews toward profound speech, it strikes me that banter satisfies this criterion, too. Spontaneity is stimulating, and it’s why real-life interactions are irreplaceable. I’m not just interested in what people think, I realise. I’m interested in *how* they think, how they make connections, or even fail. Stumbling and silence throw light on our inner landscapes, too.

110 It also occurs to me that my panic about talking stands in for a deeper fear of whether I still *think* like myself. It’s been so long since I felt funny or interesting or sharp; I feel I have aged 10 years in 12 months. Does it mean I’ll never recover those neural pathways – that I’ll always be less than I was, and further down the road to extinction? “We’re not honeyeaters!” reassures Kendall. “Just out of practice. We’ve been talking for 100,000 years and it’s instinctive.” Our old abilities will return along with the relationships that contain them, he says. And it would be odd not to feel altered by the pandemic – but that doesn’t mean forever, or that anything’s lost. [...]

115 Finally relaxing a little, I dip a toe back into small talk. Kendall lives in Bath, a world heritage site which I’ve heard described as a “finished city”, meaning there are no buildings you can knock down or new ones to be built: is that true? “That’s actually a fallacy,” Kendall says. “We have the same planning applications process and quotas as anywhere else.” This is news to me. “So you’re saying... it’s an *urban myth*?” I reply. 120 We both agree it is a good joke, and I feel a bit better. The banter bus may be stopping here again.

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⁹ the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture