

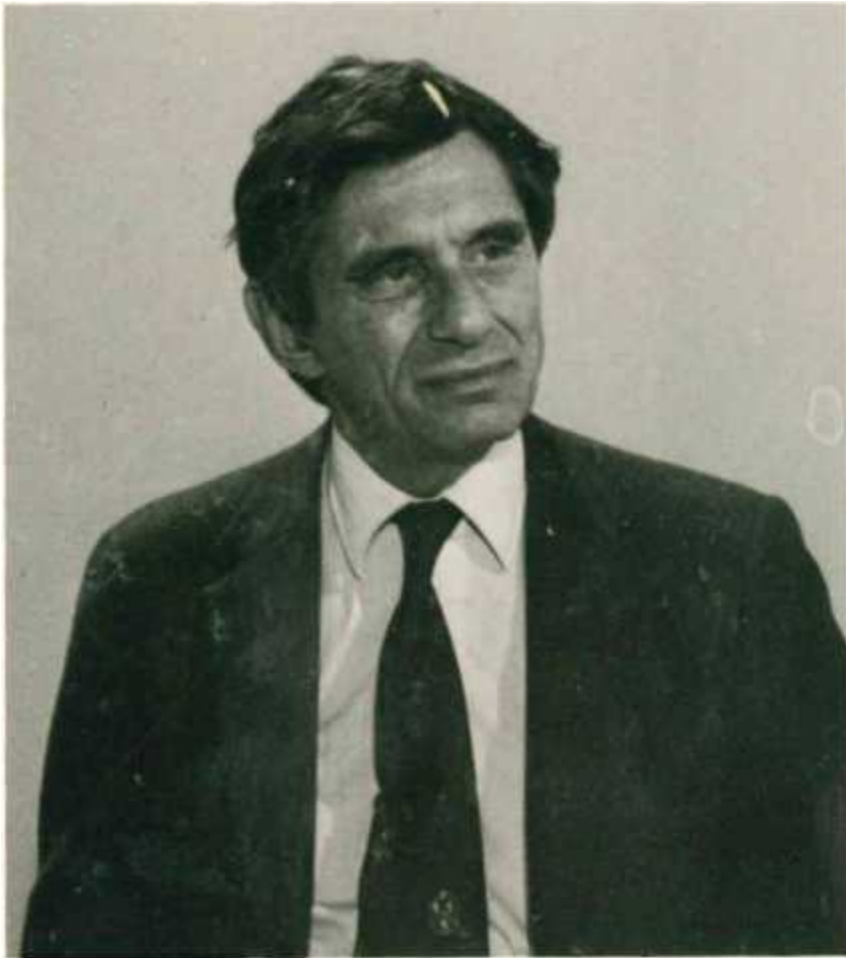
BARRY FARBER

Radio's famous interviewer shows you how to start a conversation and make people open up. A richly anecdotal how-to book that really works.

MAKING PEOPLE TALK

(continued from front flap)

Armed with this book, you can get conversation blazing when you want to—whether you're on a job hunt, a supermarket line, or national TV. Throughout, Barry studs his advice with stories of celebrities that he has grilled or chatted with, from Frank Gifford, to Ingrid Bergman, to Malcolm X, to Alfred Hitchcock (who provides an unforgettable example of how to end a conversation).



After literally thousands of hours hosting his own talk show, Barry Farber is a leading expert on *Making People Talk*. He has been a feature of New York radio for nearly thirty years, and his show is carried nightly on stations around the country.

Jacket design by Miffee Stromberg

William Morrow & Company, Inc. 105 Madison Avenue New York, N.Y.
10016

Printed in U.S.A.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Farber, Barry.

Making people talk.

1. Conversation. I. Title.

BJ2121.F37 1987 158'.3 87-5516

ISBN 0-688-01591-3

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

123456789 10

BOOK DESIGN BY PATRICE FODERO

*To Sophie and Ray Who helped me unwrap the gift of speech, and
Bibi and Celia*

Unto whom it was so much fun passing it along!

FPT

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people, without whose help and support this book would never have been either written or published: Adrian Zackheim, Bill Adler, J. Elroy McCaw, Leil Lowndes, Tex McCrary, Jinx Falkenberg, Bill Satire, Bill Berns, Martin Levin, Charles Norton, Wynder Hughes, and that bus driver on Madison Avenue who knows what I'm talking about. And to many others too numerous to mention, but very deserving anyway.

FP'

Contents

Making People Talk

You and I have something in common. We both profit if we can get good conversations going and keep them going.

What we don't have in common is what happens if we fail.

If *you* fail to get good talk going in both directions, you may be thought of as taciturn, uncommunicative, dull, drab, and boring. You may not get the opportunities you deserve and desire. Those in a position to assist you professionally may not be prompted to do so. Those of the opposite sex you'd like to come to know better may not be similarly drawn to you. Those whose social tents you'd like to enter may close their flaps to you.

And you may never notice. You may never know you failed.

If you fail conversationally, your punishment may be unfelt and invisible.

If *I* fail, I'm unemployed!

I'm a broadcaster. My specialty is talk. My mission is to provoke conversations interesting enough to make listeners listen and keep listeners listening. Sometimes, when guests are articulate and cooperative, my job is easy. All I have to do

12 Barry Farber then is *let* them talk. More often, the guests are unsure, halting, nervous, ill at ease, inarticulate, terrified, or mute. They may be great writers, businesspeople, crusaders, organizers, makers and shapers of our evolving civilization itself. When I read their book, article, press release, or letter that originally made me want them on my show, they all seemed to be full-throated giants of oratory. It's only when the on-the-air light went on in my studio that I'd realize I was dealing not with the awaited charging buck, but with a glassy-eyed deer frozen in headlights. (Once I was trapped on the air for a full ninety minutes with a Miss Finland—on the level now—who could not speak one single word of English!)

Many guests get on the air who should never be on the air. It's a mistake. It's a misbooking. Somebody should get scolded, possibly fired. But you haven't got time to luxuriate in such fantasies of vengeance when you're on the air live.

"To hell with the cheese," broadcasters soon learn. "Get yourself out of the trap!"

You've got no more opportunity to correct things at that point than a circus acrobat has to stop in the middle of a midair somersault to rewire the trapeze.

You develop skills at Making People Talk.

Or you find another line of work.

My own on-air broadcast career started out weak, and gradually tapered off. The first radio station I worked for was a major rock and roller. Mine was the only hour of the day—eleven to midnight—that featured talk. My friends at the radio station listened to my early broadcasts and told me, "That woman talking about training all those dogs was interesting. In fact, the dog lady was very interesting. The exercise lady was interesting. The

leftovers lady, the protein doctor, the mortgage man, the singing professor, the harmonica maker, the cheese taster, the ski-pole repairman, the log hollower, that man who had the southernmost brass weathervane in New Hampshire—they were all interesting. Very interesting. But ‘interesting’ won’t make it, kid. You’ve got to stagger us with big names. Not just for the listeners. You’ve got to stagger the sales department, the program director, and the owner of this company, too.”

Interesting challenge. Not many celebrities were looking for insecure late-night talk shows to come be staggering on.

I’d done a couple of interviews about Sweden arranged by Lars Malmstrom, head of publicity for the Swedish National Travel Office in New York. I knew he worked with Ingrid Bergman on promotions now and then. I told him of my problem. Ingrid Bergman, if I could only get her exclusively on my late-night local radio show, would stagger all the required personnel. If I could get one interview with Ingrid Bergman, I could get away with having nobody but dog-exercise-protein leftovers-et cetera experts on the show for one solid year!

Lars said he would try. He called me a few weeks later and told me which hour and minute to meet him in the lobby of the Hampton House Hotel on a date three weeks from then. He told me to come alone, make sure my tape recorder was functioning properly, and walk softly after him. Ingrid Bergman, Lars told me, had agreed to be mine, exclusively.

I did as instructed. And, indeed, Ingrid Bergman *was* mine; exclusively, too. The only problem was, she had by no means agreed to be mine for a prolonged interrogation on her life, work, scandals, hatreds, frustrations, passions, and recriminations. She was under the impression that, whoever I was, I was there to do a ninety-second travel piece about Sweden. For Swedish radio. And in Swedish!

It turned out that in my mid-teens I’d gone to the movies alone one afternoon in Miami Beach, seen an Ingrid Bergman movie, and fallen in love with her. After the movie I walked into the bookshop right next door and said to the clerk, ‘I want

a book that can teach me whatever language it is Ingrid Bergman spoke first.”

“Ingrid Bergman is Swedish,” said the clerk. He walked away and came back with a copy of *Hugo’s Swedish Simplified*. It cost two dollars and fifty cents. I only had two dollars.

“Do you have anything similar cheaper?” I asked. He left again and this time came back with a copy of *Hugo’s Norwegian Simplified*. The cost was only one dollar and fifty cents.

“Do you think she’ll understand this as well as the other one?” I asked the clerk. He assured me that anyone who could understand an American speaking Swedish could also understand that American speaking Norwegian.

I took that little Norwegian book and devoured it. My parents bought me others, finally going all the way for a Norwegian Linguaphone course on sixteen discs for fifty dollars as a high school graduation present. Learning Ingrid’s language, at least the less expensive Norwegian spoken next door to her Swedish, became the kind of passion for me that drives Bobby Fishers and Van Cliburns to virtuoso triumphs in chess and piano at unusually early ages.

By the time I was eighteen I could speak Norwegian well enough to work on Norwegian ships and win a scholarship to the University of Oslo. I became a kind of Norwegian “Zionist.” I loved the place. And the Norwegians were unaccustomed to being loved by Americans with absolutely no Norwegian background. Great things were flooding into my life: girlfriends, invitations to different parts of Norway, travel, adventure, the kind of sophisticating experiences that don’t often come looking for graduates of Greensboro High School.

And all because of Ingrid.

“Miss Bergman,” I calmly said when I saw her eyes were about to become the kind of superstar lasers that can vaporize the likes of me and Lars, “I

understand how annoyed you must be at this misunderstanding. I also know you've probably har-

vested more compliments than anyone else alive, so please don't think I'm trying to win my way with reckless flattery. I beg you only to be patient for one minute—literally one minute, that's all—to give me the chance to tell you why I want this interview with you.”

I then proceeded to tell her the story. In Norwegian!

The glaciers turned into warm and pleasant streams. She accepted. She responded. All I had to do was sit back and listen to my jackpot pouring in.

When the interview was terminated over an hour later, it was not because Ingrid Bergman ran out of time.

It was because I ran out of tape!

So, you say, the woman whose cooperation *you* need is not Ingrid Bergman, the movie star; she's Isabella in accounting. She's not from Sweden; she's from the Dominican Republic. You did not fall in love with her in a movie and learn her language; you had one short conversation with her at last year's company picnic, and that didn't seem to work any magic in getting her to accept your expense reports with cab fare to and from the airport merely estimated.

Regulations demand itemized expense reports supported by receipts. Isabella loves regulations. Isabella speaks, of course, Spanish. A Spanish proverb tells us, “Regulations are for your enemies.” Every language should copy and learn.

How now do you convert Isabella from someone who sends your vouchers back through interoffice memo demanding taxi receipts signed by the cabdriver to someone who tells you, “This is fine. Everybody knows it costs fifteen dollars to get to La Guardia Airport from midtown Manhattan,” and quickly expedites your check?

How do you convert the boss from one who grunts perfunctorily in your direction when you meet on the elevator over to one who invites you in for an after-hours feet-on-desk

fat-chewing session on the real needs, problems, and opportunities of the company?

How do you convert a worker from one who does his job without sloth or drama but obviously, inwardly feels about you pretty much like the shipyard workers of Gdansk feel about the Polish Communist Party over to a loyalist of almost Japanese fervor?

How do you convert a grouchy cabdriver into your own secretary of transportation, an appealing man or woman into a date and possibly a mate, a frosty store clerk into your personal procurement agent, a snippy waitress into your custom caterer, a by-the-books bank teller into your mole behind the counter?

Is there really a reliable way, a way you can actually learn—the way you learn French or karate—how to turn “No” into “Yes,” “It’s against our policy” into “No problem,” “We’ll study it” into “Let’s do it,” “I’ve got to wash my hair” into “We’ll meet at seven,” “Otherwise I’d love to” into “I’d love to”?

Is there a way to convert resistance into acceptance?

How do you convert human roadblocks into native guides, dissidents into lubricants?

There *is* a way. It works. And it’s elementary. It involves learning some principles. “Principles” may be too pompous a word. They’re more like games.

The “game” has an objective. The objective is not what you may think it is. It isn’t getting the job, getting the sale, getting the date; getting the variance, the approval, the improvement, the permission.

That’s the second objective.

The prime objective is—Get Them Talking.

How are the really colossal deals made? Is it who you know? Is it the old-boy network? Is the “fix” always “in”?

Perhaps. Any big deal might indeed owe to any of those

well-known explanations. Or, less well-known but not a bit less likely, it could be that somebody got somebody else talking.

Barry Horenbein is a lawyer and lobbyist in Tallahassee, Florida. One day a lawyer for the Seminole Indian nation came to the state capital to look around for a good lobbyist. The Seminoles have the right to sell tax-free cigarettes and run bingo games. The bingo games aren't for fun. Neither is the lobbying assignment for the Seminole nation. It's one of the most lucrative jobs of its kind in America, and Horenbein was one of the candidates.

The other lobbyists, the “pack,” jumped the expected way. They tried to impress the Seminoles' lawyer with how well connected they were with the governor, the key legislators, the power apparatus of the state of Florida.

Barry Horenbein knew a better route.

When he was invited to visit the Seminole reservation to “audition” for the account, he took over the course of the opening conversation—and not for the purpose of brandishing his closeness with the power people, although well he could have.

“You know,” Horenbein began, “I've lived in the state of Florida all my life, and I hardly know anything at all about a ‘nation’ that lives in this same state—I mean your Seminole Indian nation. I'm really ashamed I know so little about you. It's undoubtedly because of our poor schooling regarding Indian affairs, and that goes back to the old attitude of the conquering white man. Maybe you can take a few minutes and brief me on a few things I've always been curious about?”

The startled but pleased Seminole chiefs said they'd be happy to.

“Good,” said Horenbein. “I always knew there had to be more to our Seminole neighbors than beads and canoes and open grass huts and wrestling matches with alligators.”

He proceeded to ask about housing, health, and nutritional conditions among the Seminoles. He asked about their history, their legendry, their language, their customs, their religion, their attitudes, their aspirations, and their feelings about whites, blacks, and other Indians of North America.

Was there a split, Horenbein wanted to know, between Seminoles who put on neckties and go to Miami and Tallahassee, and Seminoles who never leave the Everglades? Were there Seminoles who stay so deep in the swamps they don’t even know there *is* a Tallahassee?

“Not everybody knows it,” Horenbein continued, “but the federal government only concluded a peace treaty with the Seminole nation in recent years. Long after we had signed peace treaties with Germany and Japan, we were still officially at war with the Seminoles!”

The Seminoles knew that. But they didn’t know anybody else knew it, certainly not any paleface “mouthpiece” like Horenbein.

They answered Horenbein’s questions. They told him of life among the Seminoles beyond the postcard villages and alligator fights. They lectured. They preached. They protested. They shared. They gave.

They *talked*.

They also decided on the spot that, by the authority vested in them by their Seminole nation, they would look no further. They had found their man.

Horenbein would represent the Seminoles at an annual retainer somewhere in excess of five hundred thousand dollars a year.

Horenbein had heard that Indians are not merely uncommunicative but monosyllabic.

All Horenbein needed was one syllable.

And he got it.

Yes.

* * *

There's no single, specific secret to Making People Talk. You always know, though, when it's working. You know by the invisible light and the unmeasurable heat that descends when chitchat becomes communication. It's when eyes shine, brows furrow with attention and concentration. It's when everybody around, though fully dressed, seems to be sharing a hot tub. It's when time passes effortlessly as ideas crackle back and forth.

I've known that magic thousands of times.

When it happens on the air, I feel professionally successful. When it happens off the air, I feel personally successful. In this book, I want to show you how to make the magic of Making People Talk work for you.

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Ready

Are you ready?

Obviously, the answer depends on the “Ready for what?” implication coiled inside the question.

The questions “Are you ready to . . . make love, share a pizza, go to Jamaica, watch the Super Bowl, or undergo Japanese massage topped off with oil of Wintergreen?” might command different answers from questions like “Are you ready to . . . jog another ten miles but this time faster, pay every cent you owe, reenlist in the Marines, volunteer for a medical experiment in the study of AIDS, or hitchhike to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and smuggle live ammunition across the border to the Contras?”

The question here is unusual but specific.

Are you ready to abandon all your notions of talking to other people, whatever they are, this instant and agree from now on to regard every single encounter with every person you meet as an opportunity to make that person like you and want to help you further your aims in life?

Careful!

A lot of people will say yes just to see what comes next. If your truthful answer isn't yes, nothing is coming next—nothing of interest to you, for sure.

Some consider it something close to a sin to “cultivate” a person as a friend in hope of some future gain, specific or vague. Others consider it a waste of time to socialize with anybody who can't do them any good.

The two attitudes divide, like classes on Russian trains, into “soft” and “hard.” Let's call individuals within these classes soft-hearts and hard-hearts.

The “soft” attitude has kept a lot of talented people unnecessarily trapped in mediocrity. That notion says, ‘ ‘People are not *things* to be used only when needed or when it’s advantageous. I will not abuse fellowship and conviviality by even *allowing the suspicion to germinate* that my opportunism supersedes my fraternal motives in showing niceness to others.’ ’

The “hard” shouts back, “Quit worrying about appearing opportunistic in your dealings with other people. Grow up and recognize that *people are opportunities*. ’ ’

To suppose that hard-hearts are nothing but crass and pushy opportunists who use people “like tin cans” and then smash them and throw them away when they’re through with them is either soft-heart propaganda (the Loser’s Lament) or describes awfully unskilled hard-hearts.

For every successful person out there succeeding, there are a hundred who know him who are sitting around crabbing about the way he “uses” people. The best position—the one to get ready for—is somewhere safely in from the extreme, but definitely on the hard side of the middle. The argument is not about whether to use or not to use. It’s to use tastefully or distastefully; with grace or with gall; in a manner that leaves the one being “cultivated” thinking, “What a delight doing favors for you. Do call again!” or in a manner that repels him as well as all observing bystanders.

The hardness I suggest does not call for treating people like tin cans. It demands they be treated more like treasured zucchini to be dusted and petted and placed lovingly upon protective green confetti in the display bin.

“Smash them and throw them away when they’re through with them!”
What rot! What an awful transmogrification of the “hard” doctrine. Skilled hard-hearts realize you’re never through with them! Anyone who can help you once might help you twice!

Soft-hearts see a difference between personal friends and business associates. Each is clearly enough defined in the “soft” mind to be wearing an armband, and different rules apply to each.

“Personal” friends are those we like spending time with because we like them. They may do us favors, and big ones, but that’s not usually why they were initially enlisted as friends. Personal friends are the ones we relax with. They’re the ones we rejoice with because we actually like each other, in praiseworthy contrast to those opportunistic dogs who will court anybody, kiss anybody, and spend time with anybody in their remorseless lunge for success.

That’s the soft line, and it’s devastatingly seductive. It engulfs most decent people for the course of their entire lives. It’s the easier philosophy to accept. It seems nicer.

It just isn’t true.

Some of the best friendships, some of the best laughs, the best moments, the most vibrating, pulsating *fun* takes place at parties where not one single relationship was founded on softhearted “affection”!

Do you suppose those governors and congressional chairmen of key committees actually like each other? Or the CEO’s of the eight major firms in an industry having a drink in the penthouse of the convention hotel after the evening’s banquet? Or those rock stars and movie stars relaxing after rehearsal for

a big benefit? Or those genial diplomats at the dinner party from countries that were fighting each other last Thursday, or intend to fight each other next Thursday?

Are they the ones you pity because they don’t have time for their friends? Save your compassion and your energy. They don’t need it.

Do you think you have what it takes to improve yourself quantumly over where you are now and where your present trajectory is likely to take you? If so, do you want to take that climb?

If you answered affirmatively both times, there remains only one more question: Does success mean more to you than time with your friends, or does time with your friends mean more to you than your success?

Put that way, isn't the answer obvious? And isn't the individual who opts for success now a little more normal and human, a little less "hard" in your eyes?

Relax. If you succeed, you can still have friends, dear friends, dear old friends. Your moments with them can be richer. You'll be able to do a lot more *for* those friends. You need not abandon friends you like merely because you learn to befriend others for reasons more practical, initially, than affection.

I have no way of telling how many "arranged" marriages wind up knit by love. I can testify, though, that many friendships that were motivated initially not by affection but by opportunism wind up richer and more enduring than those with the "good ole boys from down home."

When we talk about the facts of life, we mean sex. That's unfortunate. Those sexual facts may, indeed, be the most sensational facts of life. They may be the most eagerly anticipated facts of life. They may be the most *important* facts of life.

But they're not the *only* facts of life!

I learned another one on active duty in the field of journalism in the 1960's.

A convention of medical writers in Arizona was rocked by a report that a team of New York researchers had come up with an injection that could melt—literally melt—breast tumors in mice in less than eight minutes. They were eager to show it off to anybody who would watch.

I had a local radio show in New York at the time, and I didn't even try to arrange an interview with those doctors right away. I figured they'd be engulfed by network TV attention for at least a week. I made a note to call them at their New York research center one week after all their publicity.

When I called, I learned to my amazement that I was the one and only talk show host who'd shown any interest. They invited me down for my own private demonstration.

They had a specially bred strain of mice (the C3H strain) in which the female obligingly almost always develops breast cancer. They selected a mouse with a particularly large tumor. I was a layman, and they wanted to make sure nothing was lost on me. They invited me to use my own stopwatch. They injected and said “Go.”

And sure enough, inside of eight minutes the tumor was gone.

Why wasn't the whole medical world standing where I was, gasping like I was gasping, thrilling like I was thrilling?

The three doctors, the senior and his two younger Ph.D. research assistants, politely explained the rivalries that cause big-deal cancer research to “control” their excitement over any accomplishments that look promising inside little-deal cancer research. And, despite their headlines for a day, my new friends were strictly little-deal research.

I was furious. I went back to my microphones and told the world that rivalry and jealousy should stick to show business where they belong and not endanger our lives by blocking

medical research. I invited every M.D. and Ph.D. medical researcher listening to a “rebel” demonstration for the next Saturday morning—no official scientific auspices, just a broadcaster showing doctors what three researchers had come up with.

A roomful of curious doctors did, indeed, show up.

The three researchers replicated their experiment, passing the mouse around by the tail so the assembled physicians could palpate (feel) and verify the existence of the tumor, injecting their blessed fluid, waiting the eight minutes, and, finally, satisfying one and all that the tumor was now necrotic (dead) tissue.

And there wasn't the slightest hint of any excitement or even interest on the part of the medical personnel present!

Why?

Did my doctors do what I said they would?

Yes.

Did they do it as totally and quickly as I said they would? Definitely.

Why, then, wasn't there even a hint of a "Hey, now. What have we here?"

One of the young doctors present had earlier introduced himself as a regular listener to my radio show. I used that connection to take him off to one side and into my confidence.

"Gene," I said, "you and your friends don't seem to be particularly impressed with what you've just seen."

He seemed relieved that I'd come to that conclusion singlehandedly, sparing him the need to tell me.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Did you see that senior doctor?" he said.

I replied I'd seen him take a mouse, verify the existence of a breast tumor, inject the mouse, and eight minutes later verify that the tumor was gone. What else should I have seen?

"His white laboratory coat was not only stained," the

doctor said, "but his buttons—not just one—*but two whole buttonholes*—were out of whack!"

The most empire-shaking court-martial in British annals concerned the acquittal of a British officer who was apprehended chasing a young woman, completely (he, that is) in the nude, down the corridors of a hotel in Singapore.

His defense attorney successfully mobilized a long-forgotten clause in the British officers conduct manual that said, "Uniform regulations shall be

suspended to allow for officers to dress appropriately for the sport, activity, or pursuit in which they are engaged”!

Making Them Talk is the neglected tool of achievers. A million words are written on the importance of “appearance” for every one written on what to do and say after you “appear.”

Appearance is the anthem. Conversation is the ball game.

Are you sure you are dressed—and groomed and shined and clipped and fragranced and filed-of-nail, erect-of-posture, and pleasant-of-breath—for the sport, activity, and pursuit in which you are engaged, which is making people think that meeting you is a major event in their day, if not their lives, and making them friendlier and more likely to support your endeavors?

Only about ten cartoons in American magazines have become classics, and the one to recall here is the cartoon that showed hundreds of thousands of tuxedoed, swallow-tailed penguins sprawled across the Antarctic icecap. A large group of those penguins were clustered around one of their number dressed in an outrageous checkered vest with gold chain, sunglasses, jaunty beret, and a lit cigarette perched in a rhinestone-studded cigarette holder.

The caption had the stylish penguin saying, “I just got tired of being so goddamn formal all the time!”

Emotionally, we may side with that daring penguin; but tactically we’ve learned to go along with the anonymous, unimaginative others.

When you try to make an impression, that, alas, is exactly the impression you make.

Lincoln would have lost the debates to Douglas if his tie had been trapped outside the collar.

Once upon a time “gentlemen” out to succeed in commerce had no choice in dress style. They had to surrender to the fashions of the day. All rebellion was mercilessly dealt with. Today there are men and women who want to succeed only if they can do so within dress codes they consider proper.

Fine. No written word is likely to undermine your principles. All that's recommended here is to appear at all times at the pinnacle of your chosen mode, whatever it is.

If you're a three-piece-suit man, make sure the vest is properly buttoned, the pants bear a crease, and the jacket doesn't carry the fallout of yesterday's egg foo young. If you're a sweater-and-slacks man, be a good sweater-and-slacks man with attractive sweater and neat slacks. If you're a suit woman, a dress woman, or a daring none of the above, make sure that, if whatever style you're exemplifying had rules, you'd be in conformity with them.

If you're a T-shirt person, at least be a clean T-shirt person. If that's too much for you—if your personal commitment calls for a dirty T-shirt—make it the most interesting dirty T-shirt available.

No dress style calls for sloppy shoes with rundown heels, tom or tacky clothing, or things buttoned the wrong way, things sticking out of the wrong things, or things tucked into the wrong things.

You do not have to “make a grand impression” with your dress. In fact, doing so might detract from your overall effectiveness. How many people do you know who impress others with their dress who also succeed in impressing in other ways?

It is enough that your appearance not interfere with all the good things that will go on as you master the art of Making Them Talk.

Archimedes said, “Give me a place to stand, and I will lift the world.”

I say, give these principles of Making Them Talk a fair chance—meaning don't dress destructively—and you'll lift much more of your world than you ever thought was loose and liftable.

Prepare Your Brief

Thelma wasn't exactly devastated, but she weighed in definitely somewhere between distraught and frantic.

The hostess, her good friend, had called her and told her she had placed Thelma beside the most important guest at the dinner, a nuclear physicist whose name, if not a household word, did appear in the columns of *The New York Times* whenever the Soviets imprisoned a colleague or some younger professor tried to revise Newton.

Thelma was a wreck. She came to me wailing that she "didn't know a thing about physics."

I calmed her down and asked her if she ever froze whenever the waiter brought her a salad because she didn't know a thing about brussels sprouts?

Thelma indeed didn't know a thing about physics. The physicist, however, didn't know much about laymen scared to death about being expected to make conversation with a physicist. I advised her to swallow her reticence and look at the evening as a sort of summit meeting between the two.

"Why do you suppose, Professor, that your field intimidates people even more than, say surgery, or flying jets?"

"Do most people you meet outside your field own up to that awe, or do they try to mask it?"

"What kind of conversation makes you most comfortable when you're placed with someone who has no idea of what a physicist does day after day?"

"Was there one outstanding experience in your childhood that made you want to become a physicist?"

"What would you want to be if you weren't a physicist?"

“How would you explain Einstein’s theory to a typical fifth-grade class?”

“I once asked a magician if he ever saw a trick *he* couldn’t figure out, and he told me he never did understand how Blackstone got the elephant on stage. Is there any formulation in physics today that *you* don’t understand?”

“Are we ahead of the Soviets in physics?”

“Are there many opportunities for women in physics today? Are women any less logical than men when they’re trying to unlock the secrets of the universe?”

“What have you changed your mind about most since you first picked up a physics book?”

“What’s the biggest unsolved problem in physics?”

“Are there any new weapons physicists talk about that we haven’t read about yet?”

“If you had an unlimited budget, what breakthrough could you achieve?”

“Would you want your daughter to marry a physicist?”

I urged Thelma not to write any of those questions down; just to read them over and slip those she felt comfortable with into the conversation casually and earnestly. I told her *to try to* enjoy herself and not come across like an aspiring talk show hostess being auditioned before a producer who’s already frowning.

I instructed her as Napoleon’s Talleyrand instructed his younger diplomats: “Above all, not too much zeal!”

Thelma told me later it went supremely well. The physicist

broke down and confessed he’d dreaded coming that night into what he thought would be another den of fawning laymen fumbling for ways to get a conversation going. He thought *he* would have to “carry the water.”

Toscanini knew all about carrying the water. A wealthy matron once called the famous musician and asked what his fee would be to play at her garden party.

“My fee,” Toscanini replied, “is ten thousand dollars.” “That’s outrageous,” said the woman, and hung up.

The next day she called back, a slight dent in her ego, and said, “All right, I’ll pay you your ten thousand dollars, but you are not allowed to mingle with the guests.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that yesterday, madam?” Toscanini replied. “In that case, my fee is only five thousand dollars!”

The physicist knew how to unlock the forces of nature. Thelma knew how to unlock the forces of human nature.

“I’m going to meet a lot of people in the next twenty-four hours. How can I turn every single one of those contacts to my advantage?”

It takes some people a lifetime to admit that’s a legitimate question. Many never make it.

The “soft” side, I fear, has the head start. We’re trained from childhood to look down on pushy people, selfish people, opportunists, social climbers, those who “use” others, and those who are interested in others “only for how much they can get.”

Those despicable types aren’t the only ones who feel it. They aren’t the only ones who do it. They’re just the only ones who show it!

Imagine, as you enter that room, everybody freezing, all conversation coming to a halt, and everybody going into deep meditation to determine precisely what he or she could do to make *you* happy. Then snap back to the real world, get in there, and see how much of that potential you can harvest.

Politicians know what it means to “work the room.” No elected official ever worked a room better than the late Senator Jacob Javits of New York. He

was awesome.

Javits understood the unwritten attribute of leadership that warns leaders to Avoid the Ostensible. For example, the worst thing a candidate can do at a cocktail party is have a cocktail. At coffee breaks the leader neither breaks nor drinks coffee. And political dinners are not for eating; not for the candidate, anyhow. They're for Working the Room.

Jake Javits could keep his body from the waist up cocked at a forty-five-degree angle for an hour at a time without ever straightening up as he grasshoppered from table to table, person to person, greeting, chatting, chuckling, shaking hands, and maintaining a practiced stance of exuding-affability-while-never-faking-acquaintanceship (if he really had no idea who the person was).

We plain ole people, citizens, and invited partygoers don't "work" rooms. Instead we beeline toward those we know and like, those who are or might become important to us, and those who arouse our flirt glands. And we make perfunctory and sometimes grudging conversation with all others as we're introduced. To us, however, most of those in that room remain "other people at the party."

Who are those "other people at the party"? Among them are most likely, if not undoubtedly, your potential employers—or best friends of potential employers, potential custom-ers-clients-buyers of whatever it is you sell, potential supporters for whatever campaign or endeavor you might someday choose to mount, potential desirable hosts, potential desirable guests, potential good buddies who, if met, could make that party live forever as "the day I met so-and-so."

That room full of people you instinctively regard as "background" people, no more important to you than background music or wallpaper, may contain precisely the clout and qualifications you need. Or could use. Or may need. Or may be able to use. They may be just the ones to marry you, enrich you, lift and color your life, or at least speak well of you whenever your name comes up.

They will not bestir themselves to hoist your fortune in any of these capacities, however, if you let them remain as “background” people. Roast pheasants do not fly into mouths merely because they’re hanging there open.

So why don’t you move out smartly and see how many allies you can enlist—not just by talking to them, but by talking to them in a manner calculated to Make Them Talk.

If ever candy begged to be taken from a baby, it’s that sweet little motto of the Boy Scouts: Be Prepared.

It doesn’t move you, does it? Too bad. We’ve heard it so early and so often, it’s lost its fizz. It was the first wisdom to limp to the elephant graveyards of our minds and become Cliche 001.

If, as a celebrated wit once observed, youth is too important to waste on children, then Be Prepared is too important to waste on Boy Scouts. Dredge it up. Resurrect it. Give it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and let it lift your life.

Most of us have a censor-sensor in the brain that annihilates incoming facts that don’t interest us. The hostess tells you who’s going to be at the party, sometimes verbally *and* in writing, but that crisp, efficient, all-business mind of yours weeds that out. All you want to know is where and when and some general idea of what pleasures to expect. The people? You’ll take care of them when you get there.

Pretend it’s a board game. You *may* score the big lifelifting connection just by walking aimlessly down the street. The knights of the Round Table encountered damsels in distress aplenty, and young Horatio Alger kept impressing millionaires he happened to meet randomly. But don’t you obviously stand a better chance of scoring those connections at a meeting, a luncheon, or with a group? And don’t those chances soar at parties and larger gatherings?

I hope I never have to prove it, but I am “prepared.” In my Boy Scout handbook, it clearly stated we were to take deliberate note, when we

entered a theater or some other enclosed public place, of the best exit to escape through if there were a fire. If there were a public panic, the handbook assured us, you would panic, too—but you would panic in the *right direction*)

So, Rule One of Preparing Your Brief is: Dismantle your blocking system.

Give your censor-sensor the day off when the hostess, the invitation, the mailgram, the press release, or any source whatever is giving you information on Who's Going to Be There.

Listen. Try to care.

That may do the trick right there.

If written, notice carefully the names of the honored guests and their affiliations. Embed them in your mind. What does that organization or firm they head or belong to mean to you? What might it mean to you? Be broad about it. Let your mind wander.

If verbal, ask questions. Make sure you have a clear picture of who's who and who hunkers in where—as clear a picture as you can glean without getting caught on an inflamed-curiosity rap.

Now you're ready for Rule Two: Do some basic research.

Nobody expects you to demand an unabridged guest list in time for you to hire a college student to comb through *Who's Who* to see who's there and prepare abbreviated dossiers on all those you're likely to meet at the party.

Nobody expects you to call your sorority sister who now works for the FBI to enlist her help in coming up with some good tidbits on those expected to attend the ball. That doesn't mean you have to operate under a blackout. There's usually someone connected with every party—generally the host or hostess or an employee or social secretary or a friend of the host or hostess—who not only might be persuaded to tell you a little bit about some of the guests who are coming, but who quite literally can't be shut up on the subject!

If you do nothing but pay attention (for a change) to what information is *volunteered* about the guests by those with an emotional vested interest in the success of the party, you will have done Basic Research.

Anything that does not interest us tends to disinterest us deeply. Before I discovered the human fires that could be ignited by knowing certain things about the people I was meeting, I deliberately let precious information splash down the drain. I remember my annoyance and impatience with the hostess who called to invite me and gushed on and on in detail sufficient to numb the lower limbs about the incredible accomplishments and virtues of those with whom I was soon to share fellowship.

I also remember later wanting to use those numb lower limbs of mine to kick myself aft for not having paid attention and taken notes so I could have treated those people to the Flattery of Knowing, or at least spared them the Insult of Not Knowing.

What I don't remember is why it took me so many years to make the connection and start thirsting for raw material with which to weave—not witty talk that might make them laugh, but meaningful conversation pertinent to *them*. We're all prisoners of those who ask us nonannoying, intelligent questions that evidence effort and concern for our interests, our works, and us.

Richard Brookheiser, managing editor of *National Review*, begins his powerful book about the 1984 Reagan-Mondale campaign, *The Outside Story*, by recounting what an unnoticed teenager saw in 1960 on an almost empty deck of the Staten Island Ferry.

A bleary-weary Senator John F. Kennedy, surrounded by aides, stormed aboard. There was no time to rest. Those few minutes sailing across New York harbor were needed to brief the candidate about “the people on the other side,” the Brooklyn politicians whose support was so crucial to the young senator's candidacy. His aides competed with each other to impress upon Kennedy's tired faculties a snapshot and a few facts about the people waiting to greet them.

This one likes to be called Jimmy, that one owns a roller rink, this one's decided to run for city council, that one's wife just passed a civil service exam. (I've departed from Brookheiser in the details, but never mind.)

We understand the power of a British monarch conferring knighthood upon a worthy subject. We can understand the power of the Dalai Lama singling out a Tibetan priest for inclusion into the Potala. Those who've never been close to front-line politics, however, may not be able to understand, or even believe, the power of a national candidate recognizing, knowing the name of, and even knowing something about one of his supporters waiting there on the shore of Brooklyn to greet him as he makes his triumphant landfall from Staten Island.

You *would* understand it if you'd been there when Kennedy greeted the first four people with:

“Hi, there, Jimmy. I was looking forward to seeing you.”

“Al! Who's watching the rink?”

“Marv, I gotta tell you, I think it's great you're going to run for the city council.”

And . . .

“Vito, I can't tell you how relieved I am now that Mildred's passed that exam!”

Listen to some party talk. Analyze it. It may be jovial. It may be rich. A lot of it may even be worth quoting. But underneath it all is the message. It usually says, “Look, I don't care about you. You don't care about me. So what's the big deal? Let's have a drink.”

I have a friend, Bob Eliot, who's an executive of a media consulting firm whose clients include over three hundred of the Fortune 500 companies. The instant he sees me, his face takes on an expression that seems to say, “At last now, I can get the information I've been craving on how my friend Barry is getting along.”

He then asks me for a brief report on how all my various projects and enthusiasms are faring. He doesn't do it in a challenging way that gives the choice of lying or admitting failure in the case of a project that isn't doing too well. He invites me to testify about whichever of my projects I enjoy discussing; each time, precisely where I left off the time before.

Does my friend do it like John F. Kennedy was caught doing it on the Staten Island Ferry? Does he review my particulars on 3x5-inch cards when his datebook tells him we're likely to be in proximity?

Does he want something from me?

If so, he's got it!

Magicians don't admire other magicians only when they pull off absolute black magic. A well-executed trick will do. Bob executes his "trick" supremely well.

Is he an "opportunist"?

I certainly hope so. It would be a waste of good talent if he weren't. What is the opposite of opportunist, anyhow? Is it opportunity *avoider*?

* * *

Rule Three: Pick berries.

Whatever you have as preparation when you arrive at the party is your prepared lunch. Be sure to go "berry-picking" once you're there.

People will tell you things about other people present. For those not consciously out to enlarge and strengthen their network of active allies, such information might be over-the-counter sleeping potion. Not for you. Drink it in!

Does the accountant you're talking to lean closer to you and report admiringly that the tall, well-dressed man who just brushed by with a smile and a hello was a cheese distributor four years ago whose teenage son

taught him to tinker with a home computer, and between the two of them they worked out a program that increased sales and simplified deliveries and they just sold the whole package to General Foods for four and a half million dollars? Our instinct—whether inspired by jealousy, apathy, or awe—is to say, “Really?” and let it go.

You can blast a hole in the Great Wall of China with less dynamite than that! Modest dogs miss much meat. Seek that man out and come on to him with something like, “Excuse me for interrupting. Let me introduce myself. I just heard that marvelous story about you and your son. Tell me, if a gypsy had told you five years ago that you’d make a fortune in the software business, would you have paid him his two dollars?”

He’ll talk. *Believe* me, he’ll talk. And if you ever need him for a reasonable favor, he’ll listen.

Rule Four: Do homework.

You don’t have to do *much* homework. In fact, the kind of homework that would have earned you nothing better than an F in college could earn you a huge win in the real world. A simple, superficial scan job before you enter the fray will make you the best-prepared person at the party, except for those in the field, profession, industry or endeavor you just scanned. And they don’t count. If a group of Chinese are speaking Chinese and another Chinese comes over and joins the conversation in Chinese, that’s no headline. If, however, an American comes over and starts speaking Chinese, that’s big news!

If you’re from outside the industry, the field, the purview of those you’re talking to and have some general knowledge of that area nonetheless, congratulations, you’re speaking Chinese!

The party, let’s say, is convened to celebrate a professor whose work in hydroponic farming was just honored by the government of Malta. Don’t go crazy. Don’t cancel plans, order books, comb through the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* for relevant articles, and hire a consultant recently retired from the State Agricultural Commission.

Read what's handy. If an article on hydroponic farming happens to be in the newspaper you're about to throw away, that's a nice coincidence, but far from supernatural. A Persian proverb tells us, "Good fortune favors the industrious." Do you recall an article on that, or some similar topic, in one of the papers or newsmagazines you haven't thrown away yet? Go pearl-diving for it!

By the way, even though you're not a public library, a data bank, or a network newsroom, there's nothing wrong with keeping your own informal "clip" service. Clip articles that seem to provide handy payloads of information in easy-to-grasp, interesting language on subjects that might come across your windshield later on; mark the highlights with yellow felt pen, and file them alphabetically in one of those inexpensive accordion files for tax papers they sell in dime stores.

Devastatingly effective.

"Hydroponic" is merely the bull's-eye here. You get a lot of points if your dart lodges in one of the outer concentric circles, too—i.e., Israeli drip irrigation, drought, world hunger, new fertilizers, soybean futures, stock trends in agribusiness, wheat storage, the effect of radiation leaks on brussels sprouts, or techniques of farm repossession by Iowa marshals.

Any little scrap of knowledge on any of these or many other related and vaguely related subjects gives you the power to trigger some good talk with those present. With even your "scrap of knowledge," they'll perceive you as talking like "one of us"—rather than like a "civilian" smiling lamely when introduced to the hydroponics professor and saying, "That sounds interesting."

In what other university except the Real World do you get A's and Honors with nothing but *a little scrap of knowledge*?

Rule Five: The latest news—don't leave home without it.

It's bullying and annoying to have friends and associates ask you before ten in the morning if you've read a certain piece in that morning's paper.

Especially when they ask in that challenging tone of voice that leaks the fumes of “I’ve got you now!”

Being current is an important quality. “Gee, I haven’t seen a paper in days” relegates you to the same netherworld as “I’m no good until I’ve had my coffee” and “Thank God it’s Friday.” Not hanging crimes, mind you. Just crimes.

Being prepared for winning conversations demands you no more leave home without the latest news than without shave, coiffure, cash, or credit card.

Being “up” on the latest books, movies, plays, restaurants, discos, exhibitions—and the reviews of all the above— is nice. Just nice, that’s all. That kind of homework can betray a kind of insecurity, an anxiety-riddled deliberation if trafficked in conversation the least little bit awkwardly. Being up on the latest news, however, is essential.

I have twice—only twice—in my entire life gone into my day unbriefed by the latest news. One late-spring morning toward the latter part of World War Two, I overslept. I was a boy eager to make good in his very first school vacation job, and I didn’t want to get my employer, Mr. Davidson, down at the auto supply shop angry by coming in late.

On the way downtown on the bus I spotted our good friend Chester Brown walking to his car carrying a radio. I figured it was broken and he was taking it in for repair. Then I saw Mr. Shelley, the stockbroker, also carrying a radio. Were radio breakdowns epidemic?

When I got to work, Mr. Davidson didn’t scold me for not knowing General Eisenhower’s troops had invaded Normandy earlier that morning. He just assumed I was as apathetic as any other boy who was looking forward to a career assembling battery cables for the wholesale distributor.

Even at that age, I was too proud to beg Mr. Davidson to believe that that was the only morning since babyhood that I’d left home unbriefed and that I was really a “with it” kind of guy who knew and cared about things like wars and invasions. I bit my lip and swallowed my lesson.

And I didn't do anything that gross and disqualifying until July 4, 1976. My Manhattan apartment faced the Hudson River at Eighty-sixth Street, the best vantage point from which to watch the tall ships as they paraded past. It was Op-Sail day, the pinnacle celebration of the Bicentennial, and I had two huge terraces on the twentieth floor with an unobstructed view. My apartment is where Mussolini would have watched *his* navy parade if the war had worked out differently. I invited seven hundred people to a rooftop party.

This called for somewhat more food and drink allocation than usual, so I abandoned my normal day plan, which included careful attention to the headlines. I managed to hear only nine words of news before the guests arrived. They were,

“The hostages cheered when they saw the Israeli soldiers.”

As I smashed open crates of cheese and sausages that morning, I thought about that sliver of news. It was great. Obviously there had been some kind of break in the Entebbe hijacking and hostage crisis. Secret negotiations must have been going on for days between Israel, Uganda, and whoever seized and was holding the hostages. They must have agreed on a deal for their release. And part of the deal must have been for Israeli soldiers in uniform to fly to Entebbe to receive the hostages as they were released.

Good old Israel, I thought, strong and shrewd they are to insist on the right to show their flag and their force as part of the settlement. Other countries would have wimpishly let the Swiss Red Cross do it. I was proud I'd managed to infer so much of the story from so few words of news. Too many hundreds of hot dogs needed thawing for me to dwell upon it.

One of the first guests to arrive was press attache of the Israeli Consulate, Azaria Rappaport, who jubilantly asked if I'd heard the news.

“Yes, yes,” I assured him, “I certainly did. We can all be glad that's over.”

I'd give quite a nice sum to have a tape of the rest of that conversation between me and Azaria. He knew the story of the dramatic commando rescue at Entebbe. And I was under the delusion that they'd been freed

because of some quiet negotiation in some embassy somewhere. Our enthusiasm levels didn't match. We were "missing" each other. Our dialogue was like tum-of-the-century drawing room farce.

When Gabe Pressman and a Channel 4 TV crew arrived to tape news interviews with Azaria and some of the other guests, it began to dawn upon me.

By nightfall I, of course, knew and had actually begun to believe the facts of Israel's rescue at Entebbe.

I'm not yet beginning to believe that, after being caught not knowing about D-day on June 6, 1944, I could let them catch another pass behind my back.

In the same lifetime!

Even if you can't stop your forward momentum, can't sink into a newscast, and can't peruse the morning papers and the weekly news journals during commercials, there's a way to defend yourself that takes no longer than fifteen seconds.

Just watch or listen to the first fifteen seconds of any TV or radio newscast. It won't tell you about a library extension dispute in the city council, go to a commercial, cover a parade, and offer jiffy recipes—and *then* tell you about a Soviet amphibious invasion of Denmark.

The Denmark item will be first.

So if you can't take time to find out what's happened, at least take fifteen to find out what *hasn't* happened.

If they start out by talking about libraries and parades—or even congressional quarrels and indictments—you know well within fifteen seconds that the map of the world and the state of the world are pretty much the way you left them, and, thank God, there's been no war, assassination, plane crash, or crowded commuter train plunging off a trestle into a turbulent, flood-swollen river.

“Offensive” listening is preferred.

“Defensive” listening is essential.

Comic Henny Youngman taught that concept in much less time than it takes to read this chapter.

The matron, gushy and giddy, seemed confused by a reference in the conversation to World War Two.

“World . . . War . . . Two,” said Henny pointedly. “You’ve heard of World War Two. It was in all the papers.”

Assume the Burden

The first step in Making People Talk is to bring yourself to accept the awesome obligation of getting things started. In starting people talking, the expected, the ordinary, the clichéd, the automatic—that which comes naturally—is poor material.

Your host lives in a penthouse with a magnificent view of the park. She shows you to the big living room window. It's dusk. The park looks like a Christmas card that hasn't been taken down off the mantelpiece even though it's mid-April. It's too beautiful. It's your turn to say something.

Nobody expects you to be as brilliant as that legendary guest who, standing in precisely such a place watching two-way traffic at the onset of darkness and seeing the cars down below with their white headlights approaching and red taillights receding, remarked, "Ahh, diamonds going up. Rubies going down."

You can, however, with preparation, do a little better than merely, "Gee, great view." You don't have to do much better—*anything* better is much better!

How about, for example, "What's the longest anybody ever just stood here and stared?" "Forgive me for a minute. I'm trying to decide if I've ever seen a view before to match

this one." "I'll bet you get a lot of inspiration just standing here and gaping." "The ophthalmologists' association ought to pay to put this view on television, just to make people appreciate their eyesight a little more." "A magazine should interview you to try to find out what effect having a view like this has on the rest of your life." "You know, in a way you own everything down there." "Forgive me, please. I've just had an overpowering urge to go write a poem!"

"Great view" is the minimum requirement. In the military they call it a salute. Something a little more imaginative can turn that perfunctory salute

into a back-and-neck massage. It's a lot easier to forget your saluters than your masseurs.

Any of those suggested alternative remarks gives you the chance to keep on going. "How do most people react to a scene like this one?" "What's your favorite time of day to look out that window?" "Do you ever catch your friends turning away from whatever's going on and just keep on looking out the window?" "Do you ever see little dramas playing themselves out in the park—joggers, lovers, that sort of thing?"

Make it a deliberate mission to get that host to start *talking* about that view.

Isn't it old hat to him? At what point in his tenancy of that apartment will he get tired of hearing how great that view is? The answers are, respectively, no and never!

He's proud of that view. Pick something *you're* proud of— your face, your chili sauce, your stretch limo, your new slimness, your wine collection, your Scottish burr when you tell ethnic jokes. Do you ever get tired of compliments, particularly good compliments you wish you could collect signed and notarized? Do you ever get tired of being asked good provocative questions about things you're proud of? Chances are you get about as tired talking about your "attractions" as the underdog candidate gets being interviewed about his stunning upset victory on the *Today* show.

Oh, it's easy enough to get tired of ordinary people saying, "Nice view." Some people manage to bore you while they're praising you. It's hard to get bored, though, when another person who's proven his worth by handing you a nice, original compliment seems genuinely interested in knowing more.

People who wouldn't do things for the proverbial love or money frequently do them for a third, less celebrated, but equally potent persuader: attention.

We don't all have love. We don't all have money. But we all have equal reserves of attention and the ability to accord it whenever and to whomever we select. Too bad most people roll along utterly oblivious to the power this ability to confer attention can bring. They're akin to Stone Age natives in the Sepik River Valley of New Guinea, at home with rocks and stones and

grunts and groans but totally unaware of the value of the petroleum deposits splashing around a few yards beneath their feet.

Those “resources” are too valuable to waste. They’re precious fuel for the ever-hungry furnaces of conversation.

Probably the first, and definitely the worst, joke about psychiatrists deals with the young psychiatrist who asks the old one how he always manages to look so up and fresh and chipper after listening to all those unfortunate people’s problems all day. The older psychiatrist shrugs and says, “Who listens?”

That’s bad, because a joke owes us a sparkling little kernel of truth cunningly revealed. That joke is a lie.

Pretending to listen, and trying to figure out how to make this deadly dud of a couldn’t-care-less relationship between you two suddenly sizzle and shoot skyward, takes a lot more out of you than actually listening.

One of the greatest conversations I ever had was the one with Edna. Herb called me the morning of his party about an hour and a half up-country and asked, since I was driving, if I’d mind bringing Edna.

I can honestly say I hated Herb for a full half minute after that outrageous request. He sounded so casual. Would *I* call *him* just as casually and say, ‘Herb, would you mind climbing up on to one of those torture racks and letting them twist you for an hour and a half’?

That’s how the thought of driving Edna struck me.

The actual drive with Edna, however, was quite different. Edna was an artist, a subject in which I have no knowledge, no interest, and no patience. I knew that Edna, on the other hand, was hard to move off the subject of art and painting. I further knew that my attitude was wrong and ridiculous; the whole civilized world would have voted with Herb; and it was, therefore, my problem.

I thought of a way out. In the Old West, when the frontier doctor had to operate without anesthesia, they called it “biting the bullet.”

When I picked Edna up, I had an inexpensive cassette recorder in the front seat with me and a smile that was actually more than halfway meant. The bullet, when bitten, proved not all that untasty.

“Edna,” I said, “I hope you don’t mind if I use you as an information mine. I’m tired of knowing so little about art while all my better friends seem to be getting so much pleasure out of it. I want to start from the bottom, and let’s see how much you can teach me between here and Herb’s, okay?”

I flipped on the recorder and handed Edna the microphone. “Give me a short overall history of art,” I began, “from the caveman drawings through the earliest known painters clear up to the modern trends of today.”

Edna did it, with some bewilderment at first, but with brio. I then asked her to name the first ten famous painters whose names flashed across her mental windshield and “introduce” me to them. Next, I asked her about all the common art terminology, my ignorance of which is precisely what kept me from being interested in art all these years: cubism, realism, impressionism, dadaism.

I recorded Edna’s answers and exuberated with the attitude of a student who’d found a way to filch a whole course and save a thousand dollars in tuition.

By the time we’d gotten to Picasso’s blue period, Dali’s melting watch, and Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup can, I was sorry Herb’s driveway was just ahead. I felt I’d scored both a long- and a short-term gain. Long—I was neither totally uninformed nor totally uninterested in art anymore. Short—the “torture rack” became a pleasure trip.

That’s not a bad attitude to bring to your next conversation, whenever it breaks out. Maybe you won’t have a tape recorder, but maybe you also won’t be in action for a whole hour and a half! When doctors promise an injection will only hurt for a second, they mean it. The promise here is that one good burst of effort to start a good conversation will send you on a

flying motorcycle crashing through the brittle glass of boredom. It's a good feeling when you break that other kind of "sound barrier."

That's the only hard part, summoning up the moral reserves to say to yourself, "This party is going to be my entire life for the next ninety minutes. I can be bored or boring, interested or interesting. I can reach out and try to break that glassware that separates people, or I can stay here within my own glass cage and sulk.

"Whether I wind up making a contact here that will help me fulfill a life goal, or merely exchanging better than usual talk with someone else, this time *I'm going to make the effort.*"

If, in the middle of that party, you think you've got a poem in you that will transform mankind, then by all means sneak into a quiet room and write it. If you think you've got a screenplay in you that will earn you megatons of dollars and fame, ask the host for some blank paper, slip away, and start writing.

Chances are, however, that there's nothing better you can do for yourself in those particular ninety minutes than turn some of those strangers present into allies through conversation.

Who, now, do you haul off and befriend? Only conscience and clergy can counsel you as to whether you should go for the important people, the "nice" people, the sexy people, the interesting people, the ones able to do you the most favors, or those most in need of whatever it is you might offer. The same techniques of Making People Talk will work on all of them.

A famous and feared New York critic was physically dominating the middle of the floor at a publisher's cocktail party at the Four Seasons, apparently in deep conversation with an attractive woman whom I happened to know. Later, after he left, she came over to me and said, "Strangest thing. He grabbed me the instant I entered and said, 'Please, stand with me here and pretend we're having an interesting conversation. I don't happen to know anybody here, and I don't want to be seen standing alone!'"

Let's call that Condition Zero, and see if we can move upward from there. That criti , a celebrity, feared being exposed as an unloved celebrity, so he bullied his way into a phony show of "being okay," conversing in the middle of the heady swirl with a beautiful woman. If he had marched over to anybody in that room, thrust forth his hand, smiled, announced his name, and started a conversation, whomever he targeted would have been dazzled, flattered, uplifted, enriched. And he himself might have learned something, gotten or given a laugh, acquired a useful name on a business card that could get him a difficult reservation if he ever wanted to get out of Hong Kong over a holiday or buy discount linen in Eden, North Carolina. At least he might have had—or given—a good time.

Not this man.

He might have had the world's most unerring eye for flaws and virtues in the performances of actors, singers, and dancers, but he deliberately tore up his free tickets to the higher drama of the human mind.

We've got phrasematers and word *choosers*, and blessed is the talker skilled enough to know which to be at a given time. "Intercoursing" is, in this case, a chosen word. *Conversation can acquire thrill power of near-erotic magnitude!* And it may be plunged into and enjoyed by anyone in the proximity of another person at almost any time without disrobing, breaking a vow, or getting yourself all out of breath— or slapped, or shot, or arrested, or diseased.

What if the starter at some great race fired his gun—and nobody ran?

Yes, that executive could indeed make room for you in his Paris public relations department if he took a liking to you. Yes, that editor could indeed buy your story and, who knows, discuss your taking a whack at a few more. Yes, the investment banker at the party could indeed fund your scheme, the coach could advise your son, the director could audition your niece, the city councilman could put a tree outside your house, and the delightful lady or gentleman could enthrall you by agreeing to meet you for drinks after work the next day.

Those are, however, all obvious targets of opportunity, diamonds blinding even the unskilled naked eye as they lie idly atop the surface.

The interesting lesson is that every single person present at a gathering, if he were to go into a voluntary trance and meditate upon all the things he could do to make your ambitions congeal, could come up with a list of potential favors that would qualify him to wear a sign on his head that said, "I may not look like much, but believe me, pal, I'm well worth your getting to know!"

Sure, we believe in equality of opportunity, brotherhood, and the ideals of the French Revolution and the Judeo-Christian ethic. But when your eye pans outward across the crowd, when you go to work taking the measurements of those in the room, you see a few "stars," and a lot of extras, spear-carriers.

I never learned how to turn boring parties into solid gold until I discovered the power of the spear-carriers.

Believe it or not, those dull, balding, paunchy, coarse, unheard-of people own America and run the world! They're the ones who can and will get you out of jail, into the navy, through customs, seats mid-orchestra on the aisle, high up on the fifty-yard line, backstage, ringside, off jury duty until after your vacation, into the secret buffet line with the thick roast beef, over to Europe first-class while others are begging on standby, in to see the pope with only three other businessmen and an Ecuadorian monsignor, into the geisha house in Kyoto that tourists never even know about, and close enough to touch the President whenever the tall ships sail.

They're the ones who control the complaint departments, waiting lists, security and credit checks, service, delivery, and invitation lists to fights and concerts their firms bought over a hundred tickets to before they got hot.

They're the ones who keep their business cards as ready as terrorists keep grenades. And they look at *your* card the next day, and occasionally remember which one you were.

Make *them* talk, and you're a richer person at party's end, in one currency or another.

No, you won't get a personal loan from his new suburban bank if your credit record is a fright, no matter how engagingly you triggered his hilarious recollections of growing up in the Oklahoma panhandle during Prohibition. You will get only the jump, the edge, the benefit of the doubt. And that's plenty.

Wherever you swing your conversational pickax, there's gold.

And the less "likely"-looking they are, the more they appreciate someone reaching out, taking that painful initiative, breaking their crust, and Making Them Talk.

There's no art to initiating conversation. There's an art to initiating *meaningful* conversation.

The heat, the rain, the ball game, the President, the Dow, the hijacking, the big divorce, the big indictment, the big upset, the big merger, the big failure—those glibly trafficked sure things are excusable, in fact okay, as openers; but if you don't move quickly into richer talk turf, you'll have exposed yourself as a "nation" with no intellectual assets except a flagpole. Obvious topics, topics that could just as well be discussed by and with anybody who understands the language, have all the friend-making power of printed love letters.

You think that comic who happens to be sitting ringside watching another comic is quick on his feet when the comic who's performing introduces him and invites him to say a few words, whereupon he stands up, comes out of the crowd, and gets some of the biggest laughs of the evening? You're not a fool. You've just *been* fooled, by a clever practitioner who knows that nothing needs more preparation and rehearsal than ad-libs.

Should *you* do any less?

Whenever two or more people get together, the group develops a kind of "collective mind." What's on it?

The most baleful figure at the ball is the one who says, “I’ve heard so many great jokes lately, but I can’t remember a one. I’m going to start writing them down.” Let’s make him our champion negative role model as we build more and more towering collections of not just jokes, but facts, quotes, ob-

scure news items off to one side of the media mainstream, zingers and stingers from sources as varied as the inside pages of newspapers, filler blurbs in magazines, a talk show that boomed through your car radio from a station a thousand miles away, or a brilliant remark inadvertently overheard on the way to work.

Whatever day it is, that day has news, that week has news, that place has news.

Something is on that collective mind. What is it? Think now. All the obvious angles are obvious and therefore of low candlepower. Do you happen to have an original angle, is your slant a fresh, imaginative approach to whatever’s going on? If not, read the reaction stories in the newspapers and magazines. The men and women who put those publications together are your personal trained staff of writers and editors constantly on the lookout to hand you material to make you scintillate. And they charge you only pennies a day.

“Gee, wasn’t that royal wedding something!” is a remark that, like truck-stop broccoli has all the nutrients deliberately boiled out. That remark is incapable of impressing. “What did you think of the royal wedding?” is not much better.

I was interested in that comment from an ordinary Londoner on TV who, right in the middle of all the pageantry around the royal wedding, said of Britain’s plight, “Well, it looks like the Japanese are good at manufacturing electronic equipment, and we’re good at staging ceremonies!”

That’s nourishment.

Everybody goes to the party totally in control of how he or she looks. Everybody goes to the party totally in control of how he or she acts. Almost

nobody, though, ever goes to a party with any forethought about what he or she's going to say.

People have been known to stay home from parties, good ones, because "I haven't got a thing to wear."

Did anybody ever yell from a dressing room to a husband or wife pacing impatiently in the hallway, "Go ahead without me, dear. / *haven't got a thing to say*"?

Although that is a much better reason to stay home!

Party-bound, everybody figures he or she will just mosey on in, have a drink, grab a toothpick with a cube of orange cheese on the end of it, see who's there, shake a few hands, exchange a few names—and wait and see what comes up.

Try dressing like that one time. Try picking your wardrobe blindfolded. Or let a monkey do it for you.

You can do better. Get some material together. You don't need joke writers. (Although one good line that makes them laugh is worth a thousand shrewd observations on curious shifts in the Romanian Politburo!) Start with a newspaper. What's going on, not just in the world, but most especially in the worlds of those you're likely to be meeting? Talk to yourself. What are your instinctive first comments? Are they standard, flat-footed, obvious, dull?

Improve them. Don't push over your desk now and storm out of the classroom complaining that if you could improve them, you'd be down at the newspaper office writing the columns for dullards like you to read before they start putting people to sleep at parties.

Don't give up so fast.

There's a "journalism course" you can take immediately that I feel is superior to that offered at some of our so-called major universities.

This course does not take four years.

It takes *three words*.

They are, Penetrate the Ostensible.

That's so much fun that it seems more a toy than a teaching. Play with it.

Whatever the news is, decide what those putting forth the story *want* us to believe. That's the ostensible story.

Now then, like hungry raccoons, push over the garbage can and nose around to see what's good inside.

Ostensibly, one night in Pakistan in the early 1970's, Henry Kissinger got a stomachache and went to bed early. Actually, he faked the stomachache so he could slip away to the airport and take a plane to Peking for the breathtakingly historic meeting with Mao Tse-tung.

That's admittedly a pretty tightly wrapped can, and no shame accrues to whosoever saw Henry leave that party and failed to conclude, "Ostensibly he's ill, but I think he's really planning a history-making night flight."

Other ostensibles, however, are easier to penetrate. A congressman suddenly lashes out against slumlords. Did slumlords just start? Did he just learn of their activities? Are those activities so exceptionally nefarious at this particular time that, despite his four terms of silence on the matter, his conscience compels him to lash out without further delay?

Possibly. Quite possibly. On another hand, however, his anti-slumlord assault may be early cannon in a Senate race he and he alone knows he's just started waging. Or he may have just learned that the real estate interests have met (ostensibly socially) and decided to back his opponent in the primary. Or he may have been advised that those real estate moguls have come up with something damaging against him, and he wanted to hit first so their forthcoming disclosures could more convincingly be dismissed as "political backbiting" when they come flying.

Maybe this. Maybe that. Maybe yes. Maybe no. Regardless, the cause of conversation, at least, is much better served than with a bland helping of “Hey, how about what that congressman said about those slumlords!”

Ostensibly the black militant leader and the black moderate leader are ready, judging from their comments, to crosslacerate one another on sight.

Perhaps, perhaps. But couldn't it also be that they're working closely together, a well-orchestrated trapeze act designed to let the black moderate say to the white power structure, “Look, if you don't give me something to better my people's lot and make me look successful, our embattled masses will shove me aside, and then you'll have to deal with *him*, the unpredictable and uncontrollable militant extremist.”

“On the other hand,” “Looking at it another way, however,” “Turn the page and pretend for a minute that,” “Have you considered another possibility instead?” Many a conversation has been saved and stimulated and even sent soaring by on-the-other-hand-ing: someone shifting the conversational spotlight to more interesting parts of the stage. You don't need much grasp of things, either. Just Penetrate the Ostensible.

That lesson pays off, not just in conversations but all over life itself. Does your tour driver tell you the beach at Ashdod is just like the beach in Tel Aviv because it's true, or because he fears you'd want to take a walk in the Ashdod surf if you saw how nice it was and he'll make no extra money for the wait?

Had that fourth-rate screenwriter in Hollywood been closer to a third-rate screenwriter, he might have penetrated the ostensible that memorable night and not felt falsely flattered all those years. Alas, he never caught on.

At two-thirty one morning his doorbell rang. He opened the door to find, to his unbridled astonishment, a famous film producer, who said, “Look, don't cry out. I had to do it this way to get around company spies. Let me get right to the point. I've thought for a long time that you're one of the most underrated writing talents in this town, and I want you to head up the writing team for a film I'm planning for the fall.

“Top dollar. Strictest confidence. Don’t even tell your

“Congratulations! And, by the way, please forgive my unorthodox manner of approach.”

Hollywood’s seen a lot of different kinds of people, but so far they haven’t yet seen a fourth-rate writer who doesn’t agree with a producer who says he’s the most underrated talent in town.

What the poor guy never found out was that the producer was never looking for him in the first place. He was going to meet his actress mistress late that night, and he accidentally went to the wrong house. He recognized his mistake the instant the writer opened the door and quickly invented all that business about the admiration and the spies and the new film just to keep the secrecy of his affair intact. Now this producer is a philandering rogue for whom we hold no brief. But in this case he was better at manufacturing instant ostensibles than the writer was at conspiratorial penetration!

It’s fun. It’s fulfilling. Never leave an ostensible unpenetrated.

Starting things going conversationally takes work. Standing there and letting one lap over you is easy. Why should you have to work? Why should you have to assume the burden of making the conversation happen? Why should you have to arrange the fireworks display?

Fair questions.

Another fair question is why you’re there in the first place. What is your “mission” at that party? Are you there to kill ninety minutes or so, acquire some celery, some peanuts, six to eight canapes laced with cheese, anchovies, caviar, and red pepper, and two and a half glasses of white wine? Or are you there to gather some new allies—maybe four or five on a good night—in your ongoing battle for supremacy; allies who will accept your phone calls cheerfully and give you whatever help you reasonably request?

If the former, you needn’t bestir yourself. If the latter, however, your assuming the burden, taking the initiative, actually accepting responsibility for getting some good conversation crackling instantly separates you from

the rest of mankind and lets one and all know you're a good reliable social soldier.

Try to find out what field someone's in without asking directly. (Remember, the direct question, "What do you do?" robs the moment of the spin-weaving that brightens tapestries and nourishes friendships. At worst, the person may be insulted—or think you're stupid—if you don't already know.)

Drop early on what field you're in. Don't do it kerplunk, like a bowling ball at the feet that challenges him or her to tell you what field he or she is in or be exposed as a sorehead. Dance it through.

"I'm in raw cotton and, you know, those intrigues like the one between the governor and that deputy commissioner make me feel right at home."

The Italians have perfected a feel-good trick that's so effective it's amazing the rest of the world didn't steal it along with pizza. No matter who you are, no matter that they don't know you, no matter that the odds dictate they'll never see you again, Italian waiters nonetheless instinctively *promote* you. Take a seat in any restaurant in Italy and watch. The waiter will address you as *Dottore* (doctor), *Commendatore* (commandant), or some other insanity that says, "You may not possess precisely the lofty title I just awarded you, but your entire manner, bearing, demeanor, and persona bespeak a special kind of magnificence, and I dare not address you with any lesser title than the one I just invented."

That's why the shabbiest bum in the place will be at least *Capitano* (captain)!

You don't have to come flat out and say to someone you've just met, "You know, you're impressive. You strike me as a major industrialist." There are other ways to play the "Italian" game to flush out his livelihood and get some good talk going without asking directly, "What do you do?"

"Look, you obviously have to make a lot of decisions for a living. How do you feel about the Senate bill?"

“With a schedule like you must have, how do you manage to get in all your required business reading?”

“I’m always curious to learn if successful people sought their present businesses, or stumbled into them.”

“You probably have to travel a lot more than most of us.”

If, for example, the person shows genuine glimmers of higher intelligence, particularly on those issues that excite politicians, watch the temperature needle in his eyes elevate when you ask, “I’m sure this isn’t the first time you’ve been asked this, but have you ever considered seeking elective office?”

Assuming the obligation to get a conversation going is more than half the challenge. It’s fully three fourths.

The rest is developing a sense of effortlessness. The pianist’s hands, the dancer’s feet, the golfer’s swing, the ball player’s catch all achieve a higher nobility when they appear instinctive, automatic, doing-what-comes-naturally, effortless.

The man who calls his loving wife from the office to plan dinner seems a lot more effortless in that mission than the adolescent who sits four seats behind the head cheerleader in algebra class asking her for a date Saturday night. The difference is confidence, certainty of acceptance and success.

Starting and sustaining relationship-nourishing conversations need not be improvisational theater. It can be a hit you thought out well, even scripted.

Avoid any phrase, gesture, mannerism, utterance that blows its whistle, alerts the room, and reveals you as really saying, “Lookahere, folks. I’m trying to start a conversation!”

Let it all be natural, organic, effortless.

The dynamite opening and the smooth intro aren’t all that important. A sort of natural amnesty allows us all ten or twelve seconds of awkwardness

getting started. From that point forward, you've got ways to make sure the dice are loaded on your side.

At a party one Saturday night celebrating the retirement of a famous TV-radio personality, his producer rose, raised his glass, and said, "This one's to me. At last tomorrow morning, for the first time in ten years, I can read the Sunday papers for fun!"

All laughed knowingly. As many times as there are huddles in a football game, there are at least that many conferences inside the production offices of every TV and radio talk show on the air. The question is always the same: What are they interested in now?

The most meaningful scolding I ever received from a boss in broadcasting came from Jeanne Straus, who at the time was program director of WMCA and less than half my age.

"When I listen to your program," she said, "I can always tell when you're tired. That's when you talk about antiCommunist uprisings and freedom fighters in eastern Europe. "

Bull's-eye.

Boxers get tired and let their arms droop in mid-ring. When talk show hosts get tired, they tend to forget what might interest the public and curl right up into that which interests *them*. I wasn't the only one on Jeanne's list. She regaled me with complaints about my brother broadcasters and how she could tell when they were tired. One, according to Jeanne, talked only about golf when he was tired, another only about extramarital relations, and a third only about the scandalous care given the horses that pull the carriages full of tourists through New York's Central Park.

Bull's-eyes all around.

You may cringe from the awesomeness of it all, but you *are* a broadcasting station. Everything you say is your "talk show. ' ' It may keep people interested, or put their feet to sleep up to the hips within thirty-five seconds.

Your show has a “rating.” You can make it higher the very same way the pros do.

Pick up your newspaper and magazines, books, encyclopedias—all the excitement mines mentioned earlier—and go into a kind of production meeting with yourself. This time, don’t read for “fun.” Don’t skim and skip only to what interests *you*. Grasshopper around all the possibilities of what interests *them*—others, the world, your audience, your targets.

Old-style navigation called for compensation—knowing, according to the longitude of your position, how much deviation your compass suffered between true north and magnetic north. Try to develop the knack of knowing the degree of likelihood that what interests you will also interest them. That’s hard. Our instinct when people yawn at our most treasured tales is to denounce them inwardly as a tribe of dolts and go look for new, brighter, and more attentive people.

Professionals put all that disappointment and ego-rattling behind a cadmium shield and coolly continue looking for “what works. ’ ’ You win insofar as you get a good idea of the size and shape of the gulf between what interests you and what interests them.

If your “act” isn’t making it with the ones you talk to, at least develop the sense to notice it, the grace to quit, and the determination to develop a new act. If you don’t strike oil rather promptly, quit boring. Rework the act.

No man in history ever yawned, looked at his watch, or let his eye wander when the woman he craved confronted him eye to eye and confessed undying love.

She had certain advantages going in. You can build *your* advantages by gathering ‘ ‘material’ ’ and devising ways to spice up conversations through deft injections of the right *shtick* at the right time.

Remember show-and-tell, a standing feature of every school in every democracy from kindergarten through grade four, in which the children are encouraged to stand up before the class and “report”—express themselves, tell about their trip to an uncle’s farm over the weekend, a movie they saw,

a book their mother brought them from Baltimore, an argument about the President around last night's dinner table—anything that might engross the other kids, hold their interest, make them want more.

(In dictatorships there's no show-and-tell. There's no encouragement to "Stand up and express yourself," but rather to "Shut up, listen closely, and repeat after me.")

The shame of show-and-tell is, the kids who were good at it loved it and got better and became cheerleaders, editors of the school newspaper, and class presidents; and the ones who were bad at it sat there assuming that at the age of eight they had found their rightful place—the audience.

And they're still sitting there. They're sitting there feeling shy, inarticulate, lucky to be granted at least a nonspeaking role in the group. They smile as they tell you, "I'm not good at speaking."

You're allowed another shot, you know. You can recover from your show-and-tell failure of even fifty years ago by seizing upon something interesting they'll want to hear and learning how to belt it out.

Try it tomorrow. Or tonight. Or five minutes from now; or whenever your audience gathers.

Your material will have little in common with what you tried on them in the second grade. One thing will be identical, though: A good performance would have made you more popular then, and a good performance will make you more popular now.

Con conversationally, right now, what works best may be found in the subjects chosen by the talk shows and the print press. A lot of people are paid well not to make mistakes in diagnosing what grabs the public at the moment. Put those well-paid diagnosticians to work for you, at no cost. Notice what they, the pros, think we, the people, want to know, hear, discuss, debate, explore, and learn more about today.

Careful—they're far from always right. That's why producers and editors get fired so often, shows with low ratings go off the air, and publications

with poor readership get purchased or merged. Their collective guesswork remains, however, a pretty good guide. Be aware that the “responsible” newspaper is going to carry a major page one story on a shakeup in the Togo cabinet though they’re perfectly aware nobody will read it. Meanwhile, the screaming-meemies tabloid will headline a divorce lawyer caught sleeping with his secretary even if the 1.2 million Chinese troops that just crossed the Ussuri River and invaded the Soviet Union have to be bumped over to page 5.

Take notes. Keep files. The “funniest thing in the world” has happened to you thirty-five times in the past year. How many can you remember? Remembering them ten seconds after they would have lent an explosive lift to a conversation doesn’t count. How then can you retrieve the good stuff when you need it? Simply add those little notes to your daily required reading. We long ago made machines stronger than the human arm, but it’ll be a while yet before we devise a computer sharper than the human brain. The situation itself will draw the right anecdote from your mental treasury if you’ve reviewed your collection often enough.

Nothing feels less natural than that first golf swing with the teacher standing there and his eighteen “vital” things to do and not do ricocheting half remembered through your head. We’ll return to that first golf lesson soon for a lesson that has nothing to do with golf.

Forget everything for the moment, except the name of this chapter.

Go into your next audience bearing in mind only that this time you are going to try to start the conversation and keep it going.

Get in there and Assume the Burden.

You’ll be pleased and surprised at your success.

The good talker who’s also good at making others talk is a likelier candidate for success than the good talker. He’s a much better candidate than the noncontributory onlooker who’d sooner start a fight than a conversation.

The people of Sweden, by the way, know they have a problem making good conversation, and they don't mind dealing with it. The only people, they say, worse at talking than Swedes are the neighboring Finns. Both are known to drink rather well.

The legend tells us a Swede and his Finnish friend met in a little hut north of the Arctic Circle one day to engage in a friendly drinking bout.

Along about halfway through the second quart of pure *akvavit*, the Swede wobblingly hoisted his glass and said, "*Skaal!*" ("Cheers").

Whereupon the Finn slammed his glass down upon the table and said, "Dammit, did you come here to drink or talk?"

Encourage the Talker

Does Scripture really say, “And a little child shall lead them”?

I always suspected the honest translation would read, “And a little child shall teach them”!

Elizabeth was four. Her mother took her off the train in West Palm Beach to scamper around the platform during the generous twenty-minute layover and there she met another girl her age. From inside the train it looked like a comedy sketch in a silent movie. Elizabeth started talking to the other girl, who immediately put index fingers in her ears to shut out whatever Elizabeth was saying.

Elizabeth kept right on talking, with lots of earnestness and energy, until her mother had to hustle her back on the train, whereupon the other girl removed her fingers from her ears and proceeded with her life.

Afterward, I thought I’d try to make Elizabeth feel better. “I’m sony that little girl was so mean,” I said.

“That’s all right,” Elizabeth replied. “She didn’t know me.”

“Well,” I said, “that didn’t give her the right to stand there with her fingers in her ears.”

“I told you,” Elizabeth said, impatient with grown-ups

who never seem to get the point. “She didn’t *know* me!”

Clearly, Elizabeth was on *her* side, so I dropped it. Equally clearly, Elizabeth considered the moment not a negative experience in communication, just a neutral one.

Alas, we are all Elizabeth. We communicate with nearzero expectation of being heeded, or even heard. And we know this. And we don’t seem to mind.

How else can we explain all the talking that's going on in the face of so little listening?

Study the speaker the next time one pinwheels off into a “Wait-till-you-hear-what-happened-to-us-in-Acapulco” story. Good story, let's say. And he's full of it. He enjoys telling it. You can tell it's undergone four or five revisions already, and it's as amusing as a real-life travel story can reasonably be expected to get.

Now study the audience. Only rarely does he “have” them. Usually their attentiveness profile ranges from polite attention to downright rudeness—eyes wandering, yelling for the tray lady to come closer with the olives wrapped in anchovies, interruptions with better stories of what can happen to you in Acapulco, screaming greetings to newcomers to the party they haven't seen since yesterday, the launching of totally new stories by defecting listeners aimed at available splinter groups, United Nations-style walkouts prior to the punch line—no humiliation remains unvisited upon the speaker.

If a lecturer didn't hold his crowd any better than that, he'd abdicate the rest of his tour. A comic wouldn't be asked to come back for the midnight show.

And yet our veteran of all those exciting outrages in Acapulco doesn't seem to mind. After all, it's a *party*.

Deliberately deciding to pay attention to others in a group gives us a chance to get in on the ground floor of what can be a nice business—or at least a nice series of payoffs—for you.

Boy Scouts solemnly endeavor to do a good deed every day. H. L. Mencken lovers “smile at a homely girl.”

The idea here is to pay attention to bores.

Encourage whoever is talking with your attention. You'll stand out in his mind—and memory—like the Swedish Red Cross after an earthquake. You will not be the first person he or she ever bored. You can easily become the first person who took it so well, and perhaps even appeased to enjoy it.

If you've ever wondered how oxygen feels with all that power to make dying flames flare up again, you're in for your moment. You'll feel that identical power *just by making up your mind you're going to look attentive*. (And there's a lot more you can do to intensify the effect after that.) Look attentive—that's all—and you'll know you're the cause of that sudden surge of happy energy that overtakes whoever's speaking.

He's simply not accustomed to listeners like you.

We begin encouraging the speaker merely by posing convincingly as a listener. Don't slouch, fix your eyes on the bridge of the speaker's nose, react appropriately with sighs and chuckles. (Sighs are easier to fake than chuckles, but make sure you've got a convincing one before you offer it. A simple "Wow" at the right intersection of the speaker's tale is preferable to an obviously phony chuckle.)

A fact of life well known to psychologists and performers is that people are much easier to read than they think they are. You may think that stab of boredom, displeasure, disgust, anger, envy bounces harmlessly from your brain off your stomach and dissipates somewhere around your lymph nodes before it can reach and reshape your face. It doesn't.

Questions are the protein of conversation.

Isn't there anything you'd like to know about Acapulco? Let's say you already know it's in Mexico. You further know it's on the Pacific coast of Mexico.

Do you know how far down the coast it is? Do you know which airlines provide the best service to Acapulco and how long it takes to fly there from New York and Los Angeles? Do you know anything about its hotels, its restaurants, its social whirl? Do you know of its many attractions? Do you know what's going on there politically, economically, sociologically, with the condos, with the Communists? Do you know how they like Americans? Do you know what country sends the next largest group of tourists to Acapulco after the Americans?

Assuming you know all the above to the point where you could ad-lib sources, footnotes, and bibliography, is there anything additional you'd like to know about Acapulco?

Let's suppose your true answer is, "No, not now."

Fair enough. If convinced it would further your career, could you arrange to pretend to be interested in yet one more aspect of Acapulco?

Where's the "Gee whiz!" of your childhood? What if the Italians of his day had treated Marco Polo as apathetically as you and the rest of the crowd are treating the speaker? Here's someone who's just back from a major city in a foreign country. Furthermore, he's more than just willing to testify; he's eager to talk.

Invite him!

Remember now, you're interested. Let your face, body, mood, manner—everything but your words—say to the speaker, "Now that the hilarity of your opening anecdote has warmed us one and all, let's not let it end like this. You obviously have much to share from your recent adventure in Acapulco, and I for one don't want to miss a jot or tittle of it."

Would he recommend Acapulco? Would he go again? Would he choose a different time of year? Would he stay at the same hotel? What did he most want to do that he didn't have time for? Would Acapulco be a sensible destination for a single person?

Are you faking all that interest? I say, even if you think you're faking, the answer is no. The world may think it's faking and call it faking, but *striving to cultivate the blessing of heightened attentiveness* is not faking.

You're summoning forth an interest in matters your natural, unstimulated galaxy of senses might otherwise lazily overlook.

And if you can "fake" the interest, you can "fake" the questions, too.

Never start a question if you don't know how it's going to end. That may seem like frivolous advice, until you think of the many interviewers you've seen and heard in the middle of that unfortunate and unnecessary fix. It's like finding yourself in the middle of a traffic jam of squids. "When you see the mix of people in Acapulco, at least in the parts where the tourists go—I mean, don't go—aren't you . . . don't you ... in other words, considering everything that's going on there, don't you ever get the feeling that . . . ?"

The broadcaster who flails like that is confessing that the only reason for the question is because the next commercial isn't quite due yet. In conversation, you're confessing, "In my heart I really have no further questions, but I nonetheless feel I should try to carry on a conversation with you."

Ask let's-look-at-you-type questions and not hey-look-at-me-type questions.

"Do you think . . . ?" "How did you like . . . ?" "Would you advise . . . ?" "Would you recommend . . . ?" are good conversation stimulants. He is, after all, the world's foremost authority on what he thinks, likes, advises, and recommends.

Hey-look-at-me questions sound like, "Do you agree with *The Nation* that indigenous Marxists secretly welcome the opulence of Acapulco as a rallying lever for all the Mexicans living in poverty?" "Having seen them close up, do you believe the anthropological land-bridge theory that the Indians of western Mexico came across the Bering Strait from Asia?" "Could you notice the tremendous infiltration of Japanese money in Acapulco despite their efforts to disguise it?" "Would you place the Spanish spoken in Acapulco closer to Iberian Castillian or New York Puerto Rican?"

Your not sufficiently hidden agenda in asking those questions is not to elicit any of his thoughts, experiences, or richness, but to call attention instead to your own brilliance in matters of hemispheric revolution, anthropology, international finance, and comparative linguistics.

Normal compassion would propel most people to come to the aid of someone trapped naked in a freight elevator. You'd offer your assistance

based upon his needs: First, let him know you know he's in there and you've got the building superintendent on the case, toss him a sheet or a towel or something to cover himself with, then pull him out, get him something to drink, and so on.

Normal compassion doesn't stretch far enough, though, to rescue somebody trapped in the middle of telling a story nobody's listening to, a story everybody's walking away from—a story, in fact, nobody cares enough about to know whether the teller's even finished telling!

Being a good listener is usually a passive deed. You need only be attentive. Sometimes, though, being a good listener forces you to become an activist, even a militant.

When you sense the speaker is losing his audience, when they start fidgeting and talking among themselves, lean in as though you're disturbed by the commotion and want to hear what the speaker is saying. If a friend comes over while the speaker is plodding toward his punch line and starts talking with you as though the speaker is invisible and inaudible, announce with at least some twinkle of enthusiasm, "Harold's telling us about the new Soviet, Bulgarian, and East German tourists in Acapulco."

Be sensitive to moments when a speaker is in midpoint and a legitimate interruption occurs—a riptide of new arrivals, a ringing phone, the return of the tray lady with breaded zucchini slivers, the call to dinner, nearby lightning and thunder. Speakers, particularly dull ones, are dumbfounded by the ability of so many listeners to be interrupted in the middle of a story as fascinating as the one he was telling and, after the interruption, numb themselves to the suspense of it all and move into entirely new topics, without even acknowledging their gnawing need to hear how it all ends!

Some speakers rescue themselves from those moments. The instant calm is restored, they'll say, "As I was telling you ..." Others are too proud, too decent to do that. The notion of a poker player needing a pair of jacks or better to open is not just some hasty gimmick grafted into the rules of a card game. It's a reflection of human nature at its most thoughtful. Some speakers simply won't bully their way back on to center stage if they're

interrupted in midstream. They'll wait to be asked, preferably by more than one person.

If nobody asks, they'll graciously forget the whole thing— and spend the rest of the evening feeling rotten.

If you want to harvest the highest civilian decoration a speaker has ever thought about conferring upon a stranger he just met at a party, you be the one who, after everyone's seated and the damask napkins and flowers have been duly praised, takes over as master of ceremonies and says, "Now then. Please get back to your story."

That decoration will carry oak-leaf clusters if you prove you remember exactly where he was in his story—for example, "Now I want to hear the rest about the Bolivian boxer in the hotel lounge who kept putting dirty words to the Mexican national anthem."

Consider the politics of the typical party conversation. Someone is talking, or trying to. He is thereby nominating himself for the high office of Center of Attraction for an unspecified term.

He wants your support—your appearance of attention, your genuine attention, your display of favorable reaction, your refraining from any display of unfavorable reaction (fidgeting, looking at your watch, yawning, leaving, starting a conversation with someone else while he's still talking, etc.).

A President is likely to remember and reward someone whose stubborn loyalty kept the Iowa caucus from swinging overwhelmingly to his opponent in his first run for the vice presidency twelve years earlier. Speakers, too, tend to recall those whose body language and animal magnetism supported his bid for attention when challenged. (Speakers also remember who was perfectly willing to stand there unsupportingly and watch that little moment of his turn into a shambles!)

When a yacht capsizes, the Coast Guard doesn't evaluate the character of the individual passengers floundering in the water yelling for help. They save them all.

That's just as sensible and humane a policy in the parlor. Rescue the speaker whether he deserves it or not.

Be "glue." Be part of the "center" that holds and helps the speaker out.

Why? Two reasons.

Humanity demands it. If defeated boxers are helped out of the ring, then defeated conversationalists should not be left to die there.

Then, too, apart from humanitarian considerations, that conversational strikeout you just helped rescue may be able to do a great deal *for* you.

What if he can't hold a crowd, delight with an anecdote, sting with a quip, pierce with wit, and cause everybody to rebel with impatience and beg for more if he shows signs of shutting up! He may still be able to fulfill all of *your* needs, most of your ambitions, and even a few of your fantasies by dictating one (dull) interoffice memo.

There's nothing immoral about keeping evidence of your boredom hidden from the one who bores you. Every rule of politics dictates you let that man remember you as one of his rescuers.

We never liked the kid in school who hung around the teacher's desk after the bell to ask some trumped-up follow-up question about the subject matter and maybe zing in a compliment on the teacher's knack of teaching.

None of us seems to mind, however, when, long after the subject's been forgotten, someone at the party comes over and asks a follow-up question with perhaps some kind of compliment to our spellbinding abilities woven in. Do it, and you may be sure the speaker will not go storming over to the host and report you as a nag who won't let well enough alone!

You may have some off-the-menu asset you're not fully aware of that could encourage the speaker. Prominent media consultant Jack Hilton has the ability to hear the same joke a hundred times, appear to be absolutely imprisoned with interest during each retelling, and then erupt into the most genuine-sounding laughter at the punch line—every time.

That's encouraging!

Some people have a laugh that's so infectious they never have to venture any narratives of their own to win at parties. All they have to do is release a peal or two of that laughter at whatever or whoever entertains them. They're encouraging. And beloved.

Some people may, as speakers, be unable to hold a crowd through an unembellished rendition of the correct time, but as listeners they dominate the room. Whoever they deem worth listening to automatically gets the crowd's attention.

Exceptionally beautiful women have power to encourage male speakers just by not falling asleep or walking away while they're talking. (Exceptionally smart men already know that such women do not sit comparing the oratory skills of various men before deciding which one to fall in love with.)

Anyone who has obviously more prominence than the rest of the group also has tremendous power to encourage just by appearing attentive. Whoever "has the ear" of the visiting celebrity likes to imagine that celebrity as silently saying, "I may be high and mighty, but if it weren't for people like you giving me information like this, I'd be nowhere."

Everybody, some more acutely than others, feels the dreary inevitability of the opening moments of acquaintanceship.

"What is your name?"

"Where are you from?"

"What do you do?"

"How long have you been in town?"

Just as modern medical technology can get an accurate evaluation of your blood with one drop under a microscope, if we hitched you up to the right kind of machine we could get an accurate reading of your overall

sophistication level by measuring your emotional pulsations just from looking at those questions in print. The more you chafe, the higher you rate!

Worthwhile people are not all that “encouraged” when subjected to that lackluster litany, no matter how eagerly and intently you seem to fixate upon their answers. Go for the early knockout.

I knew nobody there. It was a breakfast meeting and I was to give a speech later on. I was hastily introduced to him, plunked down beside him, and there we were—both nice people, both desirous of doing our part to nurture our ad-hoc relationship for the eighteen to twenty-six minutes of its expected existence, but neither of us knowing what to say, where to start.

Nonsophisticates have no problem at moments like that. They leap for the “What do you do’s?” and “Where are you from’s?” like seals after flying fish. Sophisticates pay for their higher altitude with some initial discomfort. They like to leave those details for later, for after it’s clearly established that this acquaintanceship is, indeed, sanctioned and valid and should proceed.

I lucked out. Before one single exploratory probe into his activities or experiences looking for real material to spin real conversation around, he compared the weather at that moment with the weather last week in Peking!

“You were in *Peking!*” I asked.

Freeze the action on that frame; we’ll return to it.

Babe Ruth at bat delighted his fans by indicating with his hands not merely that he was going to send the next pitch over the outfield fence, but which *segment* of the outfield fence he intended to send the next pitch over. I could have told you the instant this man said “Peking” that I was going to leave that meeting with the business card of a man who would “do” for me at least as much as he’d do for his favorite brother-in-law.

First of all, when I asked him if he’d been in Peking, my “Peking” was exaggerated, punched up perhaps 25 or 30 percent more than the average partygoer’s “Peking” would have been. I didn’t exaggerate it far enough to make him wonder, “Has this guy been in a hollow log for twenty-five

years? Why is he so wiped out that I've been to Peking?" I carried it just far enough to let him know, "Hey, at last I've met someone who stands in proper awe of my recent journey; someone who knows Peking is not the same as Tokyo, Singapore, Djakarta, Manila, Bangkok, or even Taipei."

Let's get it right. There's much to achieve in the world beyond going around it. The achievement of mere travel is not to be confused with winning a Nobel Prize, quarterbacking a team in the NFL, exposing a corrupt official and landing him behind bars, or staging a leveraged buyout and putting a mil-

lion dollars in tax-free municipals before the age of twenty-five.

It is, however, an achievement. Travel, particularly big travel, is worth more reaction than we tend to accord it. Going to Europe is a big deal. Going to the Far East is a bigger deal. Going to a political science-celebrity place, like China or the Soviet Union, is a very big deal indeed.

So give a little! Don't let his Peking-drop go down as though he'd just come back from London, or the Caribbean, or the corner grocery.

Showing the proper respect for his itinerary through my inflection of the word "Peking" was the ball over the predesignated segment of the outfield fence. We intertwined like two long-lost lizards, not just over Chinese weather but over Chinese treatment of Americans, Chinese treatment of Chinese, Chinese motives for doing business with the West, Chinese ways of doing business with the West, factories in China, accommodations in China, politics in China, and how to handle Chinese menus when there's no column A or column B.

I never came near the bottom of my legitimate pool of good questions. He never quit enjoying being asked. And I actually found myself enjoying the answers. Not everybody has had the experience of walking off a playing field triumphant. Conversation gives everybody that chance. The feeling after we'd spoken was identical to that of winning a high school wrestling match. I'd learned more about China. He'd found somebody who cared about *his* China experience. And we'd both teamed up and defeated the

usual “Where are you from” bummers that pass for conversation like spray deodorant passes for hygiene.

He and I broke bread together.

He and I broke silence together.

He and I each has a new friend.

* * *

Was it Napoleon who said, “My right flank is collapsing. My left flank is collapsing. I shall attack”? This technique must actually be tried to be savored. The mere description of it comes across as nothing but a pep talk.

There are moments when, if the genie popped out of a white wine bottle and offered you any wish, you’d wish for nothing more than a trapdoor right under your feet that would swallow you feet first and whisk you briskly out of that social situation.

Make a note. This will guarantee relief the next time you’re in one of those “trapdoor” situations where there is an absence of welcome conversation and an abundance of annoying conversation. You have nothing to ask those people. You have nothing to answer those people. You’re getting along like a slow waiter and a poor tipper.

That’s precisely the moment to strike.

Take aim at somebody and *interview* him!

Make a conscious, weight lifter’s effort to overcome that heavy feeling that this isn’t where you’d like to be and these aren’t the people you’d like to be talking to. Imagine an infusion of “Gee whiz” energizing you.

“Hey,” you should say to yourself, “what a setup. Here I am sharing fellowship with five other people, all of whom know more about something than I do. How good that they don’t seem too eager to draw knowledge from me—that gives me more time and license to draw knowledge from them!”

The first candidate for your coherent curiosity is, let's say, a private security guard at the warehouses behind the train station.

What are your initial spontaneous and automatic thoughts? You wouldn't want to be one. You wouldn't want anyone dear to you to marry one. You wouldn't know what to say if you ever found yourself in a fix where you had to make conversation with one.

You can do better. Pretend you're a talk show host and the guest is ' 'a member of a profession that has been whisked from the fringes of society and dumped in center stage by the new riptide of American dishonesty—the private security guard.' Imagine yourself saying something like that as you "introduce" him, after the opening commercials, and then start asking questions.

Don't believe yourself if you think you have no questions. Let the "Gee whiz" of your childhood come roaring back to break the calcification of your adult boredom. You know good and well you have lots of questions to ask a private security guard at the warehouses behind the railroad station.

"Do you carry a gun?" "Have you ever had to use it?" "What training do you have?" "Is it an insult to call you a guard?" "Do you ever have false alarms caused by animals or hoboes?" "How do you fight the boredom?" "Do the police consider you a teammate or a rival?" "What's in those warehouses, anyhow?" "Remember those war movies about sentries? The way to fool them was to throw a rock over their heads and go behind their backs when they ran over to investigate the noise on the other side. Are you conscious of ruses like that?" "Soldiers can theoretically be shot for sleeping on guard duty. What's the worst your union will permit management to do to you if they should catch you dozing?" "Is the private security field a growth industry?" "Are new outfits gearing up as fast as demand?" "Are the thieves free-lancers or part of the mob?" "Are you aware you're probably the only one in this whole room who can *prove* you're of good character, after the checkout they must have done on you before they hired you!"

Interviewing the "sentry" obviously makes him feel good because (a) he's never met anyone like you before who showed "genuine" concern about

what he always considered his nearmenial means of livelihood, and (b) the “interview” relationship is per se flattering. It says to the one being interviewed, “You have information. I want it. All your cooperation will be gratefully appreciated.”

Encouraging the speaker also encourages *you*.

There’s a good feeling around and about when anything difficult seems to be going well. A conversation with a stranger at a party is no different. You feel a sense of control. You are “water in the lake”: When the lake is dry, the eye recoils from the sight of mud, stumps, gnarled vines, broken bottles, and rusty Illinois license plates. Add water, and all that ugliness is obscured. Instead you’ve got a “waterfront view” prized by all.

What comic book-reading kid didn’t envy Superman his ability to defeat criminals on his way to breakfast with one tiny display of his power? You get that feeling about yourself when you walk into what the host has warned you is a “tough crowd” and, instead of picking fights, pick conversations that move so well that other people begin to chime in with questions and comments of their own allowing you, Superman-fashion, to turn things over to the “panel” while you slip away to another group of floundering noncommunicators who need your help!

The encouragement of a stranger to talk is the sculpture of a new friend. You can finish that sculpture and polish it before parting company by use of the Command Performance and the Eternal Caption techniques.

Command Performances need not be confined to star sopranos invited to perform before the Queen. You can invite anybody you’ve met at the party to repeat anything he’s told you any time another friend or third party appears.

No barroom brawl has ever been started by someone saying, “Would you mind telling my friend here about the time

you almost shot your boss your first night on the job down at the warehouse? That was hilarious!”

The Eternal Caption “officially” elevates whoever you want elevated. You may not have power to confer Congressional Medals of Honor, Nobel Prizes, Pulitzers, or even Ph.D.’s. You do, however—by virtue of the authority vested in you as a member of the human race and a guest at the party—have the power to make someone feel part of a Mount Rushmore pantheon right up there with Greta Garbo, Mae West, Will Rogers, and Humphrey Bogart. They live forever over with the Eternal Captions of, respectively, “I *want* to be alone,” “Come up and see me sometime,” “All I know is what I read in the papers,” and “All right, Louis. Drop the gun.”

At party’s end, as you say good-bye, spell out the private security guard’s Eternal Caption for him. Let him know you enjoyed meeting and talking with him and will never forget what he told you—namely, “The biggest compliment in my business is when the thieves see you and decide to go hit some other warehouse!”

Patients have been known to terminate years of psychotherapy after one validating lift from a stranger at a party who Assumed the Burden of making conversation and Encouraged the Speaker. Stakes need not be that earnest. All you want is a business card and a friendly hello if you ever call seeking a favor or cooperation in some common endeavor.

The highest marks for Encouraging the Speaker go to the clever hostage slated for execution who, showing no signs of fear, “interviewed” his captors and got them so involved in telling him all about their lives, their angers, their life-styles, and their aspirations that, though he saved his life, he prolonged his imprisonment because they liked him so much they hated to let him go!

Low marks can still be observed on the psyche of my

beloved Aunt Margie who, when she moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, decided to make the effort of meeting the back-fence neighbor.

It looked easy. Margie and Alvin were young, attractive, well traveled, in an interesting business, and, of course, friendly and desirous of neighborly association.

One morning shortly after they moved in, Margie saw the woman working in her backyard and decided to make the move.

She grabbed a hoe and a trowel and went into her own backyard, taking up a position close enough to the fence to talk to the neighbor.

The talk went well from the “Will it rain?” phase through the “What is your name?” phase clear up to the “How do you like it here?” phase.

Margie, assuming nothing more than the permission implied by the woman’s friendliness so far, then said, “You know, it’d be fun to have you and your husband over for dinner some evening.”

“Oh, no,” said the neighbor, quite pleasantly but emphatically. “My husband doesn’t like to meet new people.”

I Need Your Advice

Thieves have been known to return lost wallets bulging with bills.

Sure, they want money. And they don't care how they get it. But merely keeping a found wallet is too easy!

Asking someone's advice as a means of winning him and getting him talking will, likewise, hurt some consciences for the same reason. It's too easy.

"The heart is a lock," goes the proverb. "You have to find the right key." Asking for advice is a skeleton key. The jackpot overkill can be embarrassing.

Gunilla Knutson's face and figure were admired by over a hundred million TV watchers who never tired of watching her beg us to "Take it off. Take it *all* off" in a Noxema commercial. Although at the time Ms. Knutson was officially the most desirable woman in America, she nonetheless interrupted her Saturday afternoon to keep an appointment with a young man in the Rainbow Room of New York's Rockefeller Center. She didn't know this man well. She wasn't drawn to him physically or emotionally. She wasn't being paid the fee that top models command, and there was no promise or hope that meeting him could in any way further her career.

How did he do it? He didn't ask her for a date. He'd merely asked for her advice on how to approach, meet, hold the interest of, and "handle" exceptionally beautiful women.

When Tom Watson was head of IBM, the most powerful people in the business world were fighting for the privilege of having lunch with him. One day he disappointed crowds of important and importuning clients, colleagues, journalists, and stockholders and instructed his secretary to accept lunch with a mail room boy from another company who'd written him a sensitive letter telling how much he'd like to get out of the mail room

and asking Mr. Watson if he'd mind having lunch with him to hear some of his business ideas and to give him his advice.

By the way, Watson accepted, despite the fact that in a postscript, the mail room boy had clearly stated that he didn't even have enough money to invite Watson to a restaurant! He was, however, a whiz at making sandwiches, he wrote, and if Mr. Watson would merely tell his secretary what kind of sandwiches he was in the mood for along around ten o'clock that morning, he would prepare them, meet Mr. Watson outside IBM's offices at noon, and lead the way to a quiet park bench he was fond of where the two of them could enjoy their sandwiches and talk.

The request for advice is seductive bait indeed.

And if America's sex symbol supreme and most powerful businessman could be induced to contribute their time and knowledge by a simple plea for advice, you can see how likely that bait is to succeed for you when all you want is for that inarticulate recalcitrant at the party to smile, relax, let all those porcupine quills bristling out of him go limp and recede into their holsters—and start talking!

Asking for "advice" is a fascinating tactic; some say a secret weapon. Young politicians probably learn the power of advice even before young businesspeople. The young candi-

date running for public office for the first time obviously wants the endorsement and support of the established political celebrity, who's probably a good deal older.

If the beginner calls and tells the older politician merely that he'd like to come see him, that's annoyingly coy. If he says he'd like to come get his endorsement and support, that's insensitive and infuriating. "May I take a few minutes of your time, please? *I need your advice*"—that gets him in with genuine smiles. Then, of course, the young candidate starts with the big shot's necktie and tries to work up to his neck. He tries to get the established politician's endorsement and support. If that biggie has no conflicting commitment and figures to support the "kid" anyhow, he now

does so with extra energy because the young man has dutifully played the game.

Advice can be a big defensive weapon in politics, too. When the biggie, in answer to appeals to meet, is heard saying, “Well, I’ll be happy to give you advice,” that means, “Look, kid, I know I was close to your grandfather, close to your father, and once upon a time close to you. Now, however, by virtue of some mysterious deals you may have read about in the papers, I’m close to your opponent—and if he loses, I’ll get indicted!”

Politics is not a perversion of life. Politics is such an accurate *reflection* of life, admittedly at times a chilling one, that some people can’t proceed comfortably unless they can find ways to pretend politics is a perversion.

Take the case of a brand-new candidate for Congress, let’s say, plotting a way to approach his state’s four-term incumbent senator, a member of the same party. Why should *he* play games and tiptoe gingerly through rituals of asking for “advice”? Don’t the congressional challenger and the senator belong, after all, to the same party? Aren’t they ‘ ‘running mates,” on the “same ticket”?

Wouldn’t the senator normally and automatically endorse and support the congressional candidate anyhow?

Quite true—and quite naive!

This comes closer to the reason to make others talk than anything else.

We’re good at mapping the location of commitment. You’re right—the senator is quite automatically on the congressional candidate’s side. If you’re a performer, isn’t your agent on your side, and supposedly out hustling bigger and better career breaks for you? If you’re a passenger, isn’t your travel agent on your side, ever watchful for problems and opportunities that may afflict or enhance your vacation? If you’re an investor, isn’t your broker on your side, lean and resilient in pursuit of low-risk, high-yield situations?

Aren’t your parents on your side? Isn’t your spouse on your side?

Of course. Except for espionage and rare cases of treachery, everybody you “count” on your side *is* on your side. If you have a chart or a map, you may confidently list them as being undeniably on your side.

That’s *location*. We’re good at knowing that various allies are *located* on our side.

The trouble is, we fold the maps back up and put them away too early. Location is not enough. We need *to know the intensity* of those on our side.

The president of the company, when hospitalized, had the board of directors on his side. He could prove it. He could show the letter he got from the chairman of the board that stated, “I have been authorized by the board of directors to wish you a speedy recovery—by a vote of five to four!”

Asking for advice is one individual’s most dignified form of unconditional surrender to another.

It beats the military salute, Japanese bowing, the Chinese kowtow, the handing over of a sword, the kissing of a ring, the

prostrate touching of a forehead at someone’s feet, and the defeated male wolf’s deliberate exposure of his bare neck so the winner can bite him there and finish him off (an invitation that the victorious wolf, by the way, being subhuman, always refuses!).

Asking someone for advice says, “After hearing even these few minutes of your expertise in the subject we’ve been discussing, I hereby choose to forfeit my human right of trying to catch up, one-up, impress you, or surpass you, and instead use these valuable minutes in your company as your student in the hope and conviction that such a posture may very well illuminate my darkness, solve my problem, lift my life.”

Such a request makes it hard to look at a watch, yawn, walk away, glance over his shoulder to see if anyone more interesting is available on the other side—or even want to. The requester of advice has dramatically shifted his mode of the moment from contender to supplicant. The one the request is addressed to, therefore, automatically shifts from guest-at-large, free to

mind his own business, over to “fire chief,” suddenly obliged to slide down the polished brass pole in his hastily donned jumpsuit and rush his knowledge and talents to where they’re obviously needed—in fact, more than needed; actually *called* for.

Glue binds scraps of paper. Staples bind documents. Rivets bind steel girders. One of the fixatives that binds people closer together is shared experience. You meet people on the club car traveling from New York to Philadelphia who are so nice, easy, interesting, fascinating that you’re sorry you’re not going to be together all the way to New Orleans. The rest of the passengers, the ones you didn’t talk to, are nothing but anonymous blobs of biology.

If Norman Gillis ever calls me, he can count on me bending—maybe even breaking—my schedule to get together and do whatever within reason I can do for him, because we once tried to hitchhike together from Greensboro to Wilson, North Carolina, for a high school football game, made it as far as twenty-five miles past Raleigh, got no farther, and wound up in my first and only instance of “double” hitchhiking; Norman and I stood on opposite sides of the highway waving at cars going in both directions, hoping one would stop headed for either Greensboro or Wilson. In that latter case, we would then hope to find a ride to Greensboro with somebody driving home after the game. At that point, we would both have gotten into whichever car stopped first!

Sure, it was a long time ago, but it was good for a lot of talk and a lot of laughs. I remain bound to Norman Gillis in a way I am not bound to the 340 other people on the same plane to Rome.

(Who wants to arrive in Rome with 340 new “friends”? Most of us would rather have six or eight hours of unbroken privacy. Of that ample passenger list, you have the chance on a normal flight to “break silence” with, maybe, six: the person on your right, your left, the one who’s hat you help secure in the overhead compartment, the one you warn you’re about to recline your seat, the one you think you met in Zagreb. You may go a dozen or more flights without trying to talk to a single one. If that’s your choice, if you’re not tortured with thoughts of all the advantages you’re sacrificing by choosing privacy, then by all means keep your protective seal unperforated.

Freedom of speech includes freedom not to start, or encourage, a conversation!)

The starting of a productive conversation, one that will turn biological blobs into Norman Gillises for you, resembles the starting of a cheap motorboat engine. You've seen the man in the lake, standing at the back of his boat, bracing his foot against the stemboard to get better purchase for a pull, then jerking the ignition cord as hard as he can in hopes of getting that mechanical purr that tells him he's in action. It doesn't come easily. At first he gets only a few *bup-bup-bups*, a few sputters of decreasing intensity.

Then, suddenly, he connects and gets the high hum of the going engine, whereupon he can smile and relax.

Asking for advice is one of the best ways to jerk anybody's ignition cord.

The skilled hosts and hostesses can, of course, handle social difficulties better than the unskilled. The most skilled, however, wouldn't be much better than the least skilled at handling, say, a guest who walked in naked!

There's a moment almost as torturous at parties that makes everybody *seem* naked. It's when the host or hostess "presents" you to another guest and, with eye at high twinkle and enthusiasm equal to drums and trumpets, tells you this stranger she's suggesting you get friendly with is "big in real estate."

At that moment you've got to score a knockout to break even.

Nobody's ever written a "History of Embarrassment," but that particular kind of embarrassment is relatively new to the world. Once upon a time, there were no people you didn't already know. The demographics of the tribe, the clan, the village, the *shtetl*, were known to one and all. The arrival of "the stranger," was a major moment—covered, incidentally, in the official behavior code of every major religion.

One result of the Industrial Revolution is that nobody knows who anybody is anymore. And a result of the "Me" revolution is that nobody gives a damn.

Whoever says to you, “This is Harold. He’s big in real estate” seldom realizes the fix he’s putting you in. What he’s really saying is, “You may not be athletic, or if you are, you may not be in the mood at the moment, but regardless, here’s a vine, buddy. *Swing on it!*”

Most of us can’t do much better than phony up a quick smile and say, “Uh huh. Real estate. Good. Good!”

That’s where the “Kernersville” ploy comes to the rescue.

My younger brother, Jerry, always wished he’d had my “first-son” advantage of choosing not to go into our father’s business: selling women’s suits, slacks, Bermuda shorts, etc., through all the little towns in North and South Carolina. I chose the softer communicative arts, which was fine, because Daddy had another son to carry on our family’s merchant tradition stretching back to czarist Russia.

One day I asked Jerry how in the world he managed to maintain his enthusiasm while pursuing a livelihood that our New World educations had made us think of as a kind of professional Siberia.

“It’s easy,” Jerry said. “You pull into town. You park in front of Mr. Epstein’s store. You get your sample cases out of the back. Mr. Epstein sees you and comes out of the store to greet you. When you see him, you put the sample cases down, throw back your shoulders, take a deep breath, and say, “Man, it’s great to be back in Kernersville again!”

If, when you’re introduced to Harold, the real estate man, you don’t do “Kernersville,” if you blunder on ahead and do what comes naturally, you’ll find it tough going. We can all hear it now.

“Oh, really!” “Real estate!” “Uh, what kind of real estate?” “How did you get into real estate?” “How long have you been in real estate?” “Real estate’s a pretty lucrative thing, I hear.”

The rich get richer and the poor get poorer conversationally, too. Arranged marriages frequently work. You are now trapped in an arranged conversation!

Harold's having a rough time because it's painfully obvious you didn't book this act, you don't want this conversation, you're bringing nothing to it, it's going nowhere. You, too, are having a rough time because you didn't ask for this conversation, you know you're doing badly, and you resent doing badly in a game you didn't want to get into in the first place.

Every general knows volunteers fight better than draftees.

With the outlay of one little burst of energy, however, you can turn that naked moment around and make that conversation rich. Just reenlist as a volunteer and do "Kernersville!"

Imagine you're really a handsome prince who got hexed by an evil witch many years ago and was forced to be a frog for a year, two years, a century—for as much time as it took until you happened to meet a real estate man. Imagine that every strand of your life is firmly gripped, snugly secured, and woven into a beautiful tapestry, except one: Up to now, you've never known anybody in real estate you could confide in, talk to like a friend.

The "Kernersville" line in your case goes something like, "Real estate? How great! It hasn't been twenty-four hours since I was wondering about something in real estate I'll bet you know all about!"

All you need do now is arrange to wonder retroactively about something he'll know all about.

Think. Is anything there automatically?

"Is it true they don't make them like they used to anymore?" "Are banks still red-lining poor neighborhoods?" "How are those rentals moving in the high rises?" "How long can landlords sustain those low levels of occupancy before they're sorry they started the development in the first place?" "Are the celebrities of real estate you read about in all the papers really the biggest, or just the best publicized?" "Do you think real architecture will ever come back?"

No more *bup-bup-bup* for you. That engine is humming!

You've gotten that engine humming nicely on a fuel called Elicitation of Expertise, a mighty fuel indeed, but a pallid cousin to the dynamite stuff called Advice!

Sometimes it's fun to play around with Elicitation of Expertise for a while before you go for Advice. If you're too quick to say, "Oh, you're in real estate, huh. Maybe you can help me with a problem," he may conclude you're nothing but another opportunist looking around for a free lunch. When you do move in for Advice, let it be a subtle shifting of gears of the conversation, a kind of border crossing between conversation and relationship. Women with striking good looks in the business world tell us they're turned off when a man seems too ready to do too much for them too soon after they've met. That man can't possibly be reacting to anything but her appearance. If, however, his overt eagerness and concern begin only *after* she's had a chance to demonstrate some wisdom and talent, that's different. Then that same woman is going to think, "Here's a man who remained disturbingly cool through the initial onslaught of my knockout good looks, and ran into difficulty containing his enthusiasm for me only after I recited stock-earnings ratios over the last four quarters for the top five companies in his field. In short, a man worth knowing."

Let Harold suppose, not "Here's someone hard up for free real estate advice," but rather, "Here's someone wise enough to grasp my wisdom in an admirably short period of time."

No drug on earth has such swift and visible effect as your injection of "Maybe you can help me with a little advice." Or "Would you mind being my consultant here for a few seconds?" Or, "I've been looking for somebody as knowledgeable as you to advise me." Or, "Do you mind my taking advantage of your expertise for a few minutes?"

No matter how you phrase it, Harold will hear, "I need your help." That is supremely flattering. Harold will like that.

"I'd be interested in your opinion on country real estate. Do you think it's a good buy right now?"

Former secretaries of state get fees of something like twenty thousand dollars to stand up before groups with names something like the Foreign Policy Association and tell of all the marvelous things that happened when their advice was followed, and all the diplomatic catastrophes that resulted when it was not. They love it.

Nothing like that has ever been offered to Harold. Your plea for advice was as close as he ever gets. And *he* loves it! The comparison with narcotics is not idle. Musicians in particular, during the years when drugs were perceived as more naughty than disastrous, told of “zipping and tripping” while high through musical riffs that were cumbersome and difficult in the flat-footed waking state. Without injecting, ingesting, or inhaling anything—legal or illegal—you will get that same feeling as the “talk” takes off and what you’ve grown to dread as “forced party conversation” soars with a sincere interest and energy.

The old song “Whistle a Happy Tune” told us, “You can be as brave as you make believe you are.”

I doubt that. I can guarantee, however, that you can be as *interested* as you make believe you are, even when Harold, a little breathless at the pleasure of your recognition, pinwheels deeper and deeper into eminent domain and second mortgages!

Your decision to go for Advice should never be based on a person’s status, only on his demonstrated wisdom over at least some conversation. Learning that the stranger is a lawyer and popping a question about a legal matter affecting you is not an ingenious and effective friend-making tool. It makes you the lowest insect on his windshield. (Even lower, of course, if he’s a doctor!)

It’s best to stick to Elicitation of Expertise with lawyers and doctors. Ask the lawyer how he views recent Supreme Court rulings, the jury system, the process of filling vacancies on the federal bench. Let him know how much you’d appreciate hearing him explain—in that clear, simple style of his—the reasons for the exclusionary laws they’re constantly debating on Sunday-morning TV. You may be about to include another lawyer on your “committee.” Don’t blow it all in the early moments by asking him if he

thinks you've got a good chance to collect from the parent company of the restaurant that served you a hamburger with something in it that chipped your tooth.

Ask the doctor, by all means, about the changing role of the AMA since the days of old bulldozing Dr. Morris Fishbein, how American medicine stacks up technologically against Russian and Chinese medicine, how American medical distribution compares with the "socialized" systems of Scandinavia, Holland, Germany, and England; whether telethons actually fight disease, whom he admires most in the research field at the moment, and in history; if he's ever witnessed a medical "miracle," whether nutrition may be overrated, how he feels about jogging when the temperature's over seventy and the jogger's over fifty.

If you want a lifetime of free medical advice from your new doctor "friend," don't use that first flush of acquaintanceship to ask him if he thinks your family doctor, whose bills you pay, is an idiot for making you mix Butazolidin with allopurinol when you feel the first touch of gout hit your big toe.

God may have given us the game of golf just to teach us that often what "feels" natural and harmonious is wrong, even disastrous. I could summarize my one and only golf lesson in two words: "Pervert nature!" Everything I did instinctively with that golf club was wrong—stance, grip, swing, and looking up to see what happened to the ball. That lesson never did help me learn to play golf; but it did teach me some philosophy and a little theology instead.

Let's say you're a young lawyer and you meet a judge at the party. Chances are you will make as many natural and instinctive mistakes with that opportunity as I did with that

golf stick. I can see you now, holding yourself high, keeping your facade polished, trying not to look too flustered or impressed, trying to radiate the impression that it takes more than mere judge to derail *you*. s64are quite at home, your demeanor suggests, enjoying fellowship on an equal footing with the judge. After all, are you not two soldiers of the law enjoying a moment of co-congeniality? "The judge and I. Nice team."

Certainly, you'll never be disbarred for acting equal to a judge at a party. The Constitution guarantees you that right. You probably feel your "swing" with the judge is as natural as I felt mine was with that golf club. (Could I be exaggerating the perversion of the good golf swing? Are you really supposed to keep your left elbow stiff?)

Glory will wait patiently until you try the unnatural swing with the judge; until you approach him and say something like, "Your Honor, I have a feeling approaching reverence for judges. I think that's why I went to law school. I don't want to put you to anything that resembles work at a party, but without even taking time to think, could you tell me what mistakes most new lawyers make when they're trying a case in court?"

Cloying? An obvious attempt to curry favor?

You're overruled!

It doesn't matter how obviously your attempt seeks to curry favor *so long as it curries!*

Reflect upon all the comments from others you can remember that succeeded in currying *your* favor. Was the motive of any one of the people making those comments hostile? Was any one of them out to annoy you? Was any one of those comments calculated to insult or incense you?

Of course not.

They were all designed to please you, weren't they? And they succeeded, didn't they? Why do you feel you alone will

be treated shabbily by those whose favor you seek to win by good, clean, honest, effective currying?

Put yourself in the judge's position. Here you make it to the upper reaches of your profession. True, there are reaches on top of reaches. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is in a higher "reach" than a traffic court judge in Valdosta, Georgia. But they're both judges. Neither is a "plain old attorney" anymore.

“Judge” is an electric word, like senator, congressman, general, admiral, bishop, countess, dame, and dozens of other titles. Whoever bears something electric enjoys electrifying, at least a little bit, at least once in a while. Nobody suggests they’re megalomaniacs ready to throw tantrums the instant one of us hears their title and fails to kneel and bum dried sassafras root at their feet. It just gets awfully boring having made it to the rank of judge, for instance, and having the entire world do nothing but show how cool, ready-for-it, and unimpressed they can be.

“What are the mistakes beginning trial lawyers make in the courtroom?”

Is that too much of a salute for you?

That question has everything. It’s a good question. Any judge asked that question will likely bristle with the kind of good answers and anecdotes that engross and entertain even the bystanders of the conversation. That question puts the judge right where most of us want to be: in the very spotlight we inwardly feel our work has legitimately earned. What small boy running to school does not fantasize himself on a football field racing for one game-winning touchdown after another? And who of us beyond the school-running age does not fantasize camera crews positioning mikes and cameras at our lips to capture our extraordinarily rich commentary and advice when headlines break along newsfronts we happen to know something about?

For every expert interviewed on the evening news when stories break ranging from insurrection in Brunei to fresh oil discovered in Israel, there are five other experts the producers called, ten others they should have called instead, a hundred others they were capable of calling, a thousand others with some legitimate claim to being called—and many millions of others who are sure they’d have been better than the one who was called and wound up getting the thirty-five seconds of national attention.

That judge works hard. That judge is a success. That judge is capable of much more than small talk. That judge will probably never get a call from a network soliciting his opinion on a question of interpretation of Constitutional law.

It's important that hungry people get food and thirsty people get drink. It's just as important, in a loose, poetic kind of way, that worthy people get attention. That's why we have parties. That's why we have fellowship. Your judge-proof cold front says, "Regardless of your needs or merits, I for one shall not grant your ego nourishment."

It's important that we put each *other* on each other's "evening news." Go ahead and ask them questions that will make them feel the cameras are focused, the microphones adjusted, and a meaningful audience—even if it's only you—has raised the volume and disconnected the telephone to pay total attention to the thoughts and advice of an authority in the field.

You'll find yourself asking follow-up questions, better ones than they ask on television. Maybe that's because you're more brilliant. Maybe it's because you've got more than the TV reporter's eighteen seconds to wrap the whole thing up. Never mind. You've advanced your cause at that party. You've made somebody talk. You've won. You've won by helping the judge win. And you helped him win by helping him *talk*.

The more you work at imagining, the more people's advice

you can arrange to "need." The old lady down the hall who speaks Slovenian may cause you to hide behind your packages when you see her to avoid the need to exchange greetings. She would instantly become the most important person in your life, however, if she happened to come ambling through the train station while you're being arrested by the Yugoslav police in Maribor on false suspicion of cocaine possession. Rather than suffer another elevator silence the next time you see her, why don't you light up your face and tell her you've been thinking about going to Yugoslavia, and maybe she could teach you how to say, "It's nothing but talcum powder. Please take it and test it!" in Slovenian.

You'll be richer by one lonely neighbor, one good chuckle, one sentence in Slovenian, and one covered dish of spiced *chevapchichi* the next time she cooks ethnic!

"I need your advice" is the signal to suspend all small talk until some much-needed knowledge is transfused from that person's mind into yours.

“I need your advice” is a no-lose burst. “I’d like to know what you think.” “Your thoughts would be valuable.” “May I borrow your expertise for a minute?” “Maybe you can help me out with a problem?” “Hold it! I don’t know where to begin, but you could probably guide me all the way through.”

Those are all different ways of saying, “You are a university. I am an applicant. I hope you’ll find room for me.”

Notice how different people “jump” when they learn, for instance, that the gentleman from Cincinnati is an accountant.

“My brother-in-law is an accountant.”

What can he say to that except, “Oh, really?”

“A fraternity brother of mine used to work for an accounting firm in Cleveland. Do you know him?”

What can he say to that except “No”?

“Oh, accountant, eh? You must have a good eye for figures.”

What can he say to that except, “Heh, heh. You bet”— accompanied by the direst of determinations to pull a jailbreak to another room, or another party, or someplace where he won’t have a smoking Chernobyl like you close by!

Some people would say nothing in the face of the revelation that he’s an accountant in Cincinnati except, “Cincinnati. Accountant. Good.”

That has roughly the effect on incipient relationships that icebergs have on shipping lanes.

How about, “How would you advise a layman to get the best possible briefing on small-business accounting without going to classes?”

He can say a lot to that—enough to tell you if he’s *worth* making talk!

Why don’t more people use the can opener of Advice on other people?

For the same reason more people don't swing golf clubs correctly the very first time. People resent the need to "learn" anything as simple as swinging a stick or talking—until they learn how dramatically a tip or two improves their game.

Some things we say translate into "I crave your body." Other things translate into "I admire your clothing." Seeking Advice means "I need your mind!"

Here's What's Remarkable About *You*

When I was editor of our University of North Carolina newspaper, the *Daily Tar Heel*, we proudly billed ourselves as “The Only College Daily, Except Monday, in the South, Except Texas”!

Sure, it was self-mocking and flippant, but after the ensuing chuckle was forgotten, we took deep, quiet pride in producing the only college newspaper that came out *almost* every day in our entire gigantic region of the nation, except for one sole, solitary other one over a thousand miles away.

My Cousin Henry lived in the little town of Weldon, North Carolina. By comparison, my Greensboro was huge. One day, in boyish bullying fashion, I was teasing Henry for living in a town as small as Weldon.

“It must save a lot of money,” I said, “living in a town where you can put the signs that say ‘Entering Weldon’ and ‘Leaving Weldon’ on the same post!”

Henry was ready. “Weldon may not be as large as Greensboro,” he replied, “but in 1886, Weldon was one terminal of what was then the second-longest railroad in the world.”

I didn't run to petition my parents to move to Weldon. I

didn't fall to my knees and apologize to Cousin Henry.

But I quit teasing him.

Comic Myron Cohen told many memorable stories, but the only one he needed to tell to ensure his immortality was the one about the suspicious husband who barged into the bedroom after letting his wife think he was out of town, jerked open the door of her closet, and, sure enough, found another man there, naked and cringing behind the dresses.

“What are *you* doing here?” the husband demanded.

The famous reply came in a weak voice gagging with fear.

“Everybody’s got to be *someplace*.”

Interesting point. We, who at no extra cost would just as soon have people like us and want to help us, can use that point.

Yes, there is only one President of the United States at any one time. And there’s only one Academy Award winner for Best Actor. There is one heavyweight champion, one author of the number-one best seller, one wealthiest person, one Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, one mayor of the town, one American ambassador to Poland, one owner of the horse that won the Kentucky Derby, and so on.

Nonetheless, *everybody’s got to be something’*.

And everybody likes to think that the something he is, is special, worthy, and deserving of far more recognition than it usually gets from others. Most people are sentenced to a lifetime of always having to mention what it is that makes them special themselves, and never knowing the joy of having it brought up by others.

Play a game. The game we normally play in conversation with new people is undirected small talk: the game of “Where are you from?”; the game of minimum give and no enthusiasm; the game of being testy, grouchy, flaccid, bored, and boring. We fill silence with “talk” as a sort of obligation to

our species, like spiders weave webs, beavers build dams, wolves growl, and raccoons nose into garbage cans.

Our motivation is similar to that of lightning. When lightning flashes, it has no intention of illuminating, clarifying, pointing, emphasizing, or helping the lost shepherd find his way. All that lightning wants to do is release a bolt of electricity into the earth that’s gotten too built up to hang out up there in the clouds anymore. And that’s usually all *we’re* doing when we

“converse.” Silence “draws” us into speech, much like the ground draws the electrical charge down from the clouds.

There’s no need to play the dreary game of answering unnecessary questions with short, grudging answers while trying to fake at least some interest and concealing at least some of your boredom. Talk show hosts and hostesses make a living making other people talk. Talk host training teaches a trick that makes people talk as though they were suddenly paid by the word.

Notice how talk hosts on TV and radio introduce their guests. You’ll discover a gap so glaring between the great talk hosts and the also-rans that you’ll wonder why you never noticed it before and, even more bewildering, why the also-rans never noticed it before!

The ordinary talk hosts—the ones whose names, stations, and time slots you can’t quite remember—do their introducing flat-footedly: “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight we’re proud to have the distinguished author of—” That kind of introduction betrays a host whose attitude says, “I’m an official host, certified by my employment at this station. My guest is an official guest, certified by a publisher who published his book and a public relations person who called me and suggested I interview him on my show. Out there waits an official audience, certified by the fact that if there weren’t one, this station would have gotten wise by now and replaced me.

That audience is eager to have none other than me ask questions of whomever I’ve selected as today’s guest, so all I have to do is remove the cellophane and cut the cake, and it doesn’t particularly matter how.”

The great talk hosts make no such pat assumptions as to their “command” of an audience. Their attitude goes more like: “There are sixty-five radio stations and about as many other TV channels competing with me for my audience’s attention at this instant. Plus there are lots of other things those in the audience might be doing in life right now, for pleasure and profit, that have altogether nothing to do with listening or watching talk shows.

“Therefore, *I’ve got the obligation to reach out and grab them.* I’ve got to be so interesting I obliterate all notions of their drifting away to other

attractions and pursuits. I've got to start with an earthquake and work up to a climax. And, may I never for an instant forget, *I've got to score a knockout in every single round to break even.*"

The great ones go like heat-seeking missiles to the gutwork of a guest's specialness and make him sound so interesting that the audience is held prisoner.

Tex McCrary was famous for fencing in a whole audience with one line of introduction to a guest. You never heard him introduce George Jessel, for instance, as "a great wit who emcees some of our most prestigious dinners, luncheons, and banquets." McCrary would bring Jessel on as "the Toastmaster-General of the United States."

Bill Zeckendorf was not merely "the well-known builder." Far from it. He was "the man who's carved his name in stone and steel all across the countryside." Irina Shapiro was not "the young daughter of UPI's Moscow correspondent Henry Shapiro who went to high school in the Soviet Union all during the height of the Cold War." She became the "world's only girl of two worlds." Labor mediator Theodore Kheel, when

brought to McCrary's microphones in the middle of a major labor dispute he was trying to help settle, was not "a prominent labor mediator currently involved in trying to mediate between labor and management in the---- crisis." Not at all.

He was the "catalyst on a hot tin roof."

Theo Bikel has probably "outranged" every other actor in history. He's played parts as varied as a Greek quisling, a Scottish gravedigger, a Soviet submarine commander, the captain in *The Sound of Music*, and dozens of others as dizzily disconnected one from the other as the above. Bikel, when introduced by McCrary, was not just an "actor with an extraordinary range of roles." He was the "man of a million faces and a million places." Transport union leader Mike Quill was the "man who makes New York stop and go."

You fear you're not as clever as McCrary? You could never come up with little "whiplashers" that sum up a person's specialness so deftly? You're probably right; but so what? You don't need to. All you need to do is examine the material—the background, qualifications, attributes, and capabilities of the person you're cornered with at the party and ask yourself, "If I were this person, what would I be secretly proud of and hopeful that somebody besides myself would notice?"

In high school I was on the wrestling team. For some marvelous reason, I also begged my parents to buy me foreign language courses, which I studied at home. I was not that good a wrestler. I was not that good a linguist. But dammit, I was the only wrestler anybody had ever heard of who took Norwegian grammar books on out-of-town wrestling team trips with him!

And I liked that. I liked it long before I knew it was supposed to be called a "self-image" and everybody was supposed to try to have a good one. I admired the "balance" of it all. If somebody on campus teased me for losing to my opponent from N.C. State the night before, I wanted to grab him by the collar and say, "All right, pal, but could that gorilla who beat me conjugate *'henvende seg,* ' ask the name of the pretty blonde who's smiling at him at the Oslo airport, or buy himself a jockstrap in Trondheim?"

Conversely, when some horn-rimmed detractor ridiculed me for speaking such miserable Norwegian, I wanted to grab him and say, "All right, pal, if I had no other interests but study like you obviously don't, I could probably get forty-four percent more of my verb endings correct, but *I* am a wrestler! I fight! I make my way through the world of contact sports with men! What would *you* with your oh-so impeccable Norwegian do if you were attacked by a drunk in a bar?"

I never actually grabbed anybody and told him anything of the kind. Knowing it and thinking it was sufficient armor against all the put-downs addressed to my wrestling and my Norwegian.

That brings us to the good stuff. When a compliment came in on my wrestling, it was joyously received. When a compliment on my Norwegian or some other language I was studying came in, it too was joyously

received. On those much less frequent occasions when somebody said, “You know, there are very few people who put equal stress on accomplishments of the mind and the body. That’s what’s remarkable about you—*that* dwarfed mere “joyously received!” *That* was a joy I made promises I’d one day bring to others. It was more than a double compliment. It was more than a compliment arithmetically or geometrically progressed.

It was a compliment positioned between sound mirrors that reverberated into infinity!

Look around. There are a lot of deserving people inside whom a tiny tap from you can strike a Chinese gong reverberating good feeling.

* * *

Let’s call the young man who keeps Norwegian phrase books in the locker with his wrestling tights a multidimensional person. And let’s call his less accomplished neighbor who *only* wrestles, or who *only* studies Norwegian, a unidimensional person.

Now we’re about to see what’s remarkable about all of us.

Which are *you*, uni- or multidimensional?

And which are most of the people you know, uni- or multi-?

Got it?

We, don’t you see, are *all* nice and muZ/zdimensional!

They, however—the rest of them out there—are almost without exception, wnzdimensional. *They* are all simple, nondifferentiated, single-cell, single-cylinder Johnny-one-notes!

Get off the game, then, of small talk carried to the point where it’s a declaration of mutual noninterest. And make the new game “How quickly can I ferret out your specialness and let you know I’ve spotted your multidimensionality?” instead.

The minute you start looking, whoppers come leaping right out at you.

She's a psychiatrist, let's say, and she spent a year in the Peace Corps in Malaysia before going to medical school.

Neither fact really excites you all that much. You really cannot come up with a question or angle on psychiatry that hasn't already been corkscrewed into the ground, and the Peace Corps puts your feet to sleep.

If that's your attitude, halt! You must be cured before you victimize another person. Better you should blow smoke into that woman's lungs than ice water upon her accomplishments!

Why don't more of us let ourselves get more gee-whizzy about the accomplishments of others? Why don't we smile approvingly and bathe those of achievement in the radiance of our admiration?

Answer: for the same reason balls don't roll uphill.

An accomplishment, however trivial, is a reflection upon all who haven't similarly accomplished.

Congratulations to the Japanese, not for overcoming that ungenerous weakness (they haven't), but for at least *admitting it*. One of the most oft-repeated cliches in Japan is, "The nail that sticks up shall be hammered flat."

Defense attorneys want defendants to admit as little of their guilt as possible. Sure, we want to congratulate those of our peers who achieve, but as little as possible. (Subtract those unstinting congratulators who are much younger, much older, not construable as being in competition with the one being congratulated, or who anticipate favors from the one they're unstintingly congratulating—they're on another track!)

Let's stick now to peers, those whose successes could have been our successes—a condition more and more devoutly to be desired as details of each success emerge. Why are we so afraid to haul off and salute our peers

of accomplishment? Their success was not achieved at the expense of our own.

There's a meanness darting to and fro under our oceans of self-esteem. If it were a beached whale, it would look something like this:

“You're telling me of your success in one of your endeavors. If all you say is true, then you have more right at this instant to have a good feeling about yourself than I have to have a similarly good feeling about myself. You, in other words, are ahead of me. And I lament that. And there's a Fifth Amendment coiled within the human soul that provides that I need do or say nothing to intensify the negative feeling caused by your being ahead of me. So, 'Congratulations.' Two and a half cheers. But you may be lying. (I hope you are!) Your fortune may turn before dawn. So don't expect me to cut cartwheels in your behalf, at least until more evidence is in.”

Most of us are clever enough to congratulate those we don't really feel like congratulating just enough to avoid sus-

picion of soreheadism. We cover our troubled waters with sufficient foam and lather to make our approbation seem standard and in order.

Haven't you ever “caught” somebody who should have been exuberant about your success being merely animated? And haven't you caught someone who should have been at least animated being merely supportive?

An older man, a solid success by most standards, harbored major ambitions that eluded him. In his later years he developed what you could almost call a mechanical defense to protect himself against the success of others. If you happened, for example, to have written an article in a major magazine, he'd say yes, he saw it and it was great, congratulations and all that, but “Wow, did you see that article that began on the same page as yours? Now *that* article was so well written, and it really made me realize for the very first time how ...”

Let's suppose you'd been promoted to sales manager of one of those major corporations with more than fifty different divisions. At the party to honor you, that same gentleman would home in on you to get the details

pretending keen interest to comprehend the full dimension of your success. “Now,” he’d open, “does this mean you’re responsible for all the products sold by the entire company?”

He knew good and well it didn’t, but that forced you to say, “Oh, no, no, just the Attila division.”

“Oh,” he’d say, faking regret that he’d sent you into retreat in front of all those people, “just the Attila division, huh? I see. I see.”

The “I see” portion of his comment was melodied so as to apologize, almost, for having so clumsily been the one to reveal that there really wasn’t justification for all this excitement—that all you’re the new manager of, it turns out, is one lousy division nobody ever heard of, but what the hell, everybody likes a good party, and we have all too few occasions.

I genuinely believe that if this gentleman had ever run into the President-elect the day after the election, he would have asked him, “What’s new?” And when the President-elect told him, “I’ve just been elected President,” he would say, “Oh, glad to hear it. Let’s see. Does that include Canada, too?”

When the flustered, incredulous President-elect said, “No,” the gentleman would have quickly said, “Oh, I see. You mean only—only the *lower* part? Okay, okay. That’s great. Nice. Really nice.”

This game I’m proposing makes it a lot easier to give a “glow” to others. The “scientifically” deduced compliment is a lot more fun to deliver than mere congratulations through a pasty-faced smile.

Let’s go back to that psychiatrist who’d served in the Peace Corps. Can’t you “read” her self-image?

“No bookworm, I! Not for me, merely sitting in the comfort of an American medical school studying theories devised by Sigmund Freud from the comfort of a townhouse in Vienna. All that, yes, but not without undergoing rigors that exceeded anything Freud himself ever experienced, even when the Nazis threw him out of Vienna! Oh, the leavening and the toughening

I've accrued, the kind few professionals in any field ever endure. Oh, the opportunity to gain firsthand and up-front observations of people and their problems in a part of the world where psychotherapy doesn't exist and probably wouldn't even be believed. They, the other psychiatrists, the unidimensional psychiatrists, the normal psychiatrists, may be fully valid, competent, a total credit to our profession. Nothing wrong with that; nothing wrong with them. I, however, have had Third World experiences, the very descriptions of which would have them whining, crumpling, and calling for stretcher-bearers! I am advantaged. I have experience in the field—and I mean the Southeast Asian field. I shall not exactly enter rooms full of others and yell, 'Hey, everybody, I've done time in Southeast Asia!' In fact, I will demurely balance a wine glass in my little plate without dislodging my canape and make dulcet talk, self-effacingly as though I were just another 'Uni.' Inwardly, however, I shall treasure my superiority. And, perhaps, envy the good fortune of my patients."

Don't assume that Clark Kent is the only one considerate enough to wear street clothes to conceal the fact that underneath it all, he's really Superman. I'm not saying all of us do. I'm saying the lucky ones do.

Though not heretofore quoted, President Eisenhower got vexed at young Congressman Richard Nixon as they were preparing to run together for President and Vice President for the first time. An aide told Ike about some comment or action Nixon had taken on his own without consulting Ike or the team, whereupon Ike snapped and said, "Damn him! He's plugged into my socket!"

That, of course, meant that whatever power Nixon had, it derived from Eisenhower. Fine. Eventually Nixon became a "socket" himself. Too many of us, however, feel valid only if we're plugged in. "Superman" people don't feel that way. On many an occasion when the power people at a party treated me like a black hole of invisibility, I plugged in to my own socket, drew myself up smartly, and said to myself, "The women I'd like to meet here all seem to have other agendas. The men, too, seem perfectly comfortable in conversations that don't involve me. How many of them, however, could pin a strong man's shoulders to the mat, or translate for the King of Norway at the next goat cheese festival in Chicago?"

He sells insurance, and baffles antique mirrors in his basement workshop.

She imports batik from Indonesia, and finishes near the front in every marathon for women over fifty.

He's in the advertising business, and scales glaciers in Greenland.

She's a licensed real estate dealer, and spends weekends showing ghetto kids how to clear away the rubble and plant gardens that wind up in newspaper feature stories every twelve to eighteen weeks.

Interesting, wouldn't you say?

Don't say it to them, if all it is to you is *interesting*. *They* think it's a lot more than just interesting. *They* think the unexpected specialties they've acquired render them highly unusual, if not unique, individuals and deserving of virtually unending praise from those of merely ordinary pursuits.

And they're right.

They rarely get the acclaim they feel they deserve. But that doesn't make them quit feeling they deserve it. Their "starvation" is easy to explain. Multidimensional people bother unidimensional people. Strivers bother nonstrivers. Those who move forward reflect upon all who stand still. Therefore our instinct—our "normal" golf swing—tells us to notice their achievements only glancingly and acclaim them only slightly.

Overcome that "normal" swing, and you can trigger fireworks—*their* egos exploding to color *your* skies.

"Mirror baffling is one of the hardest crafts there is. I think it's a little breathtaking to find the ability to sell insurance and baffle mirrors inhabiting the same person!"

"Eastern wisdom, wisdom from the region your batik comes from, teaches that successful living is the balancing of yin and yang forces—opposites, that is. *They* preach it; *you* live it!"

“If you’re in the advertising business, maybe you can tell me in a headline or so why those who make a good living with their wits so often go out like you do and court physical danger. I still tremble from what I read of those glaciers in old books about downed fliers in World War Two!”

“Those who buy the land and sell the land aren’t usually the ones who love the land! Did you deliberately set out to bridge that chasm?”

At the end of whatever line you choose to show recognition of a person’s multidimensionality, just add, “Tell me more. I’m interested.”

Master the utterance of that line without guile, gush, false enthusiasm, or forced sincerity, and you’ve got one of the most formidable weapons in the entire arsenal of Making People Talk.

“Tell me more. I’m interested.”

Practice it. Let someone close to you grade you on the effortlessness and genuineness of your delivery. Don’t use it in real life until your grades are tops.

“Tell me more. I’m interested.”

Remember, it takes jacks or better to open. If, upon hearing that the person you’re talking to owns dealerships in used motorcycle parts, you were to say immediately, “Tell me more. I’m interested,” he’ll suspect, quite correctly, that what you’re interested in is promoting a conversation with him doing all the work.

You become the cartoon in which the sexiest and dizziest-looking chorus girl is leaning provocatively across the cocktail table into the face of the dullest and most unidimensional-looking businessman and saying, “You know, Mr. Abernathy, I’ll bet you’ve got to be a shrewd judge of character to make a go of it in industrial abrasives.”

Let’s illustrate with the opposite of a remark that finds a skillful way to say, “Here’s what I find remarkable about you.”

Sammy Davis, Jr., back in the days of racial tokenism, found himself the only black at a Fifth Avenue penthouse party of wealthy whites. A newly arriving white man was introduced to Davis by the host and promptly won the prize for the remark intended to ingratiate that, far from merely failing, had the dramatically opposite effect.

The first line out of the white man's mouth, before they'd even finished shaking hands, was, "My daughter goes to school with Ralph Bunche's niece."

Ralph Bunche, a celebrity diplomat, was black. Sammy Davis, Jr. is black. Get it? The white man was trying to impress Sammy with the impeccability of his liberal credentials. That's roughly equivalent to standing on your chair at a dinner party, clinking your knife against your cocktail glass for attention, and announcing to the assemblage that you don't intend to steal any silverware that night.

That remark didn't say, "Here's what I find remarkable about you." It said, "Here's what's remarkable about me, which I'm afraid you won't find out unless I tell you!"

Talk hosts tend to "like" and therefore edify their guests for a simple reason. To show disdain and ask questions that aim to invalidate your guest brings you right down with him. If you succeed in convincing the listeners that the guest is unimportant, the question that then arises is, how important can *you* be if you waste so much air time with unimportant people?

Talk hosts develop the instinct to enhance whomever they're talking to. The public's instinct is less felicitous. It swings between neutrality and put-down.

"When I was in England ..." says the guest. And right away the interviewer remembers the part of the magazine article about the guest's England trip and interrupts, saying, "You were a big hit in England. The Queen's people lined you up for a command performance in less time than anyone since Maurice Chevalier."

That's not a bad instinct: "Here's what's remarkable about you." You'll find dozens of openings to zing in "Here's-

what's-remarkable" when you lift your blocking mechanisms and learn to *look and listen* for those openings.

Admittedly it's rough when the openings are deliberately laid out for you by an unbearably attention-hungry contender.

I clearly recall, at the age of eight, a friend of my parents from New York coming to dinner. I remember hoping he wasn't a good friend of my parents. I didn't like him.

He launched into some story about prominent Broadway personalities I only vaguely understood. He came to a line that I could tell by his face he liked a lot. It was, ". . . And then I called my good friend Walter Winchell."

For the benefit of those who came late to the twentieth century, Walter Winchell, even without television, had more raw power than anybody in the media today. If you took your four most powerful contemporary media personalities and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please put your rivalries to one side. We're being challenged to see if all of you together can reach and convince as many people of anything as Walter Winchell did through his newspaper column and on radio, ' ' they couldn't do it!

That line of my parents' friend hung like a levitating anvil over the dinner table. ". . . And then I called my good friend Walter Winchell." I backed away.

At the instant he said it, my father was distracted by the ringing phone, and my mother fixated upon a gravy leak from one of the side vents of the chicken. Neither seemed to hear him. Neither reacted. He cleared his throat and tried again. ". . . And, as I was saying, I then called my good friend Walter Winchell."

My parents' full attention had not yet returned to normal, and again they failed to react.

By the time he tried a third time, I was inwardly screaming to my parents, “Will one of you *please* be impressed. This man is in pain!”

When my mother finally said, “Oh, do you know Walter Winchell?” you could see the after-the-storm rainbow beaming out of his soul.

Of all the forms of violence you can commit upon deserving people, the least humane is deliberately failing to be impressed by what they’re saying.

I say, yes, it’s submissive and acquiescent to haul off and be impressed with someone who’s obviously begging for it. On the other hand, it’s even more cruel to deny him and watch him twist.

If a baby were screaming for warmth, wouldn’t you reach down and cover him up? If a man walking in off the desert said, “I sure could use a glass of water,” wouldn’t you get him one? So what’s so different about saying, “Oh, do you know Walter Winchell?” Or, “Do you really go to the White House for breakfast?” “You mean they consulted you before the four-billion-dollar merger?” “King Hussein was so impressed with your analysis that his aide asked you for a memo?” “Let me get this straight—you say during your college career you tackled four Heisman Trophy winners for a total loss of twenty-six yards?”

The old lady gave as her excuse for never voting, “It only encourages them!” Admittedly, your surrendering to these cries for attention encourages the most malignant egos on earth. Your withholding of your little applause, however, will not discourage them, so why not anesthetize them with the injection of approval they’re crying for and put them out of their misery? Everybody loves the night nurse who agrees to strengthen the dose of painkiller the doctor prescribed. And if one fragment of their boasting turns out to be true, these people may be helpful to you later on.

Of course, it’s more fun—and fruitful—to knife in and show surprise and approval for items they reveal about themselves in conversation when they’re not really trying to impress.

“You mean it was *you*? All this time I thought you were talking about your father! You don’t look old enough to have been in World War Two!”

“Did you say ten miles? Every day? No wonder you seem so fit!”

“You knew back then the market was going to boom?” “You’re the only one I know who thought he could win!” “Bulgaria! I admire you. I wish I had the guts to break out of the London-Paris-Rome routine.”

“You say you campaigned for equal rights in the Deep South in the fifties? That’s before it was fashionable. Or safe!”

“The government should pay you to go around from party to party and tell that story. If we all had discipline like you, this would be a better country!”

“You came that close to getting the part? You ought to preach on Sundays on how to keep bitterness out of your heart!”

These all say, “I approve of you,” “I applaud you,” “Here’s what’s remarkable about you.”

You are, don’t forget, a twenty-four-hour-a-day broadcasting station. Some stations won’t play classical. Some stations won’t play rock. Have a closed-door meeting with your “program director. ’ ’ Are you willing to ‘ ‘play’ ’ melodies like ‘ ‘I approve of you” and the rest? If not, don’t even try. You’ll break spiritual bones in the workout, and you won’t do a good job.

If your attitude is, sure, I’ll program whatever the audience wants, then “Approve,” “Applaud,” and “Remarkable” make a winning format.

How can we explain that marvelous reaction we get from others when we reach out, reach in, and unfurl their specialness before one and all? After all, they don’t think they should have to wait for a sentient like you. They think they deserve that kind of attention all the time.

The answer was proclaimed to the world outside the Anniston, Alabama, train station many years ago when the

northern businessman asked the redcap who’d carried his bags from the train to the taxi what the average tip was for a mission like that.

“Oh,” said the redcap, “about five dollars.”

The man peeled off a five-dollar bill and gave it to him. “Wow,” said the delighted redcap. “Thank you, sir!” “Wait a minute,” said the traveler. “If five dollars is an

average tip, why all this ‘Wow, thank you sir’?”

“Well,” said the redcap, “you’re the first one who’s come up to average around here in a long time!”

Add Your Wrinkles

“Lightning danced across the sky, and thunder applauded in the distance.”

Isn't that nice? That's from the *Reader's Digest* section they used to call “Picturesque Speech and Patter” somewhere in the 1940's. It sets a high standard of expression. It's considerably loftier than, for example, “Yucko. There's a thunderstorm going on out there.”

That line is what we call a wrinkle. It's the conversational equivalent of the big play in baseball, football, tennis, or golf that erases hours of zombified watching from our faces and makes us say, “Wow!”—or preferably something with more of a wrinkle than “Wow!”

The only problem with a line like that is, unless you're the editor of “Picturesque Speech and Patter,” it's kind of hard to apply to your everyday life. There's something calcifyingly false about standing by the host's picture window during a thunderstorm, waiting for lightning and its ensuing thunder, then ambling back into the den where the other guests are playing bridge and saying, “Lightning just danced across the sky and thunder applauded in the distance.”

But don't give up. There are literally limitless bundles of

wrinkles lying around unclaimed, begging to be picked up and incorporated into people's everyday speech for the uplift and betterment of all. If Cartier reduced diamonds to ten cents a carat, they wouldn't have any left. Conversational sparklers are free, and nobody stoops to pick them up.

For centuries man speculated upon the “backside of the moon,” that hidden portion of the lunar globe that we could see only by going to the moon and zipping around it. When we finally did see the other side, it turned out to be so much like the side we see all the time that we yawned and forgot the moon ever had a backside we couldn't see.

We're right now orbiting around to the "hidden" side of human nature, but unlike the backside of the moon, this one is rich with personal payoff.

Why do so many people, particularly the "self-improvers," spend so much effort dressing well and staying fit? Easy. We all already know the advantages of dressing well and staying fit. If a magazine were to give us a cover story revealing the heretofore unknown advantages of better dress and good physical appearance, nobody would say, "Hmm. Wow. Is that a fact?" We already know all about it. There are no "heretofore unknown" advantages of dressing well and staying fit. They're all topside on the table.

Some jewels and other mineral wealth lie right there on the surface or glisten at you in the shallow creek bed. Others you have to dig for. You've got to dig to appreciate the payoffs of coloring your speech beyond the great stone cliches and fad flippancies of the moment.

Read the books, letters, articles, debates, and dialogues of a hundred years ago. Yes, the language interests us, but not because it's merely "old-fashioned." It's richer. Just as a country can suffer soil erosion, seacoast erosion, and crop erosion, it can also suffer richness erosion in the language.

A ten-year-old child in Lincoln's day could talk more en-

gagingly than a "charismatic" candidate today. Why? Values. Before television, everybody had an "act," a packaged presentation of himself to the world; and in that act, the way a person spoke was key and king. There was an incentive to read more, learn more, broaden horizons, *and craft more and more appealing ways to say things*. Just because the electronic revolution persuaded the many to shut up and listen to the few does not mean the human ear has lost the ability to be stimulated by ingenious, colorful—or merely different—modes of expression. It's all still there, waiting to be stroked.

The ear is the forgotten pleasure zone!

We know well the blessings of good sexual arousal, gastronomical arousal, and visual arousal of all kinds. Those arousals are limited. You can't haul

off and enjoy them as much as you please with whomever you please at any and all times that please you. You can, though, please every single ear that comes within range of your speech, and harvest rewards commensurate with those who lead the field at any of those other arousals.

How do I know? My favorite part of *being* interviewed is when the reporter asks, “How did you learn to talk like you do?”

It’s fun telling, and therefore recalling, how I learned to “talk like this.” I grew up in North Carolina, where true status in boyhood resided in playing football or owning a convertible. I tried but never made the football team. I was allowed to use Daddy’s hard-top Plymouth during periods of good behavior, but that’s not the same as owning a convertible. The secret of being a happy peasant is to resign yourself early to the fact that you’re never going to be anything more, and concentrate on getting the wine ready for the next festival. I couldn’t do that. I wanted *up*. I wanted *in*. I soon learned how.

There was a quiet third way to enter the high school royalty that not many kids took advantage of. If you learned how to “talk”—if you learned how to keep conversations rolling, if

you learned how to make the girls giggle without touching them—you might be asked to double-date *with* a football player. If you were really good at it, you might be asked to double-date with a football player in a *convertible*}

Even at low levels of communicability, they recognize the importance of “keeping a conversation going.” Even those who seem to communicate exclusively in grunts and mumbles walk out on relationships because “We never had anything to talk about.”

I made it my business to bristle with interesting things to say.

I’d draw my material from everywhere. A birthday present of Robert Ripley’s gigantic, unexpurgated *Believe It or Not* from my parents gave me gems like, “The entire population of the planet Earth could fit comfortably inside a half-mile cube.”

Any of the kids who wanted to could have bought that book and engrossed the crowd the same way I did, citing Ripley's many two-headed calves, women who drove motorcycles in Austria standing on their heads, hundred-year-old men who run and lift weights, and the unfathomably wealthy potentates with titles like the Eppes of Jaipur who refused to eat off anything except plates carved out of a single ruby. None of them ever did. They just sat there and consumed all I could dish out, figuring I had some exclusive pipeline to worlds of fascination beyond their reach.

For the more intellectual football players and their dates, I threw "big" Ripley, conceptual Ripley. Stuff like, "The Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor was it Roman, nor was it an empire" and "The Irish Free State is neither Irish, nor is it free, nor is it a state."

I forget the historical explanations, and I never played them off history professors, but I always had the feeling I was enriching the party with material of a higher sort than would

have been discussed had I not been present. And I kept on getting invited back!

Once I let fly a very funny line, and while enjoying the laughter and guffaws, remembered with alarm that it was from a movie that had played in town only recently. I waited for someone to accuse me of plagiarism, but no one did. They had forgotten. That emboldened me, deliberately this time, to try a few lines from other movies and TV shows that had played even more recently. Nobody laid a glove on me. Some of the very best bons mots from current books and magazines also "worked" in the back seats of convertibles at North Carolina drive-in movies.

I discovered something I still find amazing. If a *shtick* came fresh out of the popular culture—movies, TV, books, magazines, whatever—I'd always assumed you couldn't get away with it in a crowd. (By the way, that word *shtick*, with slight variations in orthography, is German, Russian, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, *and* Yiddish. For some reason, though, Yiddish gets all the credit!)

On a scale of 1 to 100, I would have guessed the “usability” of somebody else’s genius was between, say, 1 and 5, depending on the awareness level of your “audience.” It’s actually closer to 90, and getting better all the time as the number of books, magazines, TV channels, etc., proliferate.

Am I flat out recommending you take jokes, lines, quips, squelches, sayings, proverbs, put-downs, mottoes, aphorisms, and battle cries you see and hear and use them to make people think you’re brilliant?

You bet I am—but with style, technique, judgment, flexibility, and *honesty* I

Get that frown off your face. Once upon a time old Secretary of War Henry Stimson, when approached by senior officials with the suggestion that America get into the espionage and intelligence business like everyone else, put that

same frown on his face and said, “Gentlemen don’t read other people’s mail.”

When you go to buy a suit or a dress, you want something that’s you, something that fits you more than in mere physical size. You look for something that expresses you, exemplifies you, bespeaks you in every way suits and dresses can. You enjoy showing it to friends and hearing them say, “Yes, that’s you.”

But what does that mean? You didn’t weave the fabric, cut it any certain way, dream up the accessories, or invent the color blue. Somebody else did, but the resultant come-together nonetheless harmonizes with you. If we were required to present ourselves to others strictly in terms of what we ourselves without collaboration had originated, not many people would be qualified to walk outdoors. Presenting the quintessential you to the world depends not solely on your originality, but on your *judgment*.

How many people in the world have never had an original clever thought?

And how many who haven’t have ever worried that they haven’t?

The answer to the first part is, almost everybody.

The answer to the second part is, almost nobody.

No harm done. Let those with brilliance to say the things we wish we'd thought of first continue to say them. And let the rest of us learn to harvest those fruits and scatter those seeds, preferably with credit but giving them new reach and new life in any event.

Whatever makes you say, "Gee, I wish I'd said that," is part of your "wardrobe." It's you. Write it down. Buy a little file box and file those shards of lusciousness under appropriate categories for later study and retrieval. The totem pole of amusement sophistication ranges all the way from pie in the face through naughty double entendres through limitless levels

of jokes and stories, funny lines and funny retorts, clear up to puns and wordplay in Latin.

Don't worry about where you are on that totem pole. Just select the material that has your name on it, regardless of who wrote it. See how far you can stretch your niche and still be comfortable trafficking the material. I'm not at all at home with insult comedy or dirty jokes, no matter how funny. I can, however, uproariously enjoy somebody who *is* at home with that type of material, provided he stays at least five spiritual yards short of gross.

I find my personal sense of what's funny so at odds with the taste of those I usually find myself with, that I have to keep my favorite *shticks* to myself. I know by now, for instance, not to use the one about the sweet little old lady who sat there beaming all during the professor's lecture about the ancient Persians and Medes who lived many hundreds and thousands of years ago. Afterward she bounded up to the podium, grabbed his hand in both of hers, and said, "Oh, Professor, you'll never know how much your talk meant to me. You see, my mother was a Meade!"

Notice I say "use", it, not "tell" it. "Telling" is risky. Telling a joke, story, etc., is, again, Babe Ruth at bat pointing not just to the outfield fence, but to precisely which *part* of the outfield fence he intended to send the next pitch over. "Telling" says, "Hey, everybody. I have something I think will make you laugh. Listen now, and judge me." Very few *shticks* in the best-kept

library can stand up when the “librarian” is really saying, “I think I’m funny. Let me now put myself on trial.”

The Japanese use beef, not so much as steaks but as seasoning. That’s the way to use *shtickleckh* (that, believe it or not, is the plural of *shtick*), not as “jokes” but to illustrate a point. Every speaker is told that jokes make a speech better. What not every speaker learns is to limit his jokes to relevant

jokes. If a joke illustrates or fortifies a point, it need not be as funny to be effective.

Pretend we’re all at a party and suddenly I say, “Hey, I’ve got a good joke. A schoolteacher in North Carolina went to the mountains to apply for a job. The principal asked him if he believed the earth was round.

“Personally, I believe it is,” replied the teacher, “but I can teach either way.”

Okay, not bad; not bad. But not good enough *as a joke*.

Change it a little. Suppose one of you asks me point-blank how I feel about, for instance, the opposing forces in Country X. And, instead of breaking up the party by answering as bluntly as I was asked, suppose I wanted to try to smother that razor blade in Vaseline. Then, suppose I began that effort with that very same story. I will have amused, and defused. I might then succeed in lodging a few thoughtful points regarding Country X, if I have any. Otherwise, I’m still home free.

The world is a cafeteria of wit. And it’s all free. Take what you like. Write it down. Milton Berle, who cultivated the same image as a joke stealer that Dean Martin did as a drunk and Liberace as a homosexual, once said a rival comic made him laugh so hard it almost made him drop his pencil! It’s a good idea to make a mental note only at the moment of thought theft, and do your jotting later in privacy.

At day’s beginning, or end, look over your catch, like a Long Island bass fisherman might look over his. You don’t have to plan routines or plot specific usage of your captured treasure. Just looking it over and making the mental commitment to try to flavor your verbal traffic will reinforce your

inventory of good stuff. Your stimulated mind will cooperate by making connections, bring the right line up at the right time.

You can devise ways to adapt material to your own usage. Once I reached out and stole a line from somebody's description of some complicated act of juggling and gymnastics in a circus. The writer said it was "like doing an appendectomy on a man carrying a piano upstairs."

What an image! An appendectomy. On a man, while he's busy carrying a piano upstairs. Sorry—that's just too good to be allowed to lie there on a printed page describing a maneuver in a circus. There are too many other ways that can be used.

In self-defense, for instance. A friend calls and wants to do something together. You'd rather have emphysema. A traditional "Sorry, I'm busy" sounds lame. If you stay cheerful, however, and say, "You ought to take a look at my schedule right now. It's like doing an appendectomy on a man carrying a piano upstairs," then you're excused!

Nothing has changed. You barreled your way out of an unwanted commitment on sheer energy and color.

When you hear or read a truly good line, let's say, about a celebrity who lived in the 1920's who drank too much, don't say to yourself, "Gee, I'm really going to slay them if his name ever comes up again."

Uproot it and replant it. If it worked with the forgotten celebrity, it might work with a current one. Or your boss. Or your Uncle Jake. Or a local politician. Or the anonymous drunk astride the bar. Or yourself!

If it's good, no matter where it comes from, write it down and let it marinate in your collection. The mere fact that you think it's good means it's for your wardrobe. The only task left is to adapt it, hold it for the right moment, and resist the temptation to let it loose before the right moment. Then you're not being witty; you're trying to be funny. And that, Mark Twain told us, is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug!

Attribution is a moral requirement only when a line is so undeniably good you'd be ashamed of leaving the room having people think you were trying to pass it off as yours. I'd never use that "lightning-lightning bug" without crediting Mark Twain. (If *he* heard it from a river boatman near Hannibal and failed to give him credit, that's a matter for Mark Twain's conscience!) Woody Allen gave the world a splash of color I find useful in pacifying businesspeople who've been roughed up by unskilled members of my staff.

When I learn that an innocent caller was abused by one of my employees, I get him on the phone personally and apologize by saying, "Hey, pal, this is what Woody Allen always warned us against when he said, 'What if Khrushchev wanted peace and his interpreter wanted war?'"

My conscience wouldn't let me rest if I didn't give Woody Allen credit for that one. The ethic and etiquette of stealing bons mots are obvious. When the lines are outstanding, always accord credit to the one you stole it from, the official attributee. That's not only morally correct, it's a lot safer. There's always a chance that somebody in your audience will know the line and the source and expose you. Give credit where due, and you emerge as a sophisticate of good judgment. Otherwise, you're a common thief.

Too many people regard being colorful or dull as immutable conditions. "This one's tall, that one's blond, this one's Presbyterian, that one's colorful." It rarely occurs to dull people (a) that they're dull and (b) that they can do something about it.

You *can*. You can get colorful material the same places the comics get colorful material. Everybody who jogs isn't out to win the marathon. Everybody who goes to a gym for a workout isn't competing for Mr. America. Everybody who takes up French isn't angling for a job as simultaneous interpreter at the United Nations. And everybody who tries to brighten his speech isn't out to regale the night club crowd at Vegas with ninety minutes of standup dynamite.

Merely holding up your end of the table better than you do now is Mission Accomplished.

So go buy some joke books—new, old, used, paperback, dog-eared, about doctors, sex, drinking, business, race, religion—buy everything that calls itself a joke book, whether or not they’re even funny in your view. Read them through. That exercise will unlimber punch line instincts you allowed to calcify way back when you first decided you weren’t going to be a “comic.”

Buy old magazines, and be sure to study the cartoon captions. Look at TV comedies with a fresh eye, trying to identify and isolate what the writers and producers thought would please crowds of viewers. Note clinically what the highly paid professionals think wins the plaudits. Most of it will roll off. It’s not yours. There’s a nice little warm feeling inside when something comes along that you *do* appreciate. *That’s* yours. It sticks to you. But it won’t for long unless you write it down. Write it. Study it. Review it. Adopt it. Adapt it. And then go try it. Be careful to curb it when you start growing a sense of timing and delivery and you start getting too many good results. Don’t ever let it get to the “Hey, look at me!” stage.

You’re out to Make People Talk. Colorful talkers are more fun to talk to than those whose words all come out in black-and-white.

He seemed fine to me in all key respects—appearance, manner, intelligence, and achievement in his field, insurance. He seemed so fine I was about to buy a policy from him, until I asked him if he’d mind explaining a few details to me, and he said yes, he’d be happy as a lark.

I know it’s fussy to the brink of unbearability—or beyond—but I can’t buy insurance, or anything else, from anybody capable of straight-facedly saying he’s happy as a lark! I’m a lover of brisk, rich communication, and I’m a consci-

entious objector against dealing with anybody who can let a cliché that colossal slip through his lips without immediately throwing himself on the floor, pleading temporary insanity, begging my forgiveness, and swearing never to do such a thing again!

If he tells me he’s happy as a lark, he’s got everything it takes to tell the next person he’s fit as a fiddle, high as a kite, sick as a dog, crazy as a loon,

tight as a drum, busy as a bee, or blind as a bat. Sorry. I can't take the chance.

I remember the feeling of hot, spicy rum splashing inside when I heard a gentleman from the South one day say that something that was going on at the time made him "happy as a mule eating briars." He may very well not have been as happy as the fellow who was happy as a lark, but he made *me* a lot happier telling me about it. That lark is tired. I forget what, if any, associations that poor lark ever did conjure up in my fantasy the first time or two I heard it. I will never, however, forget the vision of a mule eating briars and beaming indolently from long, floppy ear to long, floppy ear.

Why not roll your own cliches?

They need not be brilliant. The girl doesn't necessarily have to be as "sweet as a squashed-out honeydew melon" or "sexy enough to shatter a glass eye at eighty paces" to engender my interest in her, and my admiration for whoever it is who's describing her. He doesn't have to be as busy as a "dog trying to bury a bone on a marble floor" to merit my respect for his ambitious schedule. The businessman need not be "smooth as an eel going through Vaseline," "low enough to read by the light of a hotfoot," or "crooked enough to sleep in the shadow of a corkscrew" for me to beware his cunning. And he need not be "wiser than a treeful of owls" for me to want to seek his counsel.

Official ratings of radio and TV shows didn't get under way until this century, but man's instinct to rate people and

things around him is as old as any other human instinct. Cavemen knew which cave was a "6," which brontosaurus an "8," which cave woman a "10."

Who gets your higher rating, the one who complains that the task at hand is "hard as hell" or the one who says, "Hey, this is harder than trying to sneak dawn past a rooster"? Or "trying to diaper a baby wearing boxing gloves"?

Your new home-rolled cliches don't have to electrify like defected Russian ballet dancers. The best "mood" music in movies is the music you don't

even know you're hearing. You *know* you're hearing "happy as a lark." Mind you, I don't propose prison terms and deprivation of civil rights for using a line like that. We see the basketball player who commits a foul raise his hand. That tells that portion of the world watching, "I'm the one who did it." Committing a cliché tells that portion of the world listening, "I hereby, in the unselfconscious uttering of that hoary old cliché, proclaim to one and all that I am a mediocre person in some, if not all, respects"!

Sit. Think. Confect a galaxy of clichés to match your wardrobe that will fulfill all the roles clichés are called upon to fill, making sure to schedule periodic meditationals to come up with backups. (If a line is anything approaching clever, never use it twice before the same audience without a drying-out period of several weeks.)

If I happen to have used that "happy as a mule eating briars" on Clem and Guemey already, then the next time I'll be "happy as a possum chewing stumps" or a "woodchuck chasing ticks," or something.

Let that lark rest. That venerable lark can't tote any more freight. Better, infinitely, to be merely happy than "happy as a lark."

The put-down, no matter how colorful, is no-win. He feels bad enough that he let that sidewinder missile of egg foo young hit his new silk necktie in front of so many loud laughers. He

doesn't need *you* to say, "Hey, man, you look good in everything you eat!" Your gain in that remark: a tiny, momentary, and quickly forgotten twitter from the "audience." Your risk: the implantation of a festering resentment in his heart that, when multiplied, is the kind that incited masses to rise up and throw the Dutch out of Indonesia.

A magazine writer (I wish I could credit him more specifically) many years ago wrote what I considered a hilarious piece about his desire to score with beastly clever lines, but never getting the breaks, never getting the chance the famous wits always seemed to get automatically. He complained he was always waiting there, ready with the material, but never getting the right moment to throw it into the conversation.

He confessed, as one example, how he dreamed for years that someone in the conversation would lament the passing of a Mr. Kohler, whereupon somebody else would comment, “Oh, strange you should mention that. My neighbor is his funeral director, and I happen to know that’s his hearse going by outside right this minute. Look out the window.” Whereupon the first member of the conversation would say, “Oh, no. The Mr. Kohler I mean passed away in Germany.” Whereupon the second member of the conversation would say, “I’m confused. That’s definitely Mr. Kohler’s hearse going by outside.”

At which point our hero would yawn slightly and say, “Oh, that’s a hearse of a different Kohler.”

There are more than a score of fundamentalist religious groups perched on mountaintops awaiting the end of the world. Their turn will probably come before that magazine writer’s. Never mind. Commit to color! Decide you want it. Go pearldiving for the raw material. Stockpile your *shticks*. Keep on collecting. Keep on adapting. Seek out “connections.”

You’ll get your moment.

And poor Mr. Kohler won’t have to die for it.

* * *

“Dealing with him is like trying to nail a custard pie to the wall.”

“She wasn’t wearing enough clothing to wad a shotgun shell.”

“The drought was so bad we could only lick stamps on alternating days.”

“He’s dumber than a barrel of hair.”

“If a bird had his brains, he’d fly backward.”

“He couldn’t hit the ground if he fell.”

“I’d need a bombsight on my finger to dial the telephone. ’ ’

“He couldn’t find a bass fiddle in a phone booth.”

“They’re crooked as a live oak limb.”

‘ ‘He could wear a top hat and walk under a snake’s belly. ’ ’

“He’s a one-man Bermuda Triangle.”

“He’s as impartial as a parking meter.”

“She changes her mind more than a windshield wiper.” Hilarious? Of course not. Hilarity is not intended, required, or achieved. All we want is more colorful, thoughtful, amusing, different ways of saying the old familiar things that usually tempt clichés to come storming into our mental vacuum.

Realizing you’re not contributing much color and making the decision to try to improve is over half the battle. *Old Reader’s Digests* and the other fresh and abandoned gold mines detailed above, plus the excavation and adaptation procedures also detailed above, will take care of the rest.

A little luck won’t hurt, either. Like the right zinger coming to you at the right instant. And the right zinger coming to you at the right instant with the waiter *not* choosing that same instant to blurt in with “Who gets the veal?”

Be glad if a lot of what you hear makes you say, “I wish I’d said that.”

With luck, skill, effort, and style, you will!

Annoy Not

The one-armed man was quietly enjoying a drink at the bar. The man standing beside him suffered a seizure of curiosity. “Excuse me,” he said. “I notice you only have one arm.” The one-armed man put his drink gently upon the counter, looked slowly and deliberately down in the direction of his missing arm; then looked up straight into the eye of the questioner and said, “Dear me, I do believe you’re right!”

The first rule of medicine is, the treatment shall do no harm.

That’s also the first rule of Making People Talk. It seems easy. After all, only bullies, bigots, misanthropes, and psychopaths would seek to hurt, right?

That is correct. But the big word there is “seek.” This chapter is devoted to those who do not seek to hurt, but do a creditable to brilliant job of it, anyway.

Steve Carlin, the first of the genius breed of TV producers (“The \$64,000 Question”) once chose an unlikely candidate to head up one of his TV projects, a young man who came across as much less outgoing, aggressive, imaginative, or knowledgeable than dozens of others who wanted the job.

When asked why that particular young man was chosen, Carlin replied, “He knows how to deal nonannoyingly.”

So few people do. If the average person’s tongue were an airplane, it would be grounded. Fully 95 percent of all mouths should be shut down for repairs!

“What’s new?” for an opening example, is an annoying way to be greeted. It implies that your vocation, your marital status, your interests and activities—in fact, your overall quotient of life achievement—left something to be desired at last report, but, in the spirit of you’re-not-down-until-you’re-out, the other person is willing to give you another chance. ‘

‘What’s new?’ is the verbal equivalent of passing in bridge, forfeiting in tournament play, and pleading *nolo contendere* when accused of a crime. For that fleeting moment, the one who says “What’s new?” gives the world a glance at the indicator needle of his intellectual gasoline tank—showing empty!

“What do you do?” is another no-win clinker. Those involved in the lower-level occupations don’t like to have to say it out loud, and those way up the ladder are annoyed you don’t already bloody well know what they do.

The Chinese, five thousand years advanced in such matters, have an especially uplifting way of saying “Pleased to meet you.” When you’re introduced to a Chinese, you shake his hand and say, “*Jiu yang, jiu yang.*” That means, “I have long heard of you and your lustrous reputation.” That’s nice. Ridiculous, but nice.

If the American secretary of state were helicoptered down into a rice paddy in central Fukien Province for a media event and introduced by the local party secretary to a random peasant harvesting millet, he probably would not say, “I have long heard of you and your lustrous reputation.” Under slightly less extenuated circumstances, however, he would.

(Kristi Witker, popular news reporter for Channel 11 in New York, enjoys telling the story of the day she was covering something going on out at Yankee Stadium and asked Reggie

Jackson, “What do you do?” It’s my guess that if Ms. Witker were not so popular—and secure—she might not enjoy telling the story so much. I have not yet verified whether Reggie Jackson enjoyed it!)

“What do you do?” says a lot that you might not want to say that early in a first conversation with somebody. It says, “You and your works are not known to me, and I sense from your overall persona that you are of a level in life where that happens a lot, so I presume you’ll not take umbrage at my asking forthrightly how you manage to support yourself and your dependents.”

Hold it a while. You can always ask what somebody does; but once you ask, you can never unask. There's an excellent chance whoever you ask won't mind being asked what he does. He may realize he's not a high-profile person, not in the public arena, and he may think you don't really want to get to know him if you don't haul off and ask him what he does.

On the other hand, he may (a) be ego-wounded that you don't already know about his wondrous works or (b) be genuinely skeptical of your intelligence if you don't already know. So why not play for all the marbles and bring in what you do in some clever, indirect way. Talk about some industries and occupations that are being adversely or favorably affected by the current headlines, tell him he looks like a very successful banker-broker-lawyer-surgeon, something nice; ask for his card and look at it. But try to keep that direct question unasked, until the point where it becomes strained if you don't know what he does.

Some people have the ability to take something you say and turn it into a funny little quip. The problem is, many more people try than have the ability. Drafting others as your involuntary straight men is excusable only if your "capper" is explosively funny. The handful of people standing around who laugh at your tweaking of someone else's line quickly forget the mirth you provided. The one who's been topped, however,

will never forget how you used him. Swallow that wisecrack, unless your conscience clearly tells you that in so doing, you'd be robbing the world of a monumental punch line.

When you take a person's comment and turn it into a laugh, even when it's not at his expense, it tells him, "This guy is not a giver. He's not a listener. He's not a caring person. He's an attention-getter who cares only about upping people and getting a laugh."

The boundary between a welcome wit and a wise guy may be impossible to define, but everyone present knows which side your remark has landed you on.

Some people don't mean to tell you with their eyes they couldn't care less about the conversation you're having; they simply physically can't resist

spinning around to see who just came into the room. That says, “Civilization and courtesy combine to keep me in some sort of tenuous contact with you, but surely you’ll understand, the likes of *me are out for* bigger game!”

If secret agents can be trained to withstand torture, surely you can train yourself not to let your physical attentiveness visibly deflect from the person you’re talking to.

Espionage has given us a marvelous new meaning for the word “traffic.” Traffic, in this new meaning, is communication—not cars, words! All words exchanged during a party represent the “traffic” for that party. By using a technique known in intelligence as traffic analysis, you can learn a great deal about a country and the way its leadership, subleadership, armed forces, and diplomatic units operate and interrelate.

Even before we break the code and learn precisely what’s being trafficked, we can detect who starts the talking and who does the listening, who does the asking and who does the answering, how many listeners-answerers there are, how regularly the traffic crackles, what to expect when irregular patterns of communication break out, etc.

At a party, a little traffic analysis of your own will tell you some interesting things about the group, including, of course, where the “power” lies. For a split second after you arrive at the party, all guests seem equally powerful-worthy-valid-interesting. They start differentiating on your radar screens rather rapidly. One minute later you can tell the party’s “stars” from the “extras.” Five minutes later you’ve separated the one who merged the four silicone companies in a coup praised by *The Wall Street Journal* from the cousin of the host who’s a little shy.

Ten minutes after entry, you should have a feel for who’s there for being powerful, who’s there for being connected, who’s there for being sexy, and who’s there for being able to make them all start talking and forget about who’s who and why who’s there.

Study the traffic at any party and note what a high percentage of that traffic falls under the category of put-down.

An alarmingly high proportion of remarks are designed to put others down rather than lift them up.

If, for example, you're from Alabama and you go to a party in New York City, keep score on what's said when they learn you're from Alabama.

Catalogue the number of times the remark is something like, "Honey chile, is you-all sho-nuff from AlaBAMmmie?" versus something like, "Alabama! I've heard so much about Alabama lately. I hope I can spend some time there. Tell me, if you had seventy-two hours to spend getting to know Alabama, how would you use those hours to best advantage?"

(If you were the Alabaman, which of those two remarks would more inspire you to hire, buy from, vouch for, vote for, or introduce your sister to the perpetrator of? Be glad so many remarks are self-destructive and dumb. It means you can be an easy standout just by not making them.)

Is put-down attractive? Does it really win people?

Of course not. It's exactly like smoking cigarettes used to

be regarded: Each puff afforded a momentary lift, and the only consequences you faced (we thought) were nicotine stains on your forefingers and an occasional cough.

Just as people feel health course through their bodies when they give up smoking, people feel health course through their traffic when they give up the put-down.

Father Flanagan, who founded Boys Town, was written off as an early-day wimp for saying, "I never met a bad boy."

Upon pain of similar dismissal, I must avow that I have never met a boy or girl, man or woman, whom I could not compliment. Admittedly, that feat occasionally visits great strains upon the imagination, but I've never had to walk away in defeat.

(Southern legend salutes a young man who similarly preferred to hand out compliments over insults to a degree just short of religiosity. His buddies, seeking to stump him, deliberately fixed him up on a blind date with the ugliest girl for six counties in any direction. That did, indeed, stump him, but only for the greater part of the evening. Just before he said good night at her door, however, the compliment he'd been fumbling for finally came to him.

“You know, Mary Lou,” he said, “for a fat girl you don't sweat much when you dance!”)

Make that southerner your role model and you'll soar!

The critic who wrote of the actor who played the role of King Lear, “He played the king like he was afraid somebody else would play the ace,” probably had that line ready before the opening curtain and sat through the entire performance in fear that the “king” would give slightly too good a performance to make that gem viable.

Put-downs, if very funny, gain you a glory that endures maybe five or seven seconds, until the guffaws die down. Put-ups—quickie compliments based on fact—gain you a per-

son's esteem for periods ranging all the way up to a lifetime.

Most of us are convinced we never hurt others, except on purpose. We feel totally in control of our traffic and refuse to believe we injure others in ways of which we're blitheringly unaware.

Take, for example, “What happened to your foot?”

Anybody who's ever limped in public, even for a few minutes, understands a peculiar human characteristic most people think is a failing of tropical fish only. We know that tropical fish swim harmoniously together in schools, swarms, and packs—until one of them develops a weakness, whereupon the others turn on him and devour him!

Humans know how to do it without teeth.

If you don't happen to have gout, arthritis, or a broken foot, but know how to fake a good limp, take a limping walk around any block for research purposes. It's amazing. Friends, doormen, even strangers come rushing to your side wanting to know what happened to your foot. People you've never seen before who are themselves late for work and obviously in a hurry will cross streets against heavy traffic to ask, "What happened to your foot?"

Vain people who enjoy the attention may welcome the question a time or two. By the end of the first dozen inquiries, however, all limpers are united in exasperation. Occasionally, very rarely, you'll meet someone who doesn't ask. That person will simply say, "Can I help you?"

That person wins the Silver Award. The Gold Award would go to somebody who saw you limping and didn't say a word, if such a person ever existed.

Truthfully, now, you who don't limp, you who only ask why others are limping—do you mean to annoy?

Of course you don't. And it may confuse and anger you to learn that what you intended as a sympathetic outreach actually annoys the one to whom you're reaching out sympathetically.

Only when you stop to think about it, only when you realize how many times he's heard that obvious question already, does it all come clear.

The physical limp is easy to spot and easy to avoid mentioning, once you've reprogrammed your compassionate reflexes. It's the *invisible* limping that can strike down good conversations without warning.

The person whose business just went under may not have a visible limp. He may enter the room with the stride of an Olympic weight lifter. That doesn't mean fond feelings will sprout in his heart for the brilliant conversationalist at the party who asks, "Hey, I notice your store's closed. What gives?"

If someone's undergone a painful divorce, there are questions he'd rather be greeted with than, "Where's your better half?" You say you didn't know

about his divorce? You say you were just trying to be friendly? Nice. Nice and unskilled. Nice, unskilled, and stupid.

In certain parts of America, it may still be fairly safe inquiring about the health and whereabouts of a spouse, provided you knew they were still sharing married life as recently as six months ago. In our fast-lane communities, though, you stand an excellent chance of having your “friendly” question rewarded with a laser-razor stare and the explanation that such inquiries might hereafter more fruitfully be directed to the spouse’s new spouse!

The safest course is never to ask about a nonpresent spouse unless you’ve seen them leaving a party hand in hand within the previous seventy-two hours.

You think people can see your hands when they’re not covered by gloves. You’re correct. You think people can’t see your feet when you have shoes on. You’re correct. You think people can’t detect your negative feelings about them if you decide to keep those feelings under wraps and “communicate” nicely. You’re wrong! Negative feelings gush, seethe, drip, ooze—or at least waft—out of the most innocent-sounding

conversations. To keep a person you don’t particularly like from realizing you don’t like him requires better acting ability than most of us have. Alas, like drivers who swear they drive better after a few drinks, we don’t notice our impairment.

We honestly believe we hurt others only on purpose.

Bear in mind, there’s no such thing as “casual” conversation, any more than there are casual bullets in a revolver you’re casually toying with in a crowded room. As long as there’s one other person present, anything you say has the power to hurt or help, to lacerate or ingratiate.

A boxer knows the difference between round one of a major title fight and a workout session on his punching bag. A pilot knows the difference between taking off in a fully loaded jumbo jet and sailing a paper airplane across his playroom.

In conversation, there's no such difference. Obviously you play for higher stakes as you move from your family circle to the convention cocktail party, where the professional headhunter has told you to go impress the board chairman of the firm that owns the company he's trying to get you placed with. Never mind. The best way to vaccinate yourself against the possibility of committing harmful, annoying remarks is to pretend you're a soldier never on leave, always in combat; a gambler betting never for fun, always for money; a football player never in a game of touch with the neighbors' kids, always in the Super Bowl; a singer never in the showers, always before a packed house at La Scala where the hard-to-please have plenty of ripe tomatoes in their lap ready to heave.

Enter the Golden Rule. Ask yourself, "If I were he, and he were I, and if he knew exactly about me what I know about him, what, then, would I least like and what would I most like him to bring up?"

Every diplomat knows the most important part of the conference is the agenda.

That goes for conversations, too.

* * *

A prominent TV interviewer was once criticized in a prominent newspaper for being a "gusher." What is a gusher? The writer told us that if that interviewer were to ask a singer, for example, where she was from and she said, "Peru," he would gush in with maximum energy and say, "Peru! My favorite country!"

One summer night a business executive who was buying some radio time from me told me he was having some friends over to his home in Long Island for a backyard barbecue. He urged me to show up so he could impress his friends. I made a mental note that if he wanted me there to impress people, he must be a terminal case. I told him I was busy and I'd try to come but I couldn't promise, and I thanked him for the invitation.

I knew I couldn't come, but I wanted to avoid the sting of a rejected invitation. It's annoying to be turned down under any conditions. If the

person you're inviting yawns in your face and says, objectively speaking, he can't think of a less appealing prospect, it's maximally annoying. Even if he says he's sorry, but he's just been elected president of Portugal and your party happens to fall on the date of his inauguration, it's still annoying.

It's a good idea to calibrate your rejection of an invitation you can't accept according to the ability of the host to take it. If I'm dealing with a gutsy swinger in my own weight class who I know is secure, I'll just say, "I can't. I'm busy," knowing my rejection will bounce like a gravel pellet off the hull of his battleship ego.

Once, however, I got an invitation by phone. I looked in my daybook and told the man calling that I was free and was looking forward to being with him.

My secretary said, "Are you crazy? You're supposed to be in the Middle East that night."

"I know, I know," I replied. Then I explained that the

host who'd just called me was a nice but inflexible middle European who brooded a lot when you turned him down, regardless of your excuse, and would brood even if you were to fortify that excuse with certified copies of your tickets and hotel reservations in Tel Aviv. She stared incredulously as I waited eight or nine minutes, called him back, and went into an elaborate apology for having misread my schedule, causing me, alas, to have to forgo the predictable pleasures of his dinner party for the trifling consolations of the Middle East.

"He wants two things from me," I explained. "He wants one hundred eighty pounds of Barry Farber present at his dinner party. He also wants the assurance that I hold him in sufficient esteem to accept his social invitations. If I do it my way, I can give him at least half of what he's after."

Anyhow, back to my executive friend who wanted me to show up at his backyard barbecue in Long Island. I had no intention of making it, or even trying. My business appointment was an interview with Zsa Zsa Gabor. (Ms. Gabor has her own list of annoying things people say, foremost of

which is, “Gee, you sure look young to have been around so long!” Zsa Zsa explains that people, if they only took the time to study, would know that she isn’t as old as everybody supposes; she just started making headlines earlier than anybody realizes. Her first headline, she says, resulted when she was thrown off King Zog’s personal horse in Albania at the age of sixteen.)

Zsa Zsa and I had fewer delays in our taping than expected, which left us finished early, with a limousine waiting downstairs and no further plans for the evening.

“Wouldn’t it be fun and different,” I mused, “to drive up to his tacky outdoor barbecue in that limo and impress his friends—with not just a local radio personality, but with Zsa Zsa Gabor in person!”

I explained the setup to Zsa Zsa, and she agreed. Being

southern, I anticipated the “southern” response to Zsa Zsa’s arrival. I expected my friend to come out to meet the car, see Zsa Zsa, levitate, cock back his head and yell, “Good God a-mighty, look who’s come to party with us!”

My executive friend is not southern. He’s northern. He greeted us as though Zsa Zsa’s attendance were part of a laboriously negotiated contract and the only question now was whether to bring legal action because I’d delivered her twenty minutes late.

“Meet Zsa Zsa Gabor,” I said, doing a pretty good job for a southerner of concealing my zeal.

“How do you do, Ms. Gabor,” he deadpanned, offering forth his hand as though he himself had no further use for it.

That man is clearly not a gusher. He’s a prig.

If this were a role-model manual for children, I would make much of the fact that the TV gusher was eventually consigned to a middle-of-the-night time slot in which, if he were to interrupt one of his own commercials and say, “The Soviet Union has attacked the United States with nuclear

weapons,” it would not cause a panic. And the “How do you do, Ms. Gabor” cool guy went broke.

Find a notch in the middle of the spectrum between gusher and prig from which *you* can “deal non-annoyingly.”

Conversation and sex have much in common. A new friend pleased with a low-key courtship can get annoyed when the more “ready” partner tries to rush things. Asking too big a question or making too big a statement too early in the acquaintance—before the signal flags say “welcome”—can also destroy the possibility of what the French call *rapport*, that magical and mystical moment when two merging souls know that they have touched and, like expertly handled cymbals, emit harmonious chimes, whether they believe in such things or not.

“Your daughter is beautiful,” is permissible immediately.

“Is she by your first or second wife?” is not. It needs time; maybe not much time, maybe only minutes. But your Friendship Pass must first be punched by him, showing you’re entitled to proceed to that higher level of invasion.

“This election race is heating up nicely” is permissible immediately.

“If that Republican wins, I’m going to flee to my new condominium in Costa Rica” is not.

If he agrees with you, sticks out his hand, and says, “Put ’er there, pal,” he is, in his way, as annoying as you were by challenging him with a strong, specific political assertion early in round one of your interpersonal adventure together. (That’s what it always is; that’s the way to look at it—even the guy you’re wedged in beside at the buffet who opens the conversation by pointing out that you accidentally got crushed chickpea with sesame sauce on his elbow is off with you on an ‘ ‘ interpersonal adventure ’’!)

Don’t assert. Don’t assume. Feel your way forward, like a nudist crossing a barbed-wire fence.

A man I know who spends more time polishing his profanity than Shelley spent on his poetry refuses to hire anybody who uses a foul word during the job interview.

“If I hire him and over the ensuing weeks he hears how I talk and chooses to talk the same way, that’s fine,” he explains. “But how dare a job applicant use an offensive word before he knows how I’ll cotton to it?”

Nowhere is the Golden Rule more necessary than in the area of inadvertently annoying others. We know hitting others hurts, so we don’t hit. We know pinching, gouging, biting, jabbing hurts, so we refrain. We sally in and annoy, however, blither-ingly innocent of ill intent. We just don’t think before we talk. We don’t say, “Putting myself as closely as I can in his situation, would I appreciate what I’m about to say to him?”

If we stopped to think, we wouldn’t offend as much.

A five-second comment by him that his poem was accepted by the Norwegian-American Chamber of Commerce newsletter does not call for a five-minute summary by you about all the great poetry you’ve written that hasn’t been accepted by anybody! A simple “Congratulations” will do, followed by a question or two regarding the poets from whom he derives inspiration and his favorite time of day to write.

Take five minutes off—five, that’s enough. You need not adopt any posture or breathing pattern that makes you feel silly. Just get in a mood and mode that, for you, suggests meditation. Then concentrate specifically upon those “innocent” comments, questions, japes, and jibes that most annoy you. You’ll be aghast at how many of those very offenses you routinely visit upon others.

The ability to count to ten may not seem like such a big deal, and it really isn’t. The ability to recite the entire alphabet may not seem like such a big deal, and it really isn’t.

The ability to deal with others non-annoyingly may not seem like such a big deal, but it really is. Almost nobody can do it consistently.

We can all applaud actress Tallulah Bankhead, who once said, ‘ ‘One day away from him is like a month in the country! ’ ’

Don’t you feel you know exactly whom she was talking about? And it’s not *you*, it’s always somebody else.

The human mind is designed with huge tanks to hold self-righteousness, but only tiny ones with minuscule capacity to hold self-doubt.

Why give anybody the chance to think of you when Tallulah’s line is recited?

“A gentleman,” don’t forget, “never hurts anyone—except on purpose.”

Getting to the Point

This is a book about Making People Talk, and yes, I know some of you already think it's a book about getting what *you* want out of talk. You can't get what you want unless you can get your conversational partner past your pitch and through to the point.

Getting to the point sounds like a goal we should all approve and applaud.

No disagreement so far. That comes when we try to decide what the point is!

If you want something from someone; if you want someone to say yes, what, precisely, is the point? Is the point to ask briefly and bluntly for what you want without beating around the bush? Or is the point to take your time and cultivate a mood between you and that person, to engender a relationship with that person that will make his yes a lot more likely?

Americans pride themselves on being get-to-the-point people. Israelis are even more so. If an Israeli senses an unnecessary adjective here and there or an irrelevant verbal waltz going on, he may interrupt you and say, "Look, we haven't got time. Start at the end!"

Europeans may not be as hair-trigger about it as Ameri-

cans, but they, too, like to see at least the outline of an agenda come jelling through the verbal fog before too much time elapses. That insistence strengthens as we move from southern Europe up toward northern Europe.

As we enter the Middle East—*except* for Israel—there seems to be resentment at the very fact that there *is* a point and a need to get to it. We can all visualize the Turkish merchant driving the American crazy by sitting cross-legged on a rug puffing on a water pipe making sure hours elapse before getting to—or anywhere near—the business at hand.

That, at least, is the superficial view. The reality—one that can be used to good advantage by all who take heed and practice this principle—is that

everybody is more “Eastern” than he realizes, or cares to admit

Those Westerners most exasperated by the syrupy delays of the East are like the caterpillar who, seeing the butterfly, nudges another caterpillar and says, “You’ll never get *me* up in one of those things!” We’re all more likely to say yes if we’re in the *mood* to say yes.

That mood is best achieved not by exhortation but by *conversation*; by talking in such a way as to make the other person want to talk back. That takes a little time. And that’s worth a little time.

No language yet has a word for it, but we’re aiming to achieve a breakthrough, a happy explosion, a gush of acceptance, the release of a hot geyser of good feeling that turns a humdrum meeting into a joyous occasion, reticence into enthusiasm, a forced communications chore into a free-flowing delight, a conversation you didn’t know how to begin into one you hope will never end.

Dag Hammarskjold, the second secretary-general of the United Nations, was a man of the West who undertook a sensitive mission to the East. The first “China shocker” of the

postwar age was not Dr. Henry Kissinger’s pop-up in Peking that preceded President Nixon’s historic visit to Mao in 1971. Almost twenty years earlier, when Communist China was not merely a Cold War American foe but an official world outcast whose troops in 1950 entered the Korean War against American-led United Nations forces, the world was startled by word from United Nations headquarters that Secretary-General Hammarskjold was going to Peking.

It was widely known that among his major objectives was that of winning the release of twenty-one American fliers downed during that war, who were in Chinese captivity.

Hammarskjold was met at the airport in Peking by Chou En-lai, the urbane second man behind China’s revolution, who was known as a sophisticate and an intellectual by Western standards. Chou didn’t ask Hammarskjold, “What brings you to town?” And Hammarskjold didn’t tell him. Dr. John

Stoessinger, a former high-ranking official of the UN Secretariat, tells us the conversation between Chou and Hammarskjold took a decidedly different tack.

Chou noticed the top of a book jutting provocatively from the pocket of Dag Hammarskjold's raincoat. It was Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, not exactly the kind of reading a flight attendant is likely to hand you instead of *Newsweek*.

Chou could see only a word or two of the front cover. He bit. "What are you reading?" Chou asked.

That gave Hammarskjold the chance to flash the rest of the cover.

"Are you a Martin Buber fan?" asked Chou. Hammarskjold was more than a fan. He was, in fact, translating Buber's work into Swedish at the moment.

Marlon Brando playing Stanley Kowalski would have greeted that news with only limited enthusiasm. Hammarskjold, though, had "prepared his brief" on Chou En-lai. The Chinese Communist leader, as Hammarskjold knew he would, instantly mirrored into eighteen different conversations, all animated, about literature, translations, poetry, philosophy, education, the Orient, the Occident, illiteracy, escape reading, writers' egos, and Great Thoughts.

The conversational trickle between Chou and Hammarskjold had already broadened into a brook before the official party even cleared the airport. It grew into a creek, a stream, a river. Then it developed rapids. By the time Hammarskjold was set to return to New York it had become a raging torrent.

The two men embraced warmly before Hammarskjold mounted the steps to the plane. They exchanged congratulations, best wishes, a few laughs, and promises to work together for "peace."

Not one word, however, was ventured by Hammarskjold—nor volunteered by Chou—about the twenty-one American fliers.

Neither one Got to the Point.

That did not mean, however, that the point was ungotten to.

Three weeks after his return to UN headquarters, on the occasion of his birthday, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld received a telegram from Peking informing him that all twenty-one American fliers were about to be released!

Rudyard Kipling said, “Softly, softly catchee monkey!”

Cousin Guemey in North Carolina puts it slightly differently. “When you’re in too much of a rush,” says Guemey, “you’re liable to pass more than you catch up with!”

Whose style is preferable?

That’s an easy one.

It’s the style of whichever of the parties is the one who’s supposed to wind up saying yes.

Talking Up to the Intimidator

The young lieutenant was paying his courtesy call on the commanding general of the base to which he'd just been assigned.

Captains are occasionally offered coffee by the general's wife. A major or a light colonel might be offered something stronger. A bird colonel or a brigadier general might even be invited to remain for dinner.

A lieutenant, though, is supposed to arrive on time, remain no longer than ten minutes, then rise and crisply take his leave.

The lieutenant's timing was stopwatch perfect. At precisely ten minutes after his arrival he stood up, marched across the living room toward the general, and, hand outstretched, said, "General, I'm very happy to be assigned here. I'm sure you and I are going to get along very well together."

"Toz/, Lieutenant," replied the general without offering his own hand for shaking, "will do the getting along!"

"All men are created equal" may be nice poetry, but it's lazy and misleading civics. By the time we're old enough to deal with anybody outside our family, it's too long after each of us was created for us to be equal anymore. Besides, what that "equality" really means is that all of us are created *equal in the eyes of the law*.

That doesn't help you feel too much equality with the Intimidator behind the desk who's kept you waiting thirty minutes, looks like he'd love to get rid of you in thirty seconds, and whose yes or no by the end of the meeting decides whether you win or lose this chronological comer of your career.

Every conversation falls into one of three categories. You're either talking down (giving an order to a waiter), talking up (applying for a job), or talking straight ahead (to the great ole bunch of boys and girls at the party). The young lieutenant's failure was forgetting which one of those situations obtained for him at that moment.

A lot of people simply don't stop to ascertain the rank of the various players ("where the power lies"), or they're in a constant state of one-man guerrilla warfare against the system. They refuse to talk like an underling merely because they're the one asking for the job. Their attitude is "That firm has a need. I have services to offer. We will bargain eyeball-to-eyeball as equals."

Those people usually wind up asking for jobs a lot.

If King Solomon, in all his wisdom and fairness, were to come down and rule on the "system" of today, his ruling would probably read, in part, "Yes, it is lamentable that those you want to reach are so hard to get, that they don't return your calls, that they always suggest you call back after the first of the month, that thereupon they say their hands are tied until after Thanksgiving, that they can't get their hands untied before Christmas, that they grudgingly make appointments and casually cancel them through robot-sounding secretaries on the very day of the meeting after you've spent all that time and energy psyching yourself up for the challenge, that they keep

you waiting in a room with no coffee and dull magazines, that they do all they know how to do to make you feel weak and unimportant—all that is lamentable. It is all, however, thoroughly legal, and if those you seek favor with and favors from choose to play according to those rules, there's nothing you can do except (a) not call them or (b) swallow it and pay the price.

"It may feel that lengths of your small intestine are being unraveled and minted into coins that you must lay upon the counter to gain admission." Unkind, yes. Unfair, no.

"He who needs the warmth," King Solomon would conclude, "must fan the flame."

You need not grovel, crawl, flagellate yourself like a Portuguese priest, or push a peanut with your nose from the reception area to the door of the office whose occupant you seek to persuade.

You need only “salute”—and do the “getting along.” President Harry Truman is supposed to have been the first to say, “If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen.”

If you can’t do the salute, get out of the parade.

Dogs get a lot of praise from people for their ability to “smell fear.” People, in this case, are uncharacteristically modest. People can smell fear as well as dogs. The difference is, dogs who smell fear usually just bark. People bite!

So stamp out fear! That’s not quite as easily done as said, but neither is it anywhere nearly as hard as most fearful people fantasize.

Early in his political career, Winston Churchill, the man who later literally used the English language as a weapon against Hitler at a time when England had little else, had a terrible fear of public speaking. He conquered it, biographers tell us, with a device a California-based entrepreneur today might well stretch, flesh out, repackage with a touch of Eastern

philosophy, and make millions marketing in books, seminars, and cassettes.

Churchill, upon rising and taking the podium, would search the crowd to find the stupidest-looking face in the hall. Once he seized upon it, he’d say to himself, “Who am *I* to be intimidated by a roomful of *those*?”

As a talk show host, I tried to test all the whacky-sounding things that came across my broadcast windshield over the years: transcendental meditation, biorhythms, biofeedback, the Canadian Air Force exercises, telepathy, levitation, teleportation, foot reflexology, and at least eighteen different kinds of yoga including one upside down. (By far the most life-lifting and effective was cutting down on sugar!)

People on radio and TV get interviewed a lot by eighthgraders assigned to write theme papers on people in various professions. They ask great questions. A typical eighth-grade question is, “Was there ever anybody you interviewed whom you didn’t start taking seriously until much later?”

The answer is yes; several, in fact, and none more towering in that category than Dr. Gyula Denes.

Broadcasting is a religion that requires no confession; nonetheless, I owe a big one to Dr. Denes. I brought him on the air several times in the early 1960's—not to accord serious attention to his work but to ridicule it! At least I was gentle with him. Other broadcasters dismissed him as a nut.

Dr. Denes, an exquisitely accented Hungarian psychologist, had a studio in New York where he taught self-assertiveness before it was fashionable or even known. He specialized in the quick fix. Was your problem fear of asking your boss for a raise? No problem. Dr. Denes put you on a “stage” in the middle of his studio with a dummy made up to look like a boss. He then invited you to go ahead and ask him for a raise.

Dr. Denes would sit like a film director or a fencing coach in the shadows and act like a Hungarian thunderstorm. He'd

ridicule his client, criticize his technique, taunt him, tease him, coach him, and bawl him out until he saw and heard what could pass as a proud employee convincingly asking a boss for a raise.

If you were also fearful of asking beautiful women for a date, Dr. Denes didn't try to sell you another round of therapy. He simply removed the “boss” hat from the dummy, slapped on a woman's wig (of the appropriate color), and ordered you to get out there and ask! He'd wince and complain when he heard nervousness. He luxuriated when he heard progress. He kept on exhorting you to increasingly better “performances” asking that dummy for a date until he was ready to pronounce you “cured.”

You may not believe it until you try it, but that kind of earnest make-believe becomes real. If England's wars were won on the playing fields of Eton, dates and raises were surely won in Dr. Denes's humble little studio in the days just before the media made stars of oddball innovators like Dr. Denes.

Nothing is easier than deciding which encounters you find difficult. Once you do, you can be your own Dr. Denes. Go into a room somewhere and “rehearse” your way through the difficulty. Let the lamp be the boss, the

woman, the man, the personnel director, the judge, the IRS investigator—whomever you find formidable. Don't just *think* your lines. Don't whisper, don't mumble. *Belt them out* exactly the way you'd like to in real life.

Don't relent until you're convinced you've wiped away that slimy, oleaginous fear that you know is gumming up your projection lens.

A variation on Dr. Denes's principle is the scripted telephone call. When you know that your nervousness and insecurity will rupture through your crust and send forth those giveaway plumes and fumes of fear, when you know good and well your confidence will emulsify immediately after “Hello, ”

when the silence on the other end of the line says, “Okay, what do you want?”; when you know you will “break under torture” and instead of good, strong traffic utter nothing but a mess of “uhhs” and “aahs” and weak phrasings and flimsy chuckles—when you know all that, *write it down*.

Once I was trying to get friendly with a woman who inadvertently did me a huge favor by being so intimidating that I could hear myself dissolve right there on the phone whenever I called her. Usually your tendency is to suppose you're doing more or less okay; you don't realize how much “fear gas” pours through your sundered fissures when the pressure rises.

I decided to write my part of the phone call, beginning with “Hello”! Down the page a few lines the script forked into two columns, spelling out two different options depending on how she answered my questions on whether she intended to go to Rome the next weekend.

It worked—not in some fairy-tale way with us flying to Rome together, but she definitely began to regard me as a legitimate player. Up to then I'd been nothing more in her perception than a little goldfish sucking oxygen along the inside of a tank. I changed. I improved. My telephone personality became more resilient, *al dente*. I no longer appeared gelatinized in fear.

The reason Dr. Denes's dummy drills and my scripted phone calls pay off probably harks back to the old Boy Scout handbook command (remember?) to find the exit you'll use in case of emergency the instant you take your

seat in a movie theater. If there's a panic, you'll panic, too. You, however, will *panic in the right direction*.

Nobody has ever gotten into legal trouble taping his own end of a telephone conversation. Try it. Try it before you take any corrective measures. Can you smell your own fear? Then try it again after a few minutes of actual rehearsal. Or use a script to carry you well into the conversation. The contrast is

amazing. It's inspiring to hear and feel how much can be accomplished merely by making the effort to stamp out fear!

The exercise may make *you feel* foolish.

You will, however, no longer *sound* foolish to the one you're talking up to who makes you nervous.

You can lose those personal battles just by revealing fear. That's not the only way to lose, just the quickest. You can also wind up losing, no matter how confidently you come across, if you squander that confidence on stupidities or on ill-advised or unproductive lines of approach.

Don't forget, *you* asked for this meeting. Don't expect the Intimidator, smug behind his command desk, to give you much more help than, "Why don't you have a seat right there?" *You* must "fan the flames."

You can score good early points by knowing precisely when to knife in and get to the point, if the Intimidator doesn't bring you to it first. You win applause, even if the Intimidator tries to cover it with a professional semi-frown, by sensing precisely when civilities, small talk, preliminaries, and getting-to-know-you's are exhausted and bringing things down to business then—and not two and a half seconds later than then!

I once interviewed an extraordinarily successful insurance executive who'd built many empires in his industry, starting as a salesman. I asked him if he had one recipe for success he could boil down to fit on a bumper sticker, or inside a fortune cookie.

He staggered me with the power of his reply.

He was walking down a hotel corridor past an open door one day early in his career and overheard a seminar going on inside a conference room. He wasn't a participant. He hadn't even known it was going on. He was just a passerby, and he heard one and only one thing the speaker said.

“The formula for success is to concentrate first on doing

the things the failures hate doing most and don't get around to until last!”

To adapt this wisdom to Making People Talk and apply it to your next “up-talk” situation, change it around to this: “Avoid all the small talk the ‘failures’ instinctively jump to first.”

You're there. You've cleared the downstairs receptionist, the floor receptionist, his or her receptionist, and you're seated, emotionally tumultuously but physically quite comfortably, before the throne.

Regardless of how many times you've seen modern headquarters of successful businesses, you're wiped out anew every single time. You marvel at the bold sweep of the architecture, the imaginative spacings, the green belts and the flowered squares that suggest life, possibility, happiness, and success. You admire the elevators outside the buildings that make even tough cookies like you want to sit down and write a poem. You marvel at the expense of it all. You're impressed.

And you sally into your interview and get things rolling by saying, “Nice place you've got here.”

“Nice place you've got here” is English all right, and does indeed seek to express a quite appropriate approval of a workplace that shows the investment of a lot of money, talent, and love.

But one wonders if an ant really understands the planetary globe. One wonders if the gull really appreciates the ocean he spears fish out of. And one wonders if a person capable of coming on with a line like “Nice place you've got here” really understands the niceness of that place.

Let's do better, rung by rung up the ladder.

"I couldn't believe your headquarters was as nice on the inside as I'd always heard."

"I'll bet you can really get inspiration working in a setting like this."

"No matter what happens to you on the outside, you've officially beaten the system during the third of your life that takes places inside here."

"Do you mind if I talk slowly? I hate the thought of leaving here!"

The objective is to get as far away from "Nice place you got here" and occupy the high ground. Much better than lobbing in a compliment, kerplunk, is starting with an assumed compliment built into your remark, then asking an intelligent question or making an intelligent comment from there.

The Yankee Cool approach can also rankle the proud host of an outstanding workplace. Ignoring the magnificence of what you've just been led through as though "All of us successful types these days surround ourselves with goodies like these," and proceeding straight to your agenda without so much as a laudatory peep in praise of the environment, puts a subtle extra weight on your wings. Pilots call it drag. You don't need any.

One of two things will happen after you are hand-shaken, seated, and either offered coffee or told through silence that no such offer is forthcoming. The Intimidator will hand you a conversational hook on a platinum platter (much to be preferred over coffee!), or he'll sit there and wait to see what kind of stuff you do when you're thrust onstage without a warmup.

If you're handed a hook, play with it, stay with it. If you've done your homework properly, studied his company's history and activities and combined that information with a blurb fresh from that very morning's financial pages, you may not want to delay your stardom by playing with the Intimidator's offering. Like a comic who knows his opening will annihilate them, you may be itching for the chance to get "on."

Remember Kipling: “Softly, softly catchee monkey!” Play with the conversational opportunity you’ve been offered like a grateful cat plays with tumbling balls of yam.

As he ushers you to precisely the point on his turf where he wants you, he’s probably saying something. You figure he’s just filling the void of the moment with meaningless patter, so you put on mental earmuffs and let him drone on, the better to concentrate on shaping and sharpening the repartee you’re about to launch.

It’s dangerous to tune out anything said by the one you’re in the act of talking up to.

After the “What’s the weather like?” and “Did you have any trouble finding us?” he continues talking. Is he saying something about hostages, wheat crops, power failure on his commuter train, the tennis upset, women technicians, the Soviet spokesman who speaks better English than the American anchorman, the fare hike, the fare cut, Paul Revere, Marcel Proust? Whatever it is, it can’t compete in your estimation, you’re sure, with the marvelous lineup of icebreakers you’ve prepared for the occasion, as you’re certain you’ll demonstrate as soon as he finishes his little flourish about Danish pastries, MSG in Thai cuisine, weight lifting, newspapers with ink that comes off on your hands, or the interview last night with the homosexual senator who came out of the closet during his victory speech.

Sure, you listen politely enough, but you inwardly can’t wait for him to shuffle offstage so you can do your tap dance.

That’s a good moment to remind yourself that he’s not there in hopes of going to work for you or to sell you his wares. He is the world’s foremost authority on what he feels like talking about at the moment. You’re there to talk *up*. And what your Intimidator is giving you is the hook most likely to Get Him Talking at that moment.

That’s the equivalent of your poker opponent showing you

his cards, or the professor giving you the answer. It’s like the governor slipping you the winning lottery ticket.

Who could ask for anything more?

Accept it!

If you happen to know that Danish pastry has nothing to do with Denmark—and in fact in Denmark they call it *Wienerbrod*, which means Vienna bread—you get a blue ribbon around your box of Cracker Jacks in the form of his merry, “Gee, is that a fact?”

We now reach The Wall, and the ray gun that vaporizes that wall.

Suppose he takes off on something like the big wheat crop scandal, and you couldn't tell wheat from marijuana. Sure, he's launched a probe into an especially weak sector of your front, but that's nothing to lament; that's something to rejoice over! That's better than knowing all about Danish pastry. The instant something as alien to you as wheat gets nailed to the top of the small-talk agenda, *you have the opportunity to ask questions.*

Your brightest remark, about Danish pastry or anything else, finishes second *after* a flat, ordinary question from you to the one you're talking up to.

“I'm glad you mentioned wheat,” you can say. “I hate that feeling about being lost in any topic that makes page one. I've read that America is the breadbasket for the world. I've also read that America has become a net importer of foods. Can you take a minute and explain that wheat story to me?”

Those who've flown the Concorde agree the most remarkable feature is the incredible feeling of lift power during takeoff. You'll get that same feeling of lift power when you suggest to the Intimidator, “I don't really understand much about that subject you seem so well schooled in,” and then flat out say, “Could you take a minute and explain it to me?”

The room ripples with energy. Your bleakest moment in an important relationship improves vertically and rapidly. Survey your accomplishments.

You've seen some people hunch like mother sparrows over their paycheck and deposit slip at the bank for fear someone will see the amount of their weekly wage. You've let the Intimidator know right away you're not One of Those. Among all the things he's going to learn about you within a short time, you've made sure he learns early that your inclination is not to conceal ignorance, but to eliminate it.

The Intimidator also learns you're sensitive enough to ask if he has time to contribute to your knowledge.

Moreover, you've made the Intimidator talk to you about something he's knowledgeable about.

And, towering over all the above, you've got the Intimidator *talking'*.

That does to the awkwardness and insecurity of those early moments what noon does to dew.

He is not merely talking. He's in the act of doing something far better than merely talking.

He is talking by request. *Your* request. That gives him a good feeling. Long range: He will remember for years that you gave him a good feeling upon contact. Short range: That good feeling you've engendered in him gives you the best head start humanly possible toward accomplishment of your immediate mission.

Every profession and occupation throws off a lot of things insiders know that others ought to learn. One of the richest lessons the broadcasting business teaches has to do with 'feelings' like the one that the Intimidator, no matter how formidable, will hold toward you once you break format and appoint him "professor" for your ad-hoc course in Wheat Surplus 101.

As a beginning broadcast talk host, I had friends and strangers approach me with increasing frequency as my show

took root in New York with the identical comment. “Hey, that was a great show you had last night!” At first I would thank them and ask, “Which part of last night?” trying to get a handle on precisely which guests and topics were making it with the listenership. To my amazement and chagrin, they seldom remembered. I would give them the name of each guest I’d interviewed the night before, tell them the topics discussed, recite the name of any books the guests might have written.

And almost always to no avail. They didn’t remember. Despite my in-depth probing to determine precisely what it was they’d liked the night before, I’d usually get no more out of them than the sheriff gets from the guy in the serape dozing against a cactus who looks up and says, “They went that-away.”

For a long time I just supposed they were insincere people who knew somehow I had a radio show and felt like handing out a spray-on compliment to make me feel good. I later learned that wasn’t the case at all.

In most cases, they *had* listened the night before. And they *had* liked what they heard. They simply didn’t remember by dawn’s early light exactly what it was that grabbed their attention and pleased them so the night before.

All they remembered was that whatever it was, it gave them a *good feeling*.

Feelings, I learned, are more important than meaning.

People may not remember the meaning of what they heard even as recently as last night. But they do remember the manner in which an interview was conducted and the mood it lodged on their brain disc.

After this many years I can promise (almost straight-facedly) that, were I to have Winston Churchill on one microphone and Adolf Hitler on another, and if Churchill were rude, inconsiderate, obnoxious, and interruptive, thousands of peo-

pie—including Jewish people—would call the radio station shouting, “Who’s that nasty Englishman who won’t let that poor German speak”!

Life is not an issues poll. Life is an approval rating.

Your Intimidator may not remember why he liked you. Or he may be ashamed to tell anyone it was because instead of muscling his small talk aside and moving on to your own, you stopped in the middle of your own opportunistic quest and deputized him as an expert in something about which he knew and cared.

Your Intimidator will like that smart, sensitive person who came to the office and, rather than saying, “Look at *me*,” instead said, “Forgive me, I’d like to continue looking at *you*.”

A good way to get things started is by opening with the highest honest compliment you can come up with delivered squarely between the eyes of the Intimidator.

Every broadcaster knows that a compliment like “Hey, man, you’re the greatest!” is nothing but the predictable wiggle of a contemptible worm. When someone makes good eye contact with you, though, and says, “I thought the way you handled the leftist revisionist historian the other night when he tried to contradict you about Tito’s wartime activities was masterful”—that, by contrast, is a compliment.

It doesn’t matter whether your highest honest compliment deals with a firm’s recent acquisition of three competitors, a software house, and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg or with the extraordinary niceness of the uniformed attendant who helped you find a space in the visitors’ parking lot. It matters only that your compliment should obey the Law of the Compliment.

A compliment should be brief, blunt, specific, and above all accurate and credible. It’s hard for some of us to deliver a compliment and maintain eye contact simultaneously. It’s tough—a little bit like a child delivering a forced apology to a playmate. Practice sending that compliment over the outfield fence while keeping the pressure of both your eyes on the bridge of his nose. Make him dissolve under the awesomeness of it all.

(You'd be amazed how many people, when I am the Intimidator, actually begin the conversation by asking, "Are you still on the radio?" Surveying my own accomplishments, modest though they be, as objectively as I can, I cannot bring myself to believe that that is my highest honest compliment from someone whose whole purpose in meeting me is to try to get me to say yes!

The pain of "Are you still on the radio?" might be bearable, by the way, if only they would learn to conceal their surprise when my answer is affirmative!)

A book by a phony psychic who decided to go straight and tell all (*The Psychic Underworld*) revealed the existence of a national data base "psychics" could tap into for a fee. It was worth a big fee. That data base was the beginning and end of their "psychic powers."

Think back to the last time you heard a friend rave about a psychic she just met who sat her down and proceeded to "work miracles." (The "she," I fear, is advised in this case. Psychics know their best customers are older women who've lost their husbands!) How did she word her praise for that psychic?

Wasn't it something like, ". . . And then he started telling me a whole string of things about myself and about Harold *he couldn't possibly have known any other way*."

The author of *The Psychic Underworld* peeled away the veil and gave us a glimpse at the operations of the Psychic Mafia. It's a glimpse that customers who believe in psychics will find disconcerting. When a phony psychic works a client, he gingerly probes around through the lives of the client and her loved ones hoping to score with some good guesswork. The closer the psychic's observations come to accuracy, the closer he comes to lots more visits and fees from that client.

He may say, "Your late husband had an interesting attitude toward animals."

He's hoping she'll say, "Oh, you're right. It was beautiful to watch Harold communicate with our pets. It was almost as though he could talk to them."

The psychic then gets credit for a bull's-eye. He smiles knowingly and then proceeds to guess, gingerly and always hedging around so he can pile up a little more credit, to convince the client he has genuine powers.

When he's right, the client will tell him more. When he's wrong, the client will tell him what's right. In either case, another psychic who could secretly eavesdrop on the client's session with that first psychic's could easily convince the client that *he* possessed profound and exquisite powers.

"No, I'm afraid you're wrong about that," the client will interrupt in the middle of the reading. "Harold didn't really love animals all that much. I think it was because of his getting thrown off a horse when he was ten and a nasty dog bite that very same year."

The client instantly forgets the business about her husband and animals ever came up, because it wasn't a "score." The psychic, however, then *submits that bit of information to the data bank*. When that same client makes an appointment with another psychic, even halfway across the country, days, weeks, or years later, she'll be staggered when that psychic—who comes to the session fully briefed about Harold and the horse and the dog, and everything else that client ever told any other psychic hooked into the data network—will smoothly and with an all-in-a-day's-work manner, tell her not only how Harold felt about animals, but even why! (The psychic phony, by the way, wouldn't come straight out and tell her he "gets the impression Harold was thrown off a horse at the age of ten and suffered a nasty dog bite that very same year." That would be too obvious. Instead, he'll say he feels Harold had an unpleasant encounter with a dog that went beyond the normal dog bite along around his early teens, or even preteens, and he believes, though he can't be 100 percent sure, that Harold also had some sort of unpleasantness with another animal, a larger animal!)

The phony psychics' trade secret, of course, is that most of their best customers keep going from one psychic to another. They're what the old carnival hustlers used to call marks. When a new psychic sits down with a mark and says he's not quite sure whether the rapport will be forthcoming and fortuitous but he's willing to try, and then closes his eyes, heaves a deep breath, and proceeds to disclose chillingly accurate details about Harold's experience with horses and dogs, that poor mark will impute supernatural

powers to that psychic forevermore, sing his praises, and recommend him to her friends.

Point out to such a mark that unscrupulous manipulators collect, collate, and sell information about people like her in neat little dossiers that “psychics” pay good money for, and she’ll swear you’re nothing but a cynical sorehead jealous of sensitive people with the “higher gift” of being able to tune into and interpret human vibrations.

Smart psychics pay a lot for those little scraps of information. And rightly so. They’re buying the password.

The instant a person hears a detail about his life that “the psychic had absolutely no way of knowing,” his resistance melts and he becomes silly putty in the hands of the psychic.

Psychics pay for the password. Spies kill for the password.

You, on the other hand, are free to pluck all the “passwords” you want en route to your encounter with the Intimi-dator with no expense and no killing.

Had you visited President Nixon in the White House in, say, the twelfth month of Watergate and somehow alluded to the Watergate investigations, you would not have gotten credit for a searching eye and a retentive memory. Quite literally, 100 percent of everybody knew about Watergate! Remember Henny Youngman: “You remember World War Two—it was in all the papers.”

Now it’s our turn to use a “trade secret” that does just as much for ambitious good people as secretly compiled purchased dossiers do for phony psychics.

Once we get to knowledge below the World War Two and Watergate level of total public pervasiveness, you’ll be considered psychic if you show knowledge about the Intimidator or his firm’s activities no matter how well publicized that knowledge may have been!

Abandon the notion that says, “Gee, it’s been printed, so everybody must already know it.” Substitute for it the notion that says, “Nobody notices, nobody reads, nobody pays attention to, and nobody remembers a damned thing.” That latter notion, though flawed, is lot more valid than the former.

Let’s say the Intimidator is personnel director of a high-tech outfit in the energy field, and you’re just about to begin the Waltz of Pain, trying to warm the atmosphere in his office between his “Why don’t you take this chair here?” and “Let me ask you a bit about your work experience.”

Let’s further say you can read Indonesian and you spotted a tiny item in an Indonesian technical journal that very week indicating that the Intimidator’s company had just signed a deal to recondition four giant turbines for the Indonesian government in the Moluccas, beating out an Australian, a Malaysian, a Hong Kong, a Taiwanese, and two Japanese companies for the job. That item in the Indonesian language is the only public word released on the matter so far.

We can all understand how your knowledge of that and your deft dropping of that ‘ password ’ into that moment should warm things up.

Now, then, suppose that same item in English had appeared in the English-language newsletter published by the Indonesian Embassy in Washington and been sent to thousands of businessmen, technicians, students, and friends of Indonesia all over the United States.

“Shucks,” you fear, “that password has now fallen into the possession of every Tom, Dick, and Harry who’d like the job I’m angling for.”

Cut it out! The unexpectedness of your knowing that tidbit from an Indonesian Embassy newsletter will be every bit as explosive in the Intimidator’s estimation as if it had appeared only in that technical journal in Indonesia in Indonesian! The Erosion of Value as that information spreads outward from the esoteric journal read by a handful of Indonesians to the well-circulated Indonesian Embassy newsletter is imperceptible.

Let’s keep going. The Erosion of Value speeds up, of course, as the item is picked up by *The Times* of London and then carried by the Associated Press

to *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and every newspaper and news and financial magazine across the English-speaking world.

Never mind how much press attention that item got, though; so long as it falls below the World War Two-Watergate level of coverage, you get credit for knowing it. You get full credit for knowing it. You get much more credit than you deserve just by knowing it! And by knowing how to use it as an ice-melter.

“By the way,” you say boldly and without fear of being thought a favor currier, “that was a sensational coup, breaking through all those international players to get that turbine deal with the Indonesian government. That must make you awfully proud.”

Something magic happens (not every time, but often enough to make this doctrine unassailable) when you get things started by belting out a bold, honest, accurate, and well-deserved compliment, especially one that takes a little “knowing” on your part. Effete little Billy Batson in the comic books used to turn into Captain Marvel, accompanied by lightning and thunder, just by uttering the word “Shazam!”

That’s what you become when, with good eye contact, you compliment him or his company in voice strong and sure just as you’re settling down to your up-talk deliberations.

The opening perception of the Intimidator as he meets the up-talker is something like, “I’m dominant. You’re submissive. You’re here to try to gain something I have power to accord or withhold.” He doesn’t say any of that, of course. All he says is, “Why don’t you sit here.”

Your compliment lets him know right away, “Hey, this one’s different.”

“Nice place you got here” does nothing of the kind. But a sophisticated surface-to-air compliment that indicates your range and depth of concern simply overpowers his dominance and, in a profoundly human way, forces him to respect you.

“Businessmen in the Third World tend to abandon their regional rivalries when a superpower horns into a part of their market they’re perfectly capable of serving,” you continue. “You fellows had to overcome a lot of Asian pride to win that deal. ”

If you come out of your corner behind salvos like that, can you imagine him maintaining that unyielding pose and saying merely, “Uh, oh yes, the turbine deal. Thank you”—and then continuing with his “Why don’t you sit here” routine?

It’s much easier to imagine him relaxing and saying something like, “Interesting you should mention that. There were some hairy moments before we nailed that thing down, you know,” and then proceeding to regale you with all the trickle-down company legendry that reached him at morning coffee yesterday.

Sometimes the rapport you set roaring by the “highest honest compliment skillfully rendered” can be embarrassing. You almost want to say, “Enough, already,” and resume the submissive posture so he won’t later feel he overextended himself and suffer a backlash in his warmth and outreach.

Once you feel the power of the “password,” you’ll wonder where it’s been all your life. You may find it amazing that such a simple, obvious tool eluded you for so many years. It’s not amazing at all. Look how much water power went to waste before man learned how to harness it.

I discovered password power by accident—in fact, by accident while not even trying to score. I was just playing around. I was on the phone in New York trying to sell my radio show to stations across the country. I was talking to a program director of a station in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place I’d never been. As we were small-talking, my eye happened to spot a map of the United States and gravitated, naturally enough, over to Cheyenne. I lazily noted the town of Torrington, Wyoming, a bit to the north of Cheyenne.

“Do you ever get up to Torrington for the weekend?” I asked.

I think he screamed. He was so impressed he actually screamed his amazement that someone like me with a southern accent calling him from New York City could deal so knowingly with someone in Cheyenne about his territory! I made it a rule to begin all long-distance sales calls in a similar way. It makes for a great feeling on both ends of the line, a great feeling precisely when that embryonic little relationship needs it most.

* * *

Where do you get “high, honest compliments?” Not maps, obviously, but books, magazines, newspapers, newscasts, gossip, asking people who know things about the company, employees of competitors who like *you* more than they hate *them*, and from the company itself. If you call just about any company in the world and tell them you’re interested in their activities, they’ll be happy to send you a packet of public relations material, books, brochures, pamphlets, and folios, all extolling the history and activities of the company. Ask them to include a few recent copies of the company newspaper. Most will do so without question if you ask, but might not think to if you didn’t ask, on grounds that no one would be interested in most company newspapers except company employees.

People who watch moviemakers at work marvel at how many hours and days it takes to make a few minutes, or even seconds, of usable film. If all this “espionage,” brochure procurement, question-asking, and homework result in nothing more than giving you a good, solid lift over that “Nice place you got here” period of floundering, it’s hours and days well invested.

That moment is more important than the next hundred to follow. A good opening minute with a person who can say yes or no to your ambitions is the equivalent of a smooth takeoff, a high-spiraling kickoff, a 350-yard drive off the first tee, or, to a man, the woman he’s flirting with giggling at his approach quip, telling him her name and asking his.

You have to be a personnel director, or someone who says yes or no importantly, to believe how suicidally most people proceed through that opening minute.

Some people actually believe that nothing eases preinterview tensions like a good, rollicking, off-color joke.

Understand the terrain. The personnel director may like dirty jokes. He may have never heard the one you chose to lead

off with. He may think it's funny. He may think it's the funniest dirty joke he's ever heard. He may fairly itch to convene his buddies into special session later that very day just to hear him tell that joke. But it's miserable ice-breaking policy, for an interesting reason.

Those two, the job seeker and the applicant screener, have never met before. The Intimidator will reason as follows: "I have nothing against jokes, no matter how dirty. But how does *he* know that? Here he comes looking for a job, and before I can even get around to asking him what he's been doing in recent years, out of his comer he comes with a joke like that. Cops don't like drivers who crash red lights, even when they don't happen to hit anybody. The joke teller exceeds his license. That, not the dirty joke itself, is his infraction."

Undoubtedly, jobs have been gotten and careers launched on dirty jokes told without a "license," told before the teller had earned or been awarded the "right" to tell a dirty joke. Never mind. The fact that President Harry Truman was a high school dropout shouldn't lead young people to conclude that their best strategy for advancement is to drop out of school, then wait for overtures from the major parties.

The "Let's warm it up with smut" up-talker is the apprentice asked by the electrician on the ladder to touch one of the bare wires on the floor below.

"Do you feel anything?" asked the electrician.

"No," said the apprentice. "Not a thing."

"Well," said the electrician, "don't touch the other one. It's got twenty thousand volts running through it!"

If you don't have time to research, prepare, shape, and sharpen a good, high, honest compliment, at least ask the receptionist, after the Intimidator's been told you're waiting, what the company's done lately that people are talking about, what they're proud of.

The minute you enter the Intimidator's turf for the opening handshake, you're in a battle of wits.

That's no time for you to be unilaterally disarmed!

The wisest thing said during World War Two may have been the comment by an unknown soldier standing at pierside among hugging and kissing couples making their farewells, duffel bags hoisted over shoulders, loudspeakers blaring, band playing, all uniforms sharp and snappy, as the troopship was about to embark to go to war.

The GI looked around and said, "You know, war would be the most fun in the world if only nobody ever got hurt."

Some people suspect that those who use warlike analogies and metaphors harbor some dark lust for combat. (They've even banned war toys for children in Sweden.) Nonsense. Sometimes the war analogy helps your life along.

You want that job, or assignment, or contract, concession, allocation, grant, gig—whatever. That's why you sought the opportunity to meet with the Intimidator in the first place. That's why you're sitting there nervous, feeling an almost physical need for some good conversation to break out quickly. Just as in war, you've chosen an objective. You've prepared. As you're headed down the corridor to the Intimidator's lair, your invasion force is on the high seas. When you enter, you've hit the beach. When you sit down at his invitation, you've secured a tentative, temporary beachhead.

The next few instants—less than a full minute—are crucial. Will you secure and expand that beachhead, or be driven by hostile forces out to sea?

At the time of the real invasion at Normandy, France— June 6, 1944— General Eisenhower waited in his London headquarters for word. He had

drafted two public announcements: one in case the invasion was successful, the other in case of failure. Once word came that Allied forces were indeed moving inland from their initial beach positions and into the hedgerows and that succeeding waves of troops and materiel were being unloaded without impediment, Eisenhower released the victory message.

He wadded up the other one and tossed it like a basketball into his wastebasket. His secretary, with enough sense of history to think beyond the relief and joy of the moment, walked over and retrieved it.

Instead of merely sweating it out with “Gee, I hope that interview goes well tomorrow,” make it a “war” game!

Long before they started talking about psychological programming, they knew about training. You can train yourself for success in that all-important formative instant of the interview by once again marshaling your “material” (information about the company, high honest compliment, etc.), learning to cut physically through that Bermuda Triangle of unease that descends upon you, and belting out your rehearsed-but-not-over-rehearsed opening salvos with grace and confidence. Defensively, the mission is to resist the wicked, gremlin-inspired temptation to say something destructive and dumb! (Some otherwise worthy candidates have aborted their opportunities at the outset by actually confusing the name of the company they’re trying to work for with its competitors’!)

Some invasions were unopposed. American marines going ashore in Lebanon in 1958 were greeted by laughing and cheering bikini-clad bathers on the beaches of Beirut! Others are “standard”—Guadalcanal, Leyte Gulf, Sicily, Hollandia. Others are so difficult that their very names continue to chill us—Tarawa, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Salerno, Anzio. Up to now our scenarios have dealt with relatively friendly conditions on the “beach”: The enemy—the Intimidator—has handed us some kind of topic, some kind of hook, along with a handshake and seat assignment. Up to now he’s given us some hint of what we might use to get a conversation started.

What if we’re facing that sheer, stone cliff at the water’s edge, the one where the foe sits entrenched at the top rolling boulders down upon us? What if you don’t even get a handshake? What if all you get is a curt

invitation to sit down delivered through a frown that looks like he could pose for a gastritis ad without shifting a muscle?

Obviously, then, we need a different approach from the one where the bikini corps is shouting out welcomes.

Look around.

The Intimidator is in an office or workspace or meeting place of some kind. He's not levitating in midair in empty space. Where there's life, there's hope; and where there are *things*, there are things to notice, things to talk about, things to start conversations with. (The desirability of Making People Talk is nothing new. For centuries people have been calling restored oaken chums and other unusual items "conversation pieces"!)

Look around, then. Are those his children in those lovely pictures off to the left side of his desk? Did anybody else ever mention how much his son looks like John F. Kennedy at the age of eighteen and his daughter like Maria Montez? Is that diploma from the University of Maryland? He may be too young to remember, but did he ever hear the legends of how coach Jim Tatum came in and in one single season turned Maryland from a bad football joke into a national power? Do they still talk about that comeback season when the backfield of Turyn, Larue, Bonk, and Gambino took the Maryland Terrapins to a 20-20 tie with Georgia in the Gator Bowl? (Even if he's not too young to remember, it's a good idea to suggest he is!)

Does anything on or around his desk look like he might have won it—a trophy for Salesman of the Month before he

got shifted over to Personnel, a letter opener from Kiwanis, a plaque from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a pennant from the Little League, a translucent paperweight for valorous service on behalf of the Junior Chamber of Commerce wastepaper drive?

If so, bear in mind that people don't display artifacts they're ashamed of or that bore them. If he's got them there, he's proud of them, he enjoys talking about them, and nobody, not even his son-in-law or his niece, has ever seemed the least bit impressed by them. Be glad they saved that for you!

That's your opportunity to act, not overly but somewhat, like you're admiring Tito's medals in the war museum at Avala outside Belgrade.

Is his desk neat? Congratulate him on taking a page from Bernard Baruch. Is it cluttered? Congratulate him on taking a page from Thomas Edison. Does his office bristle with bric-a-brac that says, "I want to be me"? Tell him it gives you a good feeling to meet someone who refuses to let himself get emulsified and homogenized by the corporate steamroller. Is his office straight and standard without a ripple of self-expression or distinctiveness? Tell him it gives you a good feeling to meet someone willing to let a good office go ahead and be a good office and not trash it up with tacky attempts to be an "individual."

Hypocritical? Lying? Weaseling? you say?

Twaddle! Impoverished in spirit is the person unable to appreciate a variety of work styles.

Besides, a certain lassitude is allowed in wartime that would normally repel honest and worthy men. *You've got to get that conversation going right away.* However you deign to do it, short of an outright lie, you're excused. Regardless of how you really feel about his workspace, be forthcoming, be impressed, be alive, be nice. The end justifies your not being mean.

One man's coward is another man's "hero with the strength to show restraint." One man's "ring kisser" is another man's diplomat. There are ways to perform the most abject—and effective—kinds of ring kissing without coming across as or being charged with being a ring kisser.

Let's take the toughest-case scenario. Your Intimidator is male, so are you, and you think he might warm up a little if you praised his physique.

You're right if you're thinking that "Hey, you've got a great build" is not the most magic, rapport-engendering line to use when you walk into a frigid, well-defended chamber and he offers you his hand as though he himself had no further use for it.

How about, “Forgive this detour, but I’ve finally decided to haul off and get myself into shape, and you, obviously, came to that decision quite some time ago. Tell me, how do you give your work and your body the attention they deserve?”

“This I beheld, or dreamed it in a dream,” begins Edward Rowland Sill’s famous poem “Opportunity.” “A craven hung along the battle’s edge and thought, ‘Had I a sword of keener steel, that blue-blade the king’s son bears. But *this* blunt thing!’ He snapped, and flung it from his hand.” Positive thinkers already know the rest. The king’s son got his blue-blade knocked from his hand. In desperation, he spotted the sword the craven had thrown away, picked it up, sallied back into the fray, and won the battle!

It’s fascinating to hear the “cravens” return from the interview wars complaining about the reception they got. “Man, I knew it was all over from that icy ‘Hello’ when I walked in.” Listen to them! “He wasn’t the least bit interested in my—” “He treated me like—” “He didn’t even read my—” *“He did everything he could to make me feel uncomfortable.”*

Comic Sam Levinson hated to waste anything as precious as a laugh on a line that was merely funny, and nothing else. He liked to load lessons into his laughs. He never quit repeating his penniless immigrant father’s advice, “If you want a helping hand, you’ll find one at the end of your arm.”

Old Mr. Levinson, had he known the possibilities of getting ahead through personality, not perspiration, might have added, “And if you need a helping tongue, you’ll find one lying lazily on the floor of your mouth.”

I have never once failed to seize immediately on something in the Intimidator’s environment I could use to get things going, even when the Intimidator chose not to be helpful. Among the available “specks” I’ve blown up into colored helium balloons are a desk picture of him standing beside his World War Two fighter plane (“Those babies had the engines in front, where they belong”), a piece of fresh-looking Vietnamese currency (“Have you been there *since* the war?”), a hand-pumped Victrola (“You don’t look old enough to remember the old straight 78-rpm breakable records”), an expensive rug (“I’ve always wondered how many people appreciate fine things—or even notice?”), a framed page one of a newspaper reporting

Lindbergh's successful solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean ("Take a look at the President's comments about Prohibition in the news story just below"), a letter from Father Flanagan, who founded Boys Town ("I always wondered if he really looked like Spencer Tracy"), a 1929 menu ("I could have treated twelve people to filet mignon for what I just spent for lunch at the coffee shop downstairs"), a souvenir picture of his audience with the Pope ("Have you got a minute to tell me how those audiences work?"), and the view from his window ("Not many people realize it, but that part of Harlem you can see at the top of Central Park up there used to be a Finnish community. In fact, they still have a commercial sauna open on Madison Avenue just north of 124th Street").

As Talleyrand counseled his young diplomats, "Above all, not too much zeal." It's very easy in the early up-gush of success to go for overkill. It's such a delight when your invasion succeeds and you can tell by his face you've got him rocking with you and enjoying your words that the temptation is to go ahead and increase the dosage of the medicine that's obviously working.

The most unhappy victor in the Wake Island sea battle was the American pilot who was so thrilled to see the Japanese fleet sinking beneath his wings that he forgot his orders and spent so much time after he'd dropped all his bombs circling and looking that he ran short of gas and actually had to ditch his plane a few hundred yards from the aircraft carrier! He forgot his job.

If the Intimidator's face shows he's appreciating being reminded of Maryland as a football power reincarnated under Jim Tatum, don't take that as your cue to keep going about how big Lou Gambino, jersey number 44, scored an average of three touchdowns per game for the entire first part of the season, snapping the twenty-six-game winning streak of the Blue Hens of Delaware, until they met Duke, at which time Vic Turyn fumbled one play after a brilliant seventy-nine-yard gain the first play after kickoff and wound up losing 20-7, which was still a great moral victory for Maryland because everybody thought it would be another 50-0 win for Duke!

If *he* keeps the subject alive, if *he* begs for more, then you're allowed to dance back on stage for one short little encore. Don't forget, though—you have a job to do in that interview. And unless you're being interviewed for

the post of mid-Atlantic football historian, you're veering away from that job if you keep piling on long after your mission of getting him talking is accomplished.

It's a good idea always to leave some money unspent, some liquor undrunk, and some knowledge unbrandished!

* * *

Up-talk takes fascinating forms in other cultures. During the four hundred years that the Dutch ruled Indonesia, they spoke to their Indonesian servants in Pasar Malay, the language of the marketplace. The servants, though, were obliged to answer in either Dutch or High Javanese. Today, in languages that have the usual two forms of address, formal and familiar, the up-talker wouldn't dare address the Intimidator in anything but the formal, though the boss might well use the familiar, particularly if the employee were sufficiently beneath him in rank.

A French worker would quite literally sooner shoot his boss with a pistol than address him with the familiar *tu* form rather than the formal *vous*. In Sweden they get so reverent of their superiors that they flip out of the second person altogether and use the third! That, coupled with their habit of addressing women by their last names and the professions of their husbands, can lead to lusus like "Would Mrs. Senior Engineer Johansson care for another piece of lightly salted reindeer meat?"

America is one of the world's rare democracies, not just politically but in our freedom to Approach the Throne. Approach it soon. Approach it often. Approach it prepared.

Come armed with good conversational material. Postpone use of that material, or abandon it, if a better hook offers itself. If, knowing the Intimidator's emotional commitment to football, you've worked out a foolproof ninety-second routine based on last Sunday's NFL action, and if after sitting you down the Intimidator lets you know how upset he is over the Norfolk immigration official's bungling of a would-be Soviet defector, swallow football and go with the Cold War.

Otherwise, you're the cub reporter whose first assignment was to cover the PTA meeting at the local schoolhouse. A few hours later the editor asked for his story.

"There *is* no story," the reporter said.

"Why not?" the editor demanded.

"Because there wasn't any PTA meeting," said the reporter.

"Why not?" continued the editor.

"Because," explained the reporter, "the schoolhouse burned down!"

Never permit a lull, even for a fraction of a second. That lull, to you, is like sudden slack to a high-wire acrobat. Be relevant. The most high-explosive, delightful anecdote in the world, hurled *without reason or relevance* into a conversation to brighten it, is not as effective as a pleasant little piece of patter that fits what's already been said like a color-compatible square of quilting.

Don't yawn. Don't cuss. Don't tell dirty jokes. Don't smoke. Even before rejection of the smoker reached riptide, it was considered suicide for the up-talker to light up without invitation or asking permission. (And it was outright surrender even if you asked. Asking if it's all right to smoke is tantamount to declaring, "I find the intimidation hereabouts quite crippling. Do you mind if I set fire to my crutch?")

If you're intimidated, *say so*. But say so not as one who's intimidated, but as a connoisseur of intimidation commenting upon the rare vintage of intimidation being served.

"I'm sure some seemingly cool people have occupied this chair before, but, I've got to tell you, it's hard not being intimidated when you realize the opportunity that sitting in this chair represents!"

Finally, bear in mind—repeat like a mantra—"He who needs the warmth must fan the flames."

In this sprawling democracy, it's easy to forget how you rank vis-a-vis the one you're dealing with. Some people refuse to treat Intimidators as Intimidators until the official referee's ruling is handed down and they see they're officially outranked. If you're among the fortunate few capable of identifying emotional garbage and letting it slide down the disposal chute of the soul, then you might try releasing that attitude that says, "Are you sure this guy is one of the ones whose ring I have to kiss, because I'm damned if I'm going to kiss one unnecessarily," and replacing it with the attitude that says, "How best can I fan the flame?"

It's easy to tell when you're outranked in a job interview. Elsewhere, it's a good idea to learn to read "insignia."

Shortly after victory, General Eisenhower was scheduled to make an inspection tour of an American army base in northern France. The lieutenant in charge of welcoming the general came to the buck private guarding the gate and asked, "Has General Eisenhower arrived yet?"

"No, Lieutenant," snapped the private.

A half hour or so later the lieutenant came around again. "Any sign of General Eisenhower yet?" Again, the answer was no.

Another twenty minutes went by, and the exasperated lieutenant again approached the private at the gate and said, "Do you mean to tell me you still haven't seen General Eisenhower?" The private assured the lieutenant he had not.

Eventually a military limousine with a five-star flag flying from the fender pulled up to the gate of the post.

"Halt," shouted the private. "Who goes there?"

The unmistakable Eisenhower smile illuminated the region through the open backseat window and the familiar voice said, "I'm General Dwight David Eisenhower, soldier."

"Are *you* General Eisenhower?" asked the incredulous private.

“Yes, I am,” laughed Ike.

“Oh, boy,” said the private, “are you going to catch hell from the lieutenant!”

When the

Intimidation Is

Sexual

Remember the theory of the golf swing: You don't start hitting the ball right until you learn to pervert every stick-swinging instinct and practice until it feels natural.

Nowhere is that more keenly felt than in conversations you hope will end with your saying, "How about dinner?" and the other person saying, "I'd love to."

It's as though God stepped back, admired His handiwork, and then decided to play a practical joke. All creatures would get their sexual-procreative-romantic rewards by simply obeying their instincts—except man! Man would have to keep getting rebuffed when he obeyed his instincts until he saw through the joke and learned how to reverse those instincts.

The prevalent pattern is: Man sees woman, man likes woman, man sallies over to try to engineer woman's acquaintance, man tries too hard, woman says "Pleased to meetcha" and wafts away, man cross-examines buddies and bartenders to try to figure out what he did wrong—and tries even harder next time.

I'm sorry it took me so long to unpuzzle God's practical joke, but not as sorry as I am grateful that I discovered the secret while there's still time!

The secret is simply, *never try to impress*.

I didn't say, "Don't impress." I didn't say, "Don't be impressive." I said, "Never *try* to impress." You become truly impressive only when you're not trying to be.

Ask any ten attractive women why wealthy, powerful, brilliant, talented, impressive men who obviously want to make big talk with them so often walk away defeated, sent to the showers without having gained those women's interest, respect, attention, or even their correct telephone number.

I've asked many more than ten such women. The verdict is in. It's unassailable. Men can utilize it or ignore it. They just can't change it.

Those women spurn those men because they try too hard to make too much of an impression too quickly.

“What a blowhard,” steamed one woman after the Big Man at the party spotted her, came broadside, brandished his importance at her, and then retreated in ill-concealed frustration toward friendlier harbors to lick his wounds.

“He told me about his poverty-stricken childhood, his startling success, his yacht, his wealth, his power, his close ties to royalty and chiefs of state, how his employees hate him and fear him—and how okay that is with him—and how he hates to keep turning down the governor's invitation to dinner but if a chick like me were to go with him, he'd accept.

“He got all that across to me within one minute,” she said with the kind of contempt that borders on admiration. “And he wasn't even talking especially fast!”

Another Major Man will never learn why an attractive woman refused to go out with him—she chose a much less successful man—unless he reads it right here. All of us there that night thought that woman was lost to the rest of us for the evening, maybe forever, because of the fame and power of the man who decided to take a shot at her, and the intensity of his lunge. He barreled in on her like a heat-seeking missile and,

with the subtlety of a stuffed moosehead, made sure she knew all the great things he could do for her if they became “friends.”

Poor guy. He thought that was “making it.” The woman later said the toughest thing she'd ever done was cluck a polite retort before turning her back on him abruptly. “I had to grit my teeth,” she recalled. “I really wanted to pour my drink in his face and denounce him loudly enough for the guests touring the upstairs to hear. Did I perhaps look like someone who couldn't do great things for herself?”

She wound up leaving with a man who gave her a poignant description of how especially welcome bank holidays are to someone in debt, how he takes comfort in the knowledge that none of the checks he's written will bounce that day.

There will always be women who melt when men of influence and wealth try to be friendly. One of the towering achievements of the Women's Liberation movement has been to put those women in disfavor. Worthwhile women don't like sho wolfs.

The magic lies in concealing everything about yourself that might possibly impress the one who appeals to you—and then hope it all gets found out. The most impressed women I've ever met—the ones who need orthopedic help to get their toes uncurled—are the ones who come up to you and say, "See that man over there? I talked with him for twenty minutes and never even realized he was president and board chairman of the second-biggest fast food chain east of the Mississippi. He just seemed like a plain old *person.*"

Men and women see many times more attractive women and men than they meet and talk to. That leads them to wonder, "What if I'd actually met that blonde in the elevator [that man three tennis courts away]? Might it not have been mutual?"

That's wasted wonderment. A much more useful question

is, "Of all those attractive people I did meet whom I never saw again, how many might I have converted into friends if only I hadn't been so dumb in the first sixty seconds of conversation?"

"Innocent until proven guilty" is a magnificent feature of Anglo-Saxon law. Alas, the laws that govern human attractions are the opposite. You are guilty of being One of Them until you prove yourself otherwise. If you do nothing but hang around smiling and babbling "safe" conversation, you will be branded as One of Them—one of the crowd, one of the herd, one of the pack, a bit player, an also-ran, a nerd, a schlemiel, a vacant lot, a silent *H.*

Men and women, almost without exception, tell of the thrill of spotting an enthralling person across the well-known crowded room or the lonely beach—exchanging smiles, making initial contact, hunkering in eyeball-to-eyeball, feeling all the awakened internal engines of romance driving them onward—only to crash in disappointment when their potential new love opens his or her mouth and all the emptiness pours forth.

Men and women both testify that the other person's ability to start conversations—particularly valid, imaginative conversations—can compensate for deficits in dress, social standing, education, finances, and physical appearance itself!

“It's maddening,” said one of the more sought-after women in New York, “to spot a nice, rippling hunk across the room, lock eyes with him, come close, feel the chemistry, exchange names, hometowns, and occupations—and suddenly find him so boring that in less than one full minute he's put your feet to sleep!”

TV commercials never portray it, but many more women are shunned by men for inability to converse than for major breath breakdown and faulty deodorant. Vice versa, too, of course.

The man who thought of putting the wrinkle in the hairpin became a millionaire. The overwhelming majority of the population have no wrinkles in their conversation. None. Ever. It would be worth a million to them if they could just add one. They never do. Their traffic is subject, verb, and object unmodified by colorful adjectives and adverbs. And lots of cliches, intoned with the solemnity of original wisdom. You may have known teachers who deliberately seemed to say, “There shall be no joy in this classroom.” Likewise, some people seem to be telling the world, “There shall be no wrinkle of wit, originality, color, dash, or daring about my conversation. I'm straight.”

You know the feeling of sometimes looking for reasons to like, other times for reasons to dislike. Some extraordinarily attractive women tell how they inwardly cheer for the “new” man, the hunk who hasn't said anything yet. They want him to open his mouth and say something, *anything* remotely clever; anything with a “wrinkle.” And so often they just don't.

The most interesting survey I've ever taken was asking attractive women how much time a man has to make a good verbal impression before the silent gong goes off and he loses his chance. Some said fifteen seconds. Others said it was closer to a minute.

That's not much time for those who don't understand there's a test going on. It's plenty of time, though, for those who know they've got to distinguish themselves from One of Them—and come to the test prepared.

Who doesn't know that miserable awkwardness that reaches out and strangles the opening instants of what we hope will turn out to be a relationship? Money won't help. Muscles won't help. Fame won't help. Talent won't help. Social position won't help. Education won't help. Having traveled won't help.

An earthquake might. An air raid might. A blackout might.

The best help at that moment, though—and the least violent—is *conversation* }

If you want that acquaintanceship to become a relationship, *you* “sponsor” the conversation.

Again, the first step is the simple awareness that you can do something besides stand there with a forced smile and hope a nice conversation breaks out. You're not a child who can do nothing but watch the rain clouds eliminate his day at the beach. You can take charge. You can affect things in that opening minute. You can do to that opening chill what a blowtorch does to a cobweb. You can become old friends at once by igniting a good conversation.

Starting a conversation with someone you spot on the street, in a plane, train, or revolving door, or racing for a bus strikes many as impossible and, in fact, undesirable. It has a bad name: pickup. Sour grapes, I say. What kind of bigotry is it that suggests that those you're officially introduced to are necessarily preferable to those you run across in your travels in between introductions? There are ways to take good honest shots at connecting in what we'll call not pickups but unstructured encounters. Meanwhile, it's

hard enough to get things going when you're officially introduced. Or when you're both under the ' 'umbrella of introduction' ' afforded by being guests at the same party, and therefore free to step up, state your name, and start talking.

"Ernest, meet Linda," says the hostess. "Ernest is a commodities broker. Linda acts and paints. ' ' With nothing but that spiderweb to swing on, the hostess leaves Ernest and Linda to build a life together, and flits onward to fertilize other blossoms.

We'll observe, then forget, the obvious facts that (a) Linda may dislike Ernest on sight so intensely that no conversation, however brilliant, will help, (b) Ernest feels that same way about Linda, (c) it's mutual, or (d) they're both so enraptured

with each other at first glance that no conversation is necessary.

Never mind!

Athletes don't use "form" only during Olympic competition. Linguists don't use grammar only when interpreting at the United Nations. Singers don't try to stay in key only during major performances. And conversation skills are much too important to be applied only when you think you may be in love. They should be honed and tested at all times. Try it. You'll discover a whole new kind of fun when what used to be forced and labored communication between disinterested parties suddenly becomes a conversational trapeze act. That's when you can try new tricks, test new triggers. Like Ping-Pong, what began as a meaningless activity of convenience can lift and flavor a whole evening.

Conversations, like paintings, need not *do* anything. You may never want anything or seek anything from the one you successfully involve in conversation. A good conversation enriches just because it happened, just because it was there. If you're the "painter"—the architect—of that successful conversation, you're allowed to be proud, for no other reason.

Meanwhile, back to Ernest and Linda. There they are, left by the busy hostess on a desert island in the middle of a crowded party with nothing to

eat except, “Ernest is a commodities broker and Linda acts and paints.”

Remember the golf swing. The beginner, like the ape, will grab the golf club and make twelve major mistakes on the backswing and eighteen coming forward. If you’re Ernest, *stay away from that “acting” and “painting.”* Far away. At least at first.

Do not, Ernest, turn up that fire in your face and say, “Oh, you’re an actress? What have you acted in?” Do not say, “You paint, huh? Imagine that. Where can I see your paintings?”

Every tabloid editor knows something a lot of newspaper readers never learn. If the headline screams, “Actor caught in drug-sex raid,” many readers will wonder, “Gee. Actor, huh? I wonder if it’s anybody famous. ’ ’ They’ll stop everything and buy the paper. The wise person saves his money, knowing from that very headline that the actor is not famous, because if he were the headline would shout forth his name and not just say “Actor.”

Same principle with Linda and her acting and painting. If Linda had ever starred, or even bit-played, in anything recognizable, that hostess would have emblazoned that fact right up there in the “headline” of her introduction. And if her paintings had hung anywhere except on her own walls and those of her most supportive friends, the hostess would have made sure you knew that, too.

The hostess and the editor have something in common. They both want “circulation,” which for both of them rises with recognizable names and achievements. Both work on the theory that, in the business of boosting circulation, if you can’t have a *recognizable* actor or painter, then at least have an actor and a painter.

So, Ernest, don’t go blithering into “What roles have you played lately?” Ask Linda something *about* acting and painting. You’ve seen TV interviewers soar with solid, real questions, and twist in righteous isolation with empty “questiony” questions. Make sure your questions are *real*.

(This is an excellent reason for trying to engender the best possible conversations at all times regardless of how little you care. Broadcast talk hosts make themselves sound so valid and exciting when they say, “I was talking to another star in your field the other day and she told me . . .” What Ernest learns from Linda may be the “dry log” that flares and heats up a more desired conversation at a later date, or later at that same party.)

Do you know what actors mean when they talk about the Method? Linda does. And, actress that she is, she’d love to play intellectual Florence Nightingale to an Ernest who broke down and admitted, “I’ve been hearing actors and actresses on TV all my life talk about the Method and, can you believe it, I don’t even know what they’re talking about. This’ll be my big night, Linda, if you can take a minute and tell me what the Method is.”

Some might say, Ernest, you’re taking unfair advantage of poor Linda. She may get so energized she’ll bite your face. It’s *her* big night! Nobody ever took her seriously as an actress before. No director did. No producer did. No agent did. And no Ernest at a party ever did, either, because they all blundered in and asked, “Actress, huh? What are you in?” And, after Linda’s pained explanations that not all actresses are necessarily in anything, the whole subject of acting was too humiliating to bring back into the conversation for a curtain call.

So, Ernie, you’ve earned the right to step back and let yourself be warmed by the fire you started by treating Linda as an actress. Let her reverence for Stanislavsky shower down upon you. Or her contempt. Lawyers don’t care if they represent plaintiffs or defendants. It’s cases they want. Ernie wants material. He’ll jackpot out if he can just get Linda talking—not about why she hasn’t exactly appeared in a production yet, but about her art, about her love of art, and acting.

Linda the painter, likewise, does not need her new friend Ernie asking her to name the better galleries that have shown her work. Why not, this once, grant Linda the luxury—nay, the glory—of assuming she’s a serious painter and ask her the same questions you’d ask the reincarnated Van Gogh?

Where does Linda get inspiration? Where does she buy her paints? Does she make her own varnish? What was her toughest interpretation? What’s

the most time she ever spent on one painting? The least? What's the best time of day for her to

paint? Does she have to see what she paints? If, for instance, she gets to the mountains in October two weeks after the leaves have lost their color, can she roll it all back and paint them the way they were? Why not? Which attribute of which painter does she most wish she could copy?

Ernie should remember some of Linda's answers. The next time they meet, be it a year later, a week later, even later on that same evening, Linda will appreciate being recalled not as "that troubled little dreamer who thinks she can paint" but as "the artist who likes to do the subjects of Cezanne with the greens of Chagall in the morning like Picasso."

I've been to parties jammed beyond the permissible limits of the fire laws with writers, producers, directors, actors, and designers, not one of whom has ever written, produced, directed, acted in, or designed anything recognizable or recollectable! They all seem to know it, and they give each other amnesty. The unwritten ethic in the air promises, "You don't ask me, and I won't ask you." I'll ratify your fantasy, you ratify mine."

What's in a name?

Everything you may need to turn conversational ice into steam without wasting time passing through water, that's what.

Wasn't there an ethnic joke about a man about to drown in water that was no more than knee-deep? Well, it's true—not about any particular nationality, but about a biological group called people. We "drown" whenever we have difficulty making conversation with new people even though the "water" is only knee-deep.

With practice applying these principles, you will know the advantages of becoming a "good conversationalist." You don't need any principles, though, to know the pain of trying to get some good talk started from the middle of Glacier Number One when there's only you and him alone together.

And yet, there it is—the biggest, most obvious, selfsuggesting rescue possible literally screaming at you, “Here I am! Use me!” What’s the first thing you hear, the first thing that comes up, *the very first thing you know about him?*

Obviously, his name. There it is: easy to ask, willingly delivered, clearly announced, proudly proffered, and requests for repeats always granted without penalty! A person’s name is easier to find than a lake bottom through knee-deep water.

Shrewd investors know how to gain much from little. Learning about names offers you the chance to be a shrewd investor in time. Some Eastern religions consider you still in spiritual kindergarten even after eighteen years of study. An eight-year course in quantum physics wouldn’t qualify you to open your mouth to ask for bread at a table of major physicists.

A five-minute study of the names of the world, however, will make you a welcome and entertaining expert—possibly the greatest anybody at the ball has ever known. (The origin and meaning of names is an easy and fascinating study. Imagine, as you mobilize this magic, what a few hours of study might do.)

Charles Berlitz included an eleven-page chapter on names in his book *Native Tongues*. The time it takes to read it is about the average time it takes to get upstairs to a party from the lobby of the building in a city the size of New York or Chicago.

The study of foreign languages throws off some fun rewards. For years I’ve been waiting for a moment when three strangers are stranded between the mantelpiece and the buffet: a Mr. Deere, a Mr. Jelinek, and I. Immediately upon being introduced . will say, “Are you gentlemen related?” They will look quizzically at me, then at each other.

“You must not have heard correctly,” one will say. “I’m Deere; he’s Jelinek.”

I will then say, “Oh, no. I heard quite correctly.” Where-

upon I will explain that “Deere” and “Jelinek” are identical names—Deere means, of course, “deer” in English, while Jelinek means “deer” in Czech and several other Slavic languages.

There’s a way to pull things like that without being insufferable.

After those few pages of briefing by Charles Berlitz, your pyrotechnic ability with the soggy, overlooked firecrackers of people’s names will light up the heavens. You could slip off your shoes, mount your chair, clink fork to glass for attention, and ask Messrs. Ferraro, Kuznetsov, Haddad, Kovacs, Herrera, Fernandez, Fabbri, La Farge, Fernand, Herrero, Kowalski, and Magoon if *they’re* all related.

And why not? Their names all mean “smith”!

Mr. Hidalgo, upon meeting you, may possibly welcome your opinion, to consider with those of all the other guests whose comments he’s heard, of the spinach souffle. Chances are, though, he’ll have a harder time keeping his socks from being knocked off if you congratulate him on his noble origins. After all, Berlitz tells us, Hidalgo means *hijo de algo*, “son of something,” “son of *somebody*”!

Names have never been considered a target for serious study because they’re too much fun once you get into them to count as “work.” I can’t think of a more advantageous academic pursuit than a college semester devoted to people’s names!

Berlitz, in his eleven pages (which you must read slowly to stretch out to as much as five minutes of learning pleasure), reveals that many of the rulers of the principalities, dukedoms, and kingdoms of medieval Germany devised a system of taxing Jews by requiring that they adopt German names—and pay for them—on a sliding scale.

The most expensive names in what Berlitz calls this medieval shakedown were pleasant, beautiful, or poetic.

Rosenberg, for example, means “mountain of roses”; Himmelblau, “the blue of Heaven”; Morgenstern, “star of the morning”; Blumenthal, “valley

of flowers” or “blooming dale”; Silberberg, “mountain of silver.”

Those who couldn’t spring for those first-class names could pay a little less and still hold heads high with the name of their occupation. Meier means “farmer”; Schneider, “tailor”; Goldschmidt, “goldsmith”; Wechsler, “exchanger”; Fischer, “fisherman”; Kaufmann, “merchant.”

Names of colors could be acquired without burdensome fees. Grun means “green”; Weiss, “white”; Schwarz, “black”; Braun, “brown”; Roth, “red”; Grunfeld, “green field.”

Animals offered another alternative. Lowe means “lion”; Wolf, “wolf”; Fuchs, “fox”; Haase, “hare”; Katz, “cat”; Vogel, “bird.”

Names like Berliner, Hamburger, and Frankfurter indicate the bearers of those names came from the cities whose names precede the final *er*.

The poorer Jews were obliged to adopt names that carried an insult. Part of the American dream was the chance to drop those names and pick new ones at Ellis Island, but Berlitz says you can still find those put-down names in the chronicles of some of the German cities where we find records of names like Schwanz, which means “tail”; Eselkopf, “ass head”; and Schmutz, “dirt”!

Italian names can offer a lot of conversational openings. Any Italian name that indicates “a gift of the angels” or “a blessing” by the church, for example, tells us that the first bearer of that name was abandoned in a basket at the door of a convent or church and raised by the nuns.

Try it the next time you meet someone named Angeli (“the angels”), della Croce (“of the cross”), Benedetto (“blessed”), della Chiesa (“of the church”), Diodonato

(“given by God”), or Santangeli (“holy angels”).

Some military dictators get credit for making trains run on time, others for eliminating unemployment. Once upon a time, people didn’t have last names. They only had one name. A series of long-forgotten dictators had to

make Europeans adopt a family name. Many Europeans today credit Napoleon for that reform. Actually, the family name was pretty well established in Europe by the time he did his conquering.

In Turkey the family name was not compulsory until 1935 and in parts of Indonesia they're still not to this very day. The first ruler of post-colonial Indonesia, Sukarno, was named just that, Sukarno. Under pressure from Western media he reached out and grabbed a handy first name, Achmed, so nobody would make a big deal of it!

Most of the captive peoples suddenly ordered to go find a suitable last name for themselves and their families, like most people everywhere, went quietly along with the new edict and adopted names that translated into their occupations: names like Farmer, Fisher, Smith, Weaver, Baker, Carter, Taylor.

Others, however, were dissidents and refuseniks. They deliberately chose the most ridiculous names they could think of just to show defiance to their new rules with their far-out radical reforms. The Amsterdam telephone book today, for example, still lists the forebears of those freedom fighters who proudly chose the names Nakengeboren (“bom naked”) and Broek-Brun (“trousers-in-the-well”).

Try, without starting fights, to probe the origins of names like the Italian Mangiacavallo (“eat a horse”) and Malatesta (“bad head”). During the Watergate affair, columnist Harriet Van Hom saw no reason not to strike. She let her readers know the name Kleindienst meant “small service.”

Couldn't you have held up your end of the dinner conversation more effectively in mid-1986, when American aviator Eugene Hasenfus was shot down over Nicaragua while carrying arms to the Contras, if you'd pointed out that his name means “rabbit's foot”? Sure, he was unfortunate to have been shot down; but, on the other hand, *he was the one crew member who had a parachute* }

No name successfully defies the name-ologist's ability to make interesting conversation around it. You might wave the name Mary, for example, right on through customs as being utterly worthless as a conversation starter,

until your new enthusiasm for knowledge teaches you that Mary means “rebellion” (*Maryam* in the original Hebrew).

Does John strike you as perhaps not the gee-whizziest vine in the jungle to swing on. Not so fast. The name John, coming from the Bible (like the majority of European first names), means ‘ ‘God is gracious. ’ ’ It comes from the Hebrew *Yohanan*. How many “Johns” know that? Even if their name is Jean, Hans, Juan, Giovanni, Ivan, Johann, Joao, Yan, Sean, Ioan, Ian, Yannis, Johannus, Yahya; or the female versions—Juana, Jean, Jeanne, Janet, Joan, Joanna; or the last name variants— Johannes, Janowski, Johnson, Jones, Jennings, Jenkins, Shane, Valjean, Giannini, Jensen, Jantzen, Ivanov.

All this piling on is not meant to make you an instant lapidary qualified and ready to cut, polish, set, and brandish everybody’s favorite jewel, his name.

It’s merely intended to demonstrate that the possibilities are endless, and a great deal of good clean fun. You can always, after exhausting the juices squeezable from the names at hand, switch into the name of someone you met the other day, or one you read about, or heard about, or just feel like bringing up.

Some names are too good for their own good. They become, not icebreakers, but the entire evening’s conversation. The hoariest of all possible stories that Jewish immigrants tell is the one about the young man whose original name was too

long to use in America. His brother gave him a simpler one to give to the police on Ellis Island, something like Katz or Braun. In the up-gush of excitement over landing in the New World, his mind went blank when the uniformed immigration official asked him his name.

He thought and thought. When the official impatiently asked him his name again he said, “*Shoynfargessen*,” which means, “I already forgot” in Yiddish. Without breaking bureaucratic stride, the official wrote down what that utterance *sounded* like in his Anglo-Saxon ear—“Sean Ferguson”!

That's more than a joke. Don Prago and Mort Union were members of my college fraternity. Interesting names. When Prago's grandfather landed in America, the official asked him what his name was. He didn't understand. He thought he was asking where he was from. He happened to be from Prague, and said so. Again, the immigration official doing the processing wrote it the way he heard it, "Prago." And today the original Mr. Prago's great-grandchildren bear the name with never a thought that its genesis is in any way accidental, deficient, or infirm.

Mort Union told how his grandfather came to Philadelphia from Russia and saw the word "Union" carved in stone above the entrance to Philadelphia's Union Station. His original name was too long and too Russian to use in America anyhow, so he decided to go ahead and use the name Union.

It is theoretically possible to bore someone with a detailed—and thus automatically flattering—analysis of his name. But it's not nearly as likely to bore him as yet another comment on how lovely the hostess looks in her gown and how appetizing the finely diced white onions look with the green capers on the pink salmon on the silver tray.

You needn't buy an orchard to take a bite out of a peach. And you don't have to learn languages to recognize a few names and learn what they mean.

A little knowledge is a powerful thing.

Frenchmen sing "La Marseillaise." Communists sing the "Internationale."
Israelis sing "Hatikva."

Losers sing "Do You Know My Good Friend So-and-So?"

It can be fun to go prospecting for mutual friends when you're introduced to someone from a city you come from or know well, but only when you're playing slow tennis over a low net. The great game of Do You Know has no more place early in a flirtation than a Girl Scout picnic has on the Lebanese Green Line.

First of all, the search for mutual friends, particularly with all the excitement and energy that usually accompanies the discovery that the two of you have another city in common, is the first refuge of the conversationally impoverished. Flaunt first your conversational richness. There'll be time later to find out if he knows your Aunt Minnie.

Moreover, you're inviting, if not exactly a no-win, then at least a likely-lose situation. Sure, we've all played Do You Know and won. The new friend we fire the name at lights up and says, "Do you know Herman, too? My dearest friend!" The odds, however, are not good. New restaurants, shows, organizations, and small businesses are more likely to fail than succeed. Likewise, the one you ask "Do you know?" is more likely not to care particularly for that person than he is to like him. And the rules say that whatever he thinks of that person, he'll immediately think of *you*.

It would be unkind to deny you know someone in another town merely for fear that he's perceived of as a drip and you don't want to drip away with him. You're under no obligation, however, to testify against yourself—indeed, bring yourself to trial—in a game that's really been taken over by losers.

If you must play Do You Know, play it after you've already won.

The biggest reason not to go fishing for mutual friends with a flirtation target is that it delays your opportunity to display a form that can really win. And in those first few seconds of conversational engagement, anything that doesn't move you forward moves you backward.

The right attitude for successful flirting is, "Those other people we may know in common, baby, have nothing to do with you and me. Let them wait!"

Don't say democracies never practice censorship.

Shortly after World War Two, a delegation of wives of American servicemen stationed on occupation duty in Germany protested to the Pentagon about, of all things, an English-German phrase booklet the army handed out to all American servicemen stationed in West Germany. In the

entire booklet there was only one phrase they didn't like, but the women felt that was enough.

It was, "'*Mein Frau versteht mich nicht*"—"My wife doesn't understand me."

The military quickly realized they'd made a mistake, recalled the booklets, and printed new ones minus the offending sentence.

Ignoring the fact that Germany in those days was full of women willing to perform services for the American troops far beyond translation, I feel the American wives were (a) right to protest and (b) protested for the wrong reasons. It wasn't just that the army was handing American GI's that one inflammatory sentence. That was maybe 5 percent of the "crime"; the remaining 95 percent was that the army was providing an Aperture of Intimacy between American husbands and German *Frauleins*}

In what some call a platonic relationship, conversation can

ramble on for hours without ever getting intimate, or anywhere near. Books, movies, TV, plays, decor, food, sports, fashion, hobbies—conversation within these and hundreds of other topics never offers an Aperture of Intimacy, just as prudent military jets under orders to respect other countries' airspace by an extra seventy-five miles never offer an Aperture of Hostility.

Everybody instinctively understands the Aperture of Intimacy concept and knows good and well who's on which side of it. Pretend you're a jealous mate, and your foray to the punch bowl takes you through the easy-eavesdropping zone of your spouse chatting with a brand-new friend. You feel quite differently if they happen to be discussing, say, the rejuvenation of old ski boots than if they're discussing, say, the possibility of breathing new life into a sagging love relationship.

In Case One, there's no Aperture. In Case Two, the Aperture may have already widened into an uncloseable chasm!

An Aperture of Intimacy, then, is that pinprick in the conversation that invites the conversation to turn from "Fifty minutes isn't really a bad

commute” over to “Of course love at first sight is possible.”

You don’t need an “aperture” to achieve intimacy. Walls can eventually melt. Enough hours of nonintimate but pleasant conversation punctuated by a “Wouldn’t it be fun to continue this over dinner?” can do the trick. In the old movies we knew they were falling in love by the background music. By the time they fell into each other’s arms he, she, and we in the audience were all ready for it.

Why wait that long to find out if that outcome is mutually desired?

An unskilled attempt to achieve an Aperture of Intimacy is a major offense. (“Hey, baby, I’ve checked out every woman here and you’re the one for me! Just tell me what color your coat is and start saying good-bye!”) With sophisticated men and women, though, the opposite—the old, prudish avoidance

of anything “personal”—can be almost as much of a disqualifying offense. (Speed limits came first. Minimum speed limits—punishment for going too slowly—came much later.)

Skilled attempts to reach that aperture help you (a) stimulate early real conversation—the Grand March toward Intimacy— with those who welcome it, (b) allow for gentle disengagement from those who don’t, and (c) make sure you waste no time telling the difference!

A skilled attempt should be an invitation to join you in “personal” talk, but not a challenge. It shouldn’t take more than a minute of casual cocktail conversation for a man to say something like, “My ex-wife always told me I had a giveaway grin when I get around women I’d like to talk to. Take a look! What do you think? Have I got it licked?”

Look at that payload of traffic and what it accomplishes. That flip little throwaway line says, “I used to be married, but I’m not anymore.” “I really enjoy communicating with women.” “I may be a little bit of a rogue, but not objectionably so.” “Because I used ‘women’ in the plural, you can’t really tell from what I’ve told you whether the ‘women’ I want to talk to right now means you and only you, you plus some of the others at the party, you plus

all the others at the party, or, conceivably, one, some or all the other women at the party except you!” “My dumb little question at the end, like a frisky puppy, invites you to play. Let’s see now whether you play, and how.”

Now it’s her turn. Her options are vast, if not infinite. She may ask how long you were married, how many times, how long you’ve been unmarried, how you like being single, and, if you don’t like it, what’s the hardest aspect of being single for you to handle.

She may say she likes all grins, giveaway and others. She may say all grins make her leery, she never notices grins at a nice party where so many people are grinning for one reason

or another, she doesn’t know what’s so wrong about wanting to talk to women. Or, playing the other way, she may say maybe if you hadn’t wanted to talk to other women so much she wouldn’t have been your ex-wife, or since she just met you exactly ninety seconds ago, she’s got no way to compare your present grin with any of your non-giveaway grins or your face in its natural non-grinning state so, sorry, she can’t advise you!

She may “see” your attempt and raise you. She may say, “You’re asking the wrong woman. Every man who talks to me tries to wipe that anticipation grin off his face, and none of them quite makes it.”

She may, like a magnolia blossom fearful of withering if touched, pretend she didn’t hear you, put a nervous grin on her own face, and say, “Isn’t this a nice party?”

One thing she will not do, for sure, is scream and run tell the hostess you’re being forward or she’s being annoyed.

A good technique is to try lots of cool talk about hot things: husbands, wives, relationships, quarrels, jealousy, male and female roles, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, sex objects, pornography, eroticism and holistic health, jogging and desire, love at first sight—the works—but strictly about *them out there*, third parties, abstract principles in general, lofty theories. Never let on that you’re talking “how about you and me?” until you get what the diplomats call the clear response from the other side.

A risk-free way to try to drill that Aperture of Intimacy is to play the reporter, to let your traffic say, "I'm not going to get into these tacky party games of trying to win your attention and affection. You're much too attractive a woman and I'm much too urbane a social scientist for that. As long as we're standing here together, though, and in no immediate danger of our white wine giving out, let me take a few minutes to review today's passing parade through the perspective of an extraordinarily appealing woman like you who's willing to brief an objective reporter like me!"

You can then "interview" her in a manner that gives you freedom to get into areas which, if you weren't "interviewing," would be forward, annoying, off-limits, and even bad taste. "Can you tell whether a man is interested in you, or just being polite to the nearest woman at a party?" "How do most men go about their approach shots these days?" "Are they always obvious?" "About what percentage of them do it well?" "How long does it usually take you to decide whether or not you welcome his attentions?" "How do you say, 'Hey, I'm not uninterested, but I'm not all that overeager, either. Slow down'?" "How do you put him out of his misery if you know that's as far as you care to go?" "How much depends on the man himself, and how much on how he conducts himself in trying to attract you?" "Has a man you'd already counted out ever made a comeback with you?" "How did he do it?" "What's the most ingenious line a man ever used on you?" "Were you able to reward him for it?" "Do you do anything to try to rescue a man's ego when you don't want to pursue a relationship?" "Do you ever take the initiative and try to approach a man?" "Are you as obvious as you say the men are who approach you?" "What do you think has changed the most sexually [or any way] between unmarried [or any other kind of] men and women over the past ten years?"

Theoretically, it would be possible to measure everybody's first-sight sex appeal to the opposite sex, calibrated scientifically to a fraction of a point, and pinpoint the world's winner in both categories. Practically speaking, it's enough to admit the existence of "superstars." In the closing minutes of sports events they frequently announce the MVP, the one chosen by the experts as the Most Valuable Player of that particular game.

We're too civilized to do that at parties—host or hostess clinking a glass for attention and standing on a chair to announce, “The most appealing man and woman at this party, judging from the number of people who've tried to start conversations with them and the intensity with which they've tried, are Eric and Joan!”

It really isn't necessary. The Erics and Joans of the world know who they are, and so do the rest of us. These teachings and tactics of breaking out of small talk into the Aperture of Intimacy are compiled after years of detailed discussions with superstars of both sexes.

English and Chinese are the only two major languages that have the same word for “you” for intimates *and* strangers, for those higher than you and those lower. (Chinese has at least a possible alternative if the person is significantly higher or you wish to do him special honor. English, therefore, is the single most democratic language in the world!) In other languages, you use the “formal” form of “you” with almost everybody you deal with in the outside world and reserve the “familiar” form, as the grammar books tell us without a hint of a smile, for “intimates, children, and animals” (e.g., in French: *vous, tu*; German: *Sie, du*).

In Norway, during the Nazi occupation of World War Two, the formal form, *De*, almost melted away entirely in favor of the familiar *du*. It symbolized that the entire nation, strangers as well as intimates, were united in common struggle against the invader.

After the war, Norwegian liberals and sentimentalists rejoiced in the “breaking down” of those starchy old barriers erected by the two different forms of address. “We've finished them off for good,” they figured. After all, if the young people of Norway hear everybody addressed as *du*, they'll never even realize there *was* a *De*

Imagine their disappointment when, as the hatreds of war evaporated, so did the unifying *du*. Somehow the young Norwegians learned there used to be a *De* for people you didn't know too well. And they liked it. Norway is now back to normal: *du* for intimates, children, and animals; *De* for everybody else.

And so is the initiative pattern of sexual attraction.

Women flirt. Women hint. Women invite response. Men move.

The reader is, therefore, begged not to bridle at what might seem an unintentional drift in these examples toward defining the opening of Apertures of Intimacy as something men try to do with women. The drift is intentional!

The first principle is to be aware that *standing still* in a conversation you'd like to result in the opening of an Aperture is *losing ground*.

The shy, scholarly boy who calls one of the superstar girls at home to ask her for a date doesn't fool her when he chickens out and hides haltingly behind a bunch of ad-lib questions about algebra. He's a pretty oafish figure. And so is the man who stands there having just met a superstar woman at the party and, long after the suitable tribute to small talk, continues, all the while smiling like the front end of a Japanese bulldozer, to emphasize the serious reading advantages of a fifty-minute commute.

Marines don't hit the beach, then lounge around in the sand. Make a move!

In opening Apertures, the shortest distance between two points is an angle.

Obviously a Soviet aircraft flying between two points inside the Soviet Union triggers no alarm inside America's Cheyenne Mountain command post. If that aircraft heads out across the Atlantic Ocean, America pays closer attention. If it veers peacefully off toward Cuba, it causes a different reaction than if it beelines for downtown Philadelphia.

Apertures open most easily when the conversation veers into love, lust, passion, sex, marriage, infidelity, jealousy, divorce, gossip, scandal about other people!

It's no more difficult to provoke conversation in these topics, even with a new acquaintance of the opposite sex, than it is to tee up a golf ball on a course you've never played before.

“Your brooch is like the one in a picture my old college roommate showed me of a woman he was insane about. He decided to sneak a call to her after twenty years. She got all excited and wrote him a letter, which his wife found and then threw a fit. I can’t wait to hear his latest report!”

“You’ve got a smile like that woman you see in the Swiss travel posters. I just learned she’s not even Swiss. She’s Danish, and she’s famous in Europe as the model who never compromised her principles to get a gig.”

“Nice to meet you. You’re just in time to enjoy a ‘silent movie’ with me. That man who just came in—he’s taking off his coat now—has no idea the woman in green just to the left of the portrait is here. Watch his expression when he sees her!”

“For a minute I thought you were the woman who came to me for advice about a year ago right after she joined our firm. I advised her to limit her conversations with one of our owners to office hours only. She went ahead and met him for cocktails and that led to dinner and that led to demands to go with him to Singapore, and now it’s one of those harassment suits!”

Comments at more or less that level of provocation serve as good tests of attitude. She can give it short-shrift response with a minimal “Dear me.” She can be cool but not frosty with a six- to eight-word comment, and then change the subject. She can trade blow for blow and ask questions. She can see you and raise you with lurid scenarios of what might come next. She can go all the way with her own attempt to achieve an Aperture with you by asking how you would feel if you were this one or that one in the drama and what you think of people who do things like this one or that one did.

Is there “play” in her reaction? Is there “give”? Is she comfortable? Is she enjoying it? Is she glad you brought it up? Does she appear relieved she’s finally met someone fun to talk with? Do other “magnets” in the room exert pull threatening to divert her attentions from you? Or is she “yours”?

You don’t need self-deceiving answers. You need ice-cold intelligent evaluations, before it gets too late to give her a polite good-bye and try for an Aperture with someone else.

Another effective device is to make something out of nothing, much out of little, big out of small.

“No wonder you’re in such great shape. You reached for that pickle like an aerobics teacher!”

“You really intimidated the bartender by describing that drink from Bermuda. Did you intend to?”

“Was I hallucinating, or did you just congratulate that woman for taking a man away from you? Can you teach me how to be that secure?”

“You seem so comfortable with men. Do you have a lot of brothers?”

Most talk beats no talk. Talk that leads to topics like politics, food and restaurants, clothing and fashion, fitness and health, TV and home video, travel, music, theater, and dozens of other “nonviolent” areas of conversation are all better than “Gee, isn’t everything here nice?”

However, if your “plane” is capable, why stop at Gander, Greenland, Iceland, the Faroes, the Shetlands, and the Orkneys? Why not head straight for London—the classic and intimate man-woman topics that mark the inevitable destination of successful man-woman talk anyhow?

Making it all bounce off third parties keeps any of this “from referring to you and me.” That way you earn the comfort of remoteness *and* the sweet little sting of talking about things real and relevant. You have forward movement, but nothing approaching aggression.

People enjoy talking about relationships—the one they have, the one that got away, the one they want. But they first

have to be made comfortable with such talk. The third-party bounce, the teasing observation-compliment, the gentle joking, all add up to a license to talk “relationship”—the Aperture of Intimacy.

“There are so many good-looking people here who’re fun to talk to,” he might safely begin, “and they may not want to hear about people over

eighty, but I heard an interesting theory the other day and I want to get your opinion.

“You know how some husbands and wives well into their eighties have such a warmth between them—they walk around holding hands and smiling at each other. And others the same age continually look at their mates and growl.

“Some people, according to a psychologist who studied it, actually ‘take a snapshot’ with their minds the instant they see someone, and that becomes their ‘official photo’ of that person forevermore. In other words, when a woman with that kind of makeup looks at her husband, he’s not eighty. He’s never a day over twenty-one.

“The other ones who don’t work like that look at him and say, ‘What in hell am I doing with this old goat?’

“Which kind are you?”

That, legally, may qualify as an intimate question. But it’s not improper. It’s charming, even when asked by a man of a woman whose last name he can’t spell yet. It doesn’t take an intimacy license to ask it. It could be asked of any woman—or man—in the world by a TV game show host! It has the power, though, to get some good things going conversationally—and about topics closer to pay dirt than the new bus lanes during morning and afternoon rush hours.

“I heard an interesting discussion on a train the other day,” he might venture. “A group of men were debating the best way to tell women they’ve just met that they’re not interested in making love on the first date.”

As an umpire, I’d wave that one safe on first if a man tried to traffic that to a woman after a few minutes of good party talk today. It’s interesting, relevant, pointed, and loaded with redeeming social value. A woman who laughs and plays with that theme, perhaps offering specific suggestions or pinwheel-ing off into anecdotes somehow related, has been successfully engaged in conversation. One who quivers away from the whole thing is a woman who, though not responsive to that theme from that man at that

time, has nonetheless not been improperly approached. All she's done is decline to ratify an Aperture of Intimacy. That may be disappointing to a man desiring more from that woman, but it won't likely make his memoirs of major defeats. His attempt was clean and stopped well shy of scandal.

No harm done. She may, in fact, get rabidly conversational when he downgrades the topic to, say, the joys of hot buttered asparagus! Don't try to march too many elephants simultaneously over the rope bridge of early conversation.

Friends are those from whom no favors come by surprise. You know what your friends can be counted upon to deliver. The trophy for successful game-playing is friendship. Firewood is achieved by chopping. Crops are achieved by sowing. Friends are achieved by conversation. If you want that person as a friend, start talking—and Making Him/Her Talk!

The objective is to make that person you want to befriend leave the encounter with you glad he had it and looking forward to more. The biggest error we make, especially in the case of men trying to make women want more, is supposing we have to impress. Wrong. Dangerous.

Instead of “Is she impressed with me?” ask yourself, “Is she comfortable in conversation with me?” And “Am I giving her enough evidence to get the point that *I* am impressed with *her*—and impressed with her on grounds more proud and valid than mere sexual ambition!”

* * *

We aim now for a level seldom reached by those who teach How to Win the One You Love (Or Would Like the Chance to Get Close to in Hopes Love or Something Similar Might Develop). Everybody tells us if we dress right, stand right, look right, and do everything impeccably in word and deed from that point forward, things should proceed inexorably in our favor.

Such an assumption is, of course, wrong. The question least touched upon in the advice columns is the most important question of all—namely, “Have I got a shot, even if I do everything right? And how can I tell?”

Military officers who scored brilliantly on strategy and tactics in the sandbox warfare back at the academy can nonetheless come apart on the battlefield. Things in war—and love—just don't work the way the books promise. There are women and men whose reverie can simply not be unriveted from those unexplainable losers they adore.

Success doesn't work on some people. *Failure* works.

Conversation doesn't work on some people. Muteness works.

Some worthwhile and attractive people will cling to partners who can't complete a sentence without egregious error no matter how piercing other contenders are with their wit or pleasing with their follow-up style. Who of us can't attest to an attraction to somebody who, from the moment of meeting onward, proceeds to do everything absolutely wrong?

It's important to know if you're a "player" in the estimation of the one you've singled out for conversational entrapment. A player isn't necessarily somebody he or she hopes will suggest cocktails immediately followed by dinner and more of the same no later than day after tomorrow. You can be involved, too busy to be bothered, not really looking for serious attachment—and still mentally mark someone you've just met

as a player: admittedly potential, admittedly eventual, admittedly remote and abstract, but a player nonetheless.

It's no sin to be denied player status by someone you'd like to get to know. The sin comes in not being *aware* you've been denied player status. A higher sin is being denied player status and thinking you're doing great.

The highest sin of all, though, is being accorded player status and, either through imperceptiveness, modesty, misread signals, or simply thinking such a victory is too good to be true, not realizing you've won player status.

Signals abound. Is she picking up sprightly on your conversational leads, or responding like a courageous enemy prisoner of war who knows her rights of silence under the Geneva Convention? Is he having some difficulty maintaining eye contact with you during the conversation? Does a noise, a

door opening, an interruption, another person arriving break the concentrational fix between you right away? Does the spiderweb connecting you survive the wind? Or does the one you'd like to get to know latch on to the slightest interruption to use as a "rescue" from you?

Is he undergoing an internal "power struggle" with his "cabinet" divided, his "diplomats" wanting to pay attention to you, his "military" (his body) tugging him away yelling, "Enough of this already. Let's move on!" Don't lie to yourself. Is the connection between you congealing, or is he just being polite?

In short, is the conversation that's linking you, after three or four developmental minutes, still an embryo in the intensive care unit, or is it a husky football player you can enjoy watching cavort as a proud parent in the stands?

We close on a stunt of such unique power that psychologists have warned me it's too precious to print. I suspect they'd prefer to sell it to their clients as witchcraft of their own!

There may not be a way to tell all you'd like to know about

all players at all times, but there is a way a man can tell if a woman regards him as a potential lover.

All it requires is (a) the woman must be carrying something, even a small handbag, and (b) the two of them must have the opportunity to walk together; a few dozen feet down a corridor will do.

A liaison need not be imminent for this test. He can be an employee of a company and she can be the secretary of the owner of a conglomerate come to buy it out. They can be meeting for the very first time. After the initial exploratory meeting, they can be walking down the hall to lunch—executives, support personnel, consultants, he and she, all of them together. No problem. If he stages this test, he'll know whether she regards him as an eventual lover or, as we used to say in high school about girls we didn't regard as lovers, as an "aunt" or a "librarian."

He simply walks on her encumbered side.

If she's carrying her bag or whatever in her right hand, he should be sure to walk on that side. If he happens to be on the side where her hand is free, he should cross over to the side where it's not.

If she views him as someone she might someday choose to share intimacy with, *she will subconsciously shift whatever she's carrying over to her other side—in order to leave her closer hand free for holding!*

Listening

Listening is a perversion of human nature. It must be deliberately learned. If properly mastered, listening brilliantly can move you as far forward as speaking brilliantly.

“Be a good listener” is written off as one of the standard bits of advice proper parents give their young. It deserves more excitement. It’s nothing less than a treasure map.

For most of us, talking is simply more fun than listening. We instinctively use the periods when other people are talking not to listen, but to decide what we’re going to say next. Since we ourselves don’t listen, we’re subconsciously smart enough not to expect to get listened to very often.

That’s where we strike. That’s where we knife in and use listening as our offensive weapon.

If you speak, are studying, or could be persuaded to learn a foreign language, you can play an elitist game that will demonstrate the power of listening. A rabbi in my hometown was so beloved—in fact revered—that he was retained by the congregation despite the fact that he was the most boring man on earth. It was impossible to hang on to one of his sermons much longer than a green cowhand could hang onto a bucking bronco.

His sermons never lasted longer than fifteen minutes, but by that time you were long calcified. “How long did you stay with him this time?” worshipers used to ask each other as they filed out of Friday night services. Rarely had anyone outlasted the rabbi’s windup; never his pitch.

At about the time I was completing my second year of high school Spanish, I hit upon a trick that still works wonders. I pretended, as I sat there, that the rabbi was the ambassador of Israel and it was my job to translate his sermon simultaneously into Spanish for the United Nations.

It was fun. It was such fun that I remained attentive throughout. My attentiveness attracted attention. People noticed my alertness, my obvious concentration upon the rabbi's every word. I became envied. Other congregants supposed I had plugged in to some religious resource that seemed to be eluding them.

The rabbi's wife found a way of asking, without being unkind to her husband, how it was that I alone seemed to emerge from the sermons so refreshed.

"I get a lot out of the rabbi's sermons," I told her. I never felt prompted to atone for that remark on any Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) since. It was not a lie; and I think the act of paying attention to someone else, whether through genuine interest or interest artificially contrived, is an act of kindness.

(I actually used to go home, pull down my English-Spanish dictionary, and look up the words the rabbi used that I didn't know in Spanish!)

The "translation" game is good for looking like you're paying attention. Translators, like newscasters, are notorious for not remembering one single item they dealt with five seconds earlier. Here's a much better mental game that requires no expertise in any language except your own.

Opportunists have given charm a bad name. Many people even feel guilty trying to befriend someone they hold no real affection for or interest in. Civilization calls for giving a little better than you get. There's nothing wrong—and there's a great deal right—in operating inside an attitude that says, "I am not merely in a conversation; I'm in an endeavor to gain your esteem. / *aim to win you over*, whereupon you will buy my wares, vote for my candidates, accept my calls, fulfill my requests, fall in love with me, water my flowers if I miss my return flight, lend me money and, if nothing else, at least say nice things about me, thereby enhancing my reputation."

There are alternative fantasies. Pretend the President has called you into the Oval Office and said, "This is too important for the FBI. You and I have to deal with it personally. You're about to meet and start a conversation with someone. It will seem like a normal conversation flowing out of your

everyday life. Go ahead and play it that way, but bear in mind that that person's thoughts and feelings are of vital importance to our national security, and we must learn everything about him!"

Or you can pretend you've been asked by an extraterrestrial intelligence to audition people on earth to see who, in addition to you, might qualify for perpetual life on the planet Utopia later on.

Invent your own. Games like these work for children. They can work for any grown-up who doesn't consider mental play childish.

Long before modern psychology began to explore hidden continents of the mind, *Reader's Digest* wrote of a lifeboat survivor during the war who just didn't look like he'd endured the same thirty-nine days afloat on the same starvation rations as the others. When rescued, far from bedraggled, he appeared almost chipper.

When asked why, he explained, "The others simply took the crackers as crackers and the water as water. I built elaborate dreams of dining in my favorite restaurants in Paris and New York with my favorite people and being hugged by my favorite chefs, who begged for the chance to delight us with their favorite gastronomical *tours de force* of the day—along with the proper wines, of course, and with unspeakably tempting confections to follow as dessert."

Play whatever game succeeds in helping you start paying attention to those whose conversation ordinarily wouldn't interest you. Even if it's nothing but counting his words that begin with the letter *p* before he takes another breath!

Right away you reap part of your payoff. Most people are accustomed to being heard but not heeded. Your obvious attention to what he's saying may be the nicest compliment he's had in years. He will peg you immediately as a person of good taste and (even if you don't say a word) a brilliant conversationalist! He will seek out the host, if this happens to be a party situation, and congratulate him on succeeding in luring fascinating people like you to his parties.

It's a good idea to emphasize the fact that you're paying attention by asking an occasional question directly related to what he is telling you. Don't expect to hear better stories just because you've started paying attention, any more than a pathologist expects to see healthier tissue just because he's got a more powerful microscope. Much of what you hear will remain long-winded and self-serving. Interrupt with, "How many of you met with the President personally?" "How much did you say you paid for the stock in 1974?" "How'd you learn so much about Kuala Lumpur?" "How did you manage to get admitted to the Yankee dugout?"—questions that let him know you're very much in his audience.

Successful courses have been taught in how to remember names and faces. Those courses could more honestly be named How to Remember Names and Faces for the Purpose of Flattering Those So Remembered in Hopes of Achieving Some Selfish End. Everybody knows what a knockout of an advantage you have when you remember the person's name.

Why stop with his face and name?

Go ahead and prepare a little "dossier" on him, listing as much as you can recall of the stories he told, what he's done, what he's proud of, whom he admires, what restaurants he likes, his favorite anchorman, which magazine he reads first, whom he voted for, whether or not he'd vote for him again, what sports he takes most seriously, where he grew up, what he's drinking, what movies excited him, and any pithy little quotes or bits of philosophy that, when repeated back to him by you the next week, month, or year, will so cripple him with flattery he'll feel like falling to his knees and paying homage to the tops of your shoes.

When you get home, take his card. If he didn't give you a card, pull out a blank one about the size of a business card and, after his name, write down whatever chunks of data you can remember about him that, when recalled by you, will brand you in his estimation as an almost supernaturally gifted listener.

You need not complete the questionnaire suggested above. Any three, two, or even one single fact in addition to his face and name that you casually recall when you meet again will stun him, absolutely stun him into your

sway. Remembering something he said will in fact forgive you for forgetting his name!

Department store Santas report that, even more rewarding than the pay, is the explosion of delight that illuminates a child's face as he or she gets hoisted upon Santa's knee. You will feel precisely that delight when you tum the ray gun of recollection upon people who, despite their wealth, power, and prominence, aren't even accustomed to being heard, much less remembered.

How to drop your treasured little recollection into the next

conversation with him is a separate science. Obviously you don't just fish out the cards of those you're likely to meet at the upcoming party, memorize their entries, and then surprise them by calling them by their name, shaking their hand, and saying, "Hey, let me tell you what I remember about you from the last time we met."

Once Jerry, an entrepreneur with ventures in never fewer than four or five businesses at any one time, told me a story about a man who accidentally drove his rented car off a ferryboat in Yugoslavia.

That's a data chunk, an entry, a piece of Jerry's "literature." I entered it in my "Jerry" dossier.

Months later, rather than criticize one of his new ideas I happened not to like, I said, "Jerry, I honestly think you could make more money driving cars off ferryboats in Yugoslavia."

Jerry was so pleased that I'd obviously been listening to him, so impressed that I'd found one of his stories worth remembering, and so amused at the way I brought it back to bite him, that my criticism became more endearing than anybody else's praise!

And imagine the effect when, later, I used a piece of his "literature" to praise something he proposed.

Each nation has a history. The smaller the nation is, the more credit you get from its citizens for knowing something about it. You're not likely, as a foreigner, to stagger a Russian by remarking that his country begins in eastern Europe and goes all the way eastward to the Pacific Ocean. You won't impress an Englishman by knowing there's a Buckingham Palace. Don't expect a Frenchman to cry "genius" just because you know his capital city is Paris.

That's because all three of those countries are large, important, "celebrity" countries.

You can, however, please Mexicans mightily by knowing their Independence Day is May 5. You'll cripple Bulgarians by

knowing their language belongs to the Slavic family. You'll peel the socks off Norwegians by knowing their capital is Oslo and not Denmark.

You could probably get an Estonian to marry you just by knowing where Estonia is!

Those are smaller countries whose vital lore is not part of the world body of assumed knowledge.

Credit for knowledge increases in inverse proportion to the expectation that one might possess that knowledge.

If we can catapult an Indonesian into spontaneous folk dancing just because we know that the population of his country is predominantly Muslim, imagine how much more power we wield when we deal not with nations, but with individuals.

Individuals, like nations, have major *holidays* (births, graduations, getting out of the army, wedding anniversaries), *territory* (where they were born, raised, educated, stationed, commute from, spend weekends, and choose to vacation), *culture* (what they read, watch, disdain, wait in line to buy tickets for), *politics* (whom they campaign for at parties, argue about, deride, denounce) and *cuisine* (was it a crab house on the Maryland shore, a barbecue pit in the Carolinas, or a fish stew wharf in the Greek islands they

made you swear you'd never pass within one hundred fifty miles of without trying?).

Individuals also have their own heroes and villains, as vivid to them personally as Nathan Hale and Benedict Arnold are to Americans nationally. Everyone's life is peppered with historical highlights—winning Miss Arizona, getting a better job after getting fired, having gallstones removed, ambushing Wall Street by engineering a merger that made the evening news and the front cover of *Barron's*, running for the gamewinning touchdown as a freshman, successfully taking the butcher to small claims court, etc.

Insignificant to the world at large. Unimportant to the rest of us in the room. But very big deal indeed to the ones who live them.

The wizard who pulled off the merger will likely be prouder of that fresh achievement than he is of having run for the touchdown thirty years ago. But a man who never did anything greater than run for a touchdown thirty years ago will be just as proud of that as the wizard is of his merger.

You think it's ridiculous that somebody can get ego juice out of a thirty-year-old touchdown? So what? You may also think Chile has a ridiculous shape and Iceland a ridiculous climate. Don't waste an erg or an instant ridiculing. Deal with it. Use it. Turn it all to your gain.

National holidays and anniversaries are regularly observed by the population. Our individual festivities have, obviously, a smaller following.

Except for those of topmost celebrities, individual big deals are rarely even known, much less celebrated, praised, or even mentioned by those outside our tight little circle of family, friends, and associates.

Much good fiction pinwheels around computer freaks breaking into other people's computer systems and playing hob with competitors, banks, the Pentagon, even NORAD's headquarters, where, at least in fiction, a smart computer gamesman could make America think it was under attack by enemy missiles.

Listening—not just hearing, but deliberate, clinical, opportunistic listening—is tapping into other people’s “computer” systems. If you wind up in possession of someone else’s secret love letters, his income tax down to the penny, or the five-letter code on his cash withdrawal card, he would, upon confrontation with that information by you, quite likely be astonished that you knew. He keeps that kind of information carefully guarded.

He’ll be just as astonished, though, when you show yourself to be in possession of the fact that the new country club wasn’t quite sure it wanted to admit him until he beat the tennis pro in straight sets. He’ll still want to know how you knew, even though he himself bragged about it to all who would listen at the trade show the year before last!

That’s how unaccustomed we are to being listened to.

Ordinary listening is the most flattering kind of espionage. Rare and rich is the joy of having our most triumphant “secrets” ferreted out and broadcast by “brilliant conversationalists” like you willing to speak up and let all present know of our hidden glories.

Amplifying the triumphs of others is undeniably one way to win their favor. But is it an acceptable way to win their favor? Every language has words of contempt for those who win their way forward by kissing the anatomical opposite of faces. We somehow feel favor should be won by being the fairest, the fleetest, the fittest—that kind of thing.

Baloney.

There’s a difference between drip irrigation and a flood. Dumping manure is not the same as fertilizing soil with the most sophisticated methods.

He who listens, spots “entries,” remembers them, catalogues them, retrieves them before the next likely encounter, and zings them appropriately into the conversation with zest and wit *deserves* all the goodwill that flows unto him.

Don’t worry that your campaign of making an indelible impression was so utterly calculated. There are major religions that would honor you for what

you did.

“I don’t know what it is that she’s got,” the man said about the woman everybody was trying to meet, “but whenever she enters a room, it comes right in with her.”

We all know what he’s talking about. But what is it? What is that *z7*?

Is it just sex appeal? No. Too many women and men have more sex appeal than nature should allow to concentrate in one clump, but still don’t have *it*. And we all know men and women who exude *it* without being sexually appealing at all.

Is it the energy, charisma, charm, niceness, strength, confidence, magnetism, posture, bearing, success, or attitude of the person possessing *it*? We’ve passed clear through what we’re looking for without finding the exact address, and we’re still lost. And we’re going to stay that way, because the elusive *it* is the result of just the right dash of spice from every jar in that rack, and more, combined in a kind of molecular harmony within a person that allows *it* to be communicated effortlessly to others.

Does the *it* make people stars, or do stars—after their aerobics, morning yogurt, and daily talk with their investments manager—retire to the den and work on their *it*?

The failures—rather, the “presuccessful”—among us get annoyed when celebrities are praised for being so “nice,” for being so “easy to talk to” and “acting just like ordinary people.” They look skyward and say, “Make me successful, and I swear I’ll be nice, easy to talk to, and act just like an ordinary person, too.”

The plea comes true more often than the promise. The ability to make a roomful of people think they hear heavenly music and feel a ripple of volcanic warmth merely by entering that room is an attribute possessed by very few of even our most major celebrities.

It was the kind of party young men and women throw before they learn it’s not quite enough: booze, pretzels, a hastily arrayed cake brought by one of

the guests, coats on the bed. I was the host. When I invited my doctor, he asked if he might have a friend of his meet him at my party because the two of them had to go someplace together later on.

The friend got there first.

“How do you do?” he said when I opened the door. “I’m Frank.”

He gave me his last name, too, but it was lost in the crowd noise. Or it was before I recognized the absolute necessity of getting names and getting them right. Or both.

Anyhow, I invited him in, offered him a drink, and proceeded to try to make him comfortable.

“What do you do, Frank?” I asked.

“I play football,” he said.

“I do, too,” I said. “I mean what do you do for a living?”

He repeated that same answer. He played football—for the New York Giants!

His last name, the name I fumbled, was of course Gifford.

You don’t have to be a losing football team to know what it feels like to get scored on. Here was the most popular player in America of my far and away favorite sport, a man on everybody’s list of the ten most known and beloved Americans. Here was Frank Gifford in my apartment—and I didn’t even know who he was!

If they indicted people for offenses like that, sure, I could put up a fair to middling defense. I wasn’t expecting Frank Gifford at my front door. My doctor only told me his “friend” would come by; he never mentioned his friend’s name. I didn’t catch his last name at the door. He didn’t look like Frank Gifford. His face did, but I’d always thought Frank Gifford had to be bigger. You’ve seen football players lying on the ground fist-pounding the Astroturf in shame and rage at missing a pass. That’s what *I* did.

I should have known from that big hot cloud of *it* in the doorway that he had to be somebody like Frank Gifford.

What happened next was pure Super Bowl play. Some celebrities have to be rushed to the intensive care unit of an ego clinic when they're merely addressed by a slightly wrong name,

mistaken for someone else, or insufficiently greeted. And here Frank Gifford had just gone totally *unrecognized*'.

Gifford spent the next half hour making sure / was okay!

He laughed away my explanations and apologies and said he wished that kind of thing would happen more often. He asked where I was from, and then talked the football of my region, asking *me* questions about *my* opinions of coaches and players in *my* territory.

As word filtered through the party that Frank Gifford was there, all the guests gravitated into a circle around him, and he graciously held a "press conference," answering everybody's questions and chuckling at everybody's comments.

Travel agency owner Gabriel Reiner once had to spend twenty minutes trying to convince a rural telegraph office clerk in a tiny village in western Russia that, regardless of her never having heard of it, there nonetheless was a place called New York City!

I know how I feel about that telegraph lady.

I can only guess what Frank Gifford thought of me.

But that's not important.

What's important is that Gifford's zt-propulsion made me feel better about myself. He made *me* talk.

It takes a champion to make the speechless talk!

Malcolm X and I were friends.

The likelihood of any fraternal linkup over the racial, ideological, philosophical, and religious chasms that separated us may have seemed slim, but Malcolm and I many times laughed our way over all that.

The Black Muslims were introduced to white America in a 1960 article in *Esquire* magazine by black journalist William Worthy. We read what seemed like incredible tales of blacks in poor neighborhoods and prisons who had embraced Islam as one (and only one) act of rebellion against the Christian descendants of their white slave masters.

The Black Muslims wanted their own black nation on the continent of North America. They referred to the white man as the Devil and the Two-Legged Rattlesnake. Elijah Muhammad, their founder, issued his mandates from Black Muslim headquarters in Chicago. Their spokesman was Malcolm X. I invited him on my show.

At the time I was broadcasting from Mamma Leone's Restaurant on West Forty-eighth Street in New York. Malcolm X arrived behind a phalanx of tall, strong, impeccably groomed bodyguards known as the FOI (Fruit of Islam). Their buffed fingernails gleamed in the subdued lighting. They called all white men "sir" and made a show of deferring to them, not with a shuffle but with a kind of military snap and precision.

Even though his face was not yet well known, it was easy to tell which one was Malcolm. He radiated enough charisma to bum Kleenex, wilt flowers, and melt plastic.

I'd been what I always thought was a racial "liberal." As a senior at the University of North Carolina, I'd led the fight among the athletes to desegregate Kenan Stadium so black students (the university had just admitted its first four) could sit in the student section of home football games. Martin Luther King might have appreciated that, but not Malcolm X. As far as he was concerned, there was very little difference between me and the Orange County coordinator of the Ku Klux Klan.

If you weren't ready to grant blacks their own nation somewhere on American territory and compensate them financially for all the years of slavery, you were just another Two-Legged Rattlesnake.

In early 1965 Malcolm told the world a hit squad was out to get him. I joined the white reporters who wondered if Malcolm were just posturing to hit back at the Elijah Muhammad faction that had thanked him for making them famous by ejecting him from the movement.

In December 1969, after Malcolm was murdered, I traded jobs for a week with talk host Bill Smith of station WKAT in Miami Beach, which covered the major population centers of south Florida. He did a call-in program, and I asked the listeners, as the decade was ending, which of the leaders assassinated during those 1960's would be most missed in years to come: John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, or Malcolm X.

To my amazement—in south Florida, mind you—the winner was Malcolm X by quite a wide margin. And far from all his votes came from black listeners.

Malcolm's autobiography mentioned me as one of only two white reporters he trusted. Over the years more and more people (not fewer and fewer, as you might expect) have come up to me and congratulated me on that distinction. One businesswoman, an unamended white Woodstock veteran of the radical counterculture, flat out gave me a better deal than I asked for because, despite my conservative reputation, "Malcolm said you were okay"!

Malcolm has grown in literature and legend and hardened into a lustrous and mellowed permanence.

How did I earn that piggyback ride into history inside Malcolm's autobiography?

It wasn't just by Making Him Talk.

Making Malcolm X talk was no problem. I trace his deciding I was "okay" to one of our phone conversations in which I literally silenced him—shut him up completely—and then made him talk about something he never intended talking about to anybody.

I got a postcard from Malcolm one day from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, where he'd been invited by Arabs incredulous at reports of mass conversions of American blacks to their Islamic religion. When the headlines told me he was back in New York, I gave him a call.

“Who’s calling?” his secretary asked.

“Tell him it’s the Two-Legged Rattlesnake,” I said.

Malcolm came on the line and returned my jape with more of his racial jargon. We bantered back and forth, the way we usually did as a warmup, and then I fired the question that stunned him.

“Malcolm,” I asked, “did you take any pictures while you were in Mecca?”

That may not seem like such a conversation stopper, until you realize it’s a little like asking a rabbi if he had any good pork chops in Jerusalem. Mecca is the Holy City. You don’t aim cameras and click in Mecca the way you do in other cities, including other holy cities.

Malcolm didn’t say a word for a while.

Finally he responded. “Interesting you should ask me that. Muslims, you know, are forbidden to take pictures in Mecca. When I arrived, the top spiritual people greeted me and said that because I was one of the most unusual Muslims ever to visit Mecca—a black convert from America—they wanted to grant me dispensation. They said I was free to take my camera and photograph anything I liked.

“And you know,” he continued, “I was so overcome with emotion that I didn’t take one single picture the whole time I was there!”

I spent most of my time with Malcolm being outraged by his rhetoric. I couldn’t believe he actually said, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, “The chickens are coming home to roost.”

For that one instant on the phone, however, I felt he and I were like that French soldier and German soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front*,

hugging and sobbing together in a foxhole between the opposing trenches in no-man's-land.

My show was on radio, not television. It was local, not network. Yet from that moment forward, Malcolm cooperated with me, came to the show even on short notice, as though I were a star on prime-time network TV. Or the imam of his personal mosque.

I cried when they shot him down.

* * *

Eleanor Roosevelt was “z7-radiant.” Whom was she like?

Some may suppose Eleanor Roosevelt achieved that special First Lady luster because of the overwhelming popularity of her four-term husband, her widely syndicated newspaper column, “My Day,” the fact that she was First Lady during the war, or the tendency of the media of her time to be overweeningly kind to the Mighty.

Almost everybody assumed all that about Mrs. Roosevelt— until they met her. After that, nobody did!

I felt that power just walking across a room with her. That may be all I did with that legendary lady, but I did at least that.

My mission as producer of the “Tex and Jinx” radio show in 1958 was to meet Eleanor Roosevelt at the elevator and escort her across the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria to the Peacock Alley lounge where the show originated.

A student of *it* once wrote, “Nobility will shine through a hole in the elbow.”

I agree. If we had flown in someone who'd never heard of Eleanor Roosevelt (maybe that telegraph lady from the Russian village), she'd have known instinctively that Eleanor Roosevelt was no ordinary elderly woman headed for a cocktail lounge in a New York hotel.

Mrs. Roosevelt projected an authenticity, tough but nice. She was more than the sum total of all you'd read about her. Eleanor Roosevelt didn't need FDR's magic. She rolled her own. I don't remember what she said to me, or if she said anything. She didn't have to.

Geiger counters can detect radiation.

If the Waldorf hasn't changed the rug, I could show them where to find the traces of *it* for at least five feet on both sides of where Eleanor Roosevelt walked.

Not enough study has been done about The Top. All we know is we're constantly told there's always plenty of room there. As one whose work entitles him to a non-expirable visitor's visa to The Top and those who've made it there, let me toss in a few scraps of Topology for those who might want to formalize that fledgling science.

People at the top are likely to discard the trappings that people fighting their way to the top think are necessary. For instance, people at the top are more likely to answer their own telephones.

I once placed a call to Admiral Hyman Rickover, expecting to leave a never-to-be-returned message with an aide.

Rickover answered himself. He may not have been affable. He may have been curt. But he was Rickover, there on the line, personally, himself.

People at the top are more likely to have an "easement"—a sense of "Enough about me already. What should I know about *you!*"

Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel will never be confused with Buddy Hackett no matter how crowded the room. Wiesel, the voice and conscience of the Holocaust, is about as low-key as you can get and still show signs of a pulse. Yet long before the Nobel committee made him an official world-class celebrity, those who came into his company knew even before the initial handshake that here was a man with an inner fire constantly raging in his inner fireplace. You felt that fire, even though the only outward signs

were an almost supernatural gentleness and a constant pleasant, unforced smile.

I remember thinking when I first met Elie Wiesel, “Now I realize this man *is* the voice and conscience of the Holocaust— like a gladiola is a gladiola.”

One time, Wiesel was in a ballroom audience saluting two hundred veterans of the Danish underground who’d been flown over to America by Tuborg Beer to be honored and thanked for their role in rescuing the Jews of Denmark from the Nazis in 1943. (Why don’t more beer companies do things like that?)

I was emcee, and I repeated everything I said in Danish.

That’s far from the most breathtaking linguistic feat ever attempted, but I’ll be the first to admit it’s not bad for somebody raised in North Carolina with no Danish connection and a life’s total of fewer than five days in Denmark.

One and only one person at that banquet asked me where I had learned Danish—Elie Wiesel. I had to admit it wasn’t really Danish. I’d once worked in the Norwegian Merchant Marine, and my Norwegian was so bad it sounded like Danish!

Wiesel didn’t merely ask me a polite question and let it go. He didn’t ask me a polite sincere question and let it go. Focusing that famous inner intensity upon me, he proceeded to “interview” me.

He gave me the impression that whatever best-seller he happened to be working on would be jerked out of his typewriter the minute he got home so he could sit down and bat out a detailed diary entry of *my* adventure with the Danish language.

There is only one Nobel Peace Prize awarded every year.

There are Wiesel Prizes awarded every time Elie decides to Make Someone Talk!

You can't win them all, no matter how good the concepts or how faithfully they're followed.

Before my interview with Ayn Rand, I'd been warned she was a tough cookie. That's like being warned that the Grand Canyon is a nasty pothole.

The cult-figure author of *Atlas Shrugged* and *Fountainhead* was touring the land appearing on TV and radio to drum up interest in her philosophy of objectivism. Her critics derided it as a doctrine of selfishness—do everything for yourself, never think about others, ‘ ‘hoist in the gangplank, Jack. I'm aboard. ’ ’

That happens to be a criminal oversimplification of objectivism, but it's what everybody except Rand's immediate followers thought, and I figured it might draw her out and give

her something to talk about if I unfurled that provocation at the top of the show and let her reshape it her way.

“Miss Rand,” I began, “let's pretend I'm a student of objectivism and you're *the* teacher, and it's my *turn to tell the* class what objectivism is and you're going to grade me, okay?”

“No,” said Rand.

I actually thought I'd misheard.

“I beg your pardon,” I said.

“I said no,” she repeated.

I then thought she must have misunderstood my setup.

“Miss Rand,” I said, on the air in front of everybody, “I have proposed an innocent little device that I believe would get us started correctly. I will state the mass popular conception of what your philosophy of objectivism is all about, and you may then come in and attack the misconceptions head-on.”

Again, “no,” said Rand, angrier this time. “Nobody shall talk about my philosophy except me when I’m present.”

She then walked off the show.

They talk about blood being thicker than water. Personal feelings are stronger than politics. All of my admiration for Ms. Rand’s gutsy stands against Communist tyranny melted away under the pressure of her breathtaking arrogance.

A great writer, yes. A great philosopher, perhaps. But as for personality, Ayn Rand made Bella Abzug seem like Miss Congeniality.

If I were a psychiatrist, the first thing I’d do, even before verifying the patient’s medical payment plan, is have him read a list of maybe a thousand stock sayings, mottoes, proverbs, homolies, aphorisms, and cliches and check off the ones he likes. That I think would tell me more about him than his own halting recollections on a couch of the problems he had with the way his immigrant grandmother chopped oregano.

One of the sayings that would make my list is the one that goes, “The game of life is not winning, but playing a poor hand well.” Its intelligence and practicality make up for its lack of that old Vince Lombardi “winning is the only thing” macho.

When you go through life trying to play a poor hand well, you become conscious of those who are playing their poor hands poorly, their poor hands well, their good hands poorly, and their good hands well.

The winner of the Playing the Best Hand Best award goes to Jane Fonda. Physically, mentally, energetically, and charismatically gifted, Fonda goes up from there. She knows instinctively it’s not enough to *have* magic, you have to *use* it. Ask any male interviewer who ever had her as a guest. He’ll agree that even when her husband, Tom Hayden, is in the control room, she knows, with eyes, chuckles, questions, and comments, how to make you feel the radio studio is a desert island and you’re the only man alive.

What Jane Fonda gets out of it all is a de facto censorship of the interview any President would envy. In fact, if a President were to try to “manage the news” the way Fonda manages the subject matter of an interview, Fonda would spearhead a campaign to impeach him!

It’s not exactly arrogance. It’s *unembarrassability*.

I was talking with a talk host in Atlanta in the late seventies and wound up by asking who he was having on the air that night.

When he told me Jane Fonda was his guest, I suggested he whip out a pen and pad so I could give him four or five questions calculated to exploit certain of her political vulnerabilities and leave nothing but a smoking crater where her feet shortly before stood.

“Oh, no,” he said. “She’ll only talk about her exercise cassette.”

“And are you going to put up with that?” I asked him in journalist-to-journalist indignation.

His silence told me that not only was he going to put up with it, but he was looking forward to it and would probably ask her just before airtime if she had any other preferences, whims, injunctions, and taboos to which he might cater!

Tibetan shepherds don’t say no to the Dalai Lama. They’re thrilled to be on the same mountain.

That’s not a bad spell to learn how to cast. That’s better than Making People Talk. That’s making them grateful to be within talking distance of you.

If you don’t have Tibetan Buddhism as the force working for you, try to get some of what Jane Fonda’s got—and use it as well as she does!

What, Is That *It*?

The celebrated Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko was coming to my radio station to tape a broadcast.

We were getting tape and commercials ready in the studio when the receptionist buzzed and said, “There’s a Mr. Armstrong out here, and he wants to know if Mr. Yevtushenko has arrived yet.”

“The State Department strikes again!” I figured, assuming Mr. Armstrong was a functionary assigned to keep up with Soviet dignitaries, show concern, discourage interviewers from hostile questioning, change plane reservations from the phone in the control room, and have a cab waiting downstairs after the show.

As a courtesy to my government, I went out to meet Mr. Armstrong and, upon shaking his hand, congratulated myself on prediagnosing his identity and role. He didn’t wear a State Department badge, but he looked exactly like one of their official hand-holders.

I explained that Yevtushenko would be along shortly and invited him to wait in the studio, where he’d be more comfortable.

He accepted, refused coffee, and blended silently into the interior decoration of the radio studio to await Yevgeny’s arrival.

When Yevtushenko entered the studio, he brushed right on by me, grabbed Mr. Armstrong by the shoulders, then hugged him and shouted, “Neil!”

Mr. Armstrong was not, it turned out, a diaper pinnerupper for the State Department. He was Neil Armstrong, the first man in all history to walk on the moon!

Would Mr. Armstrong be willing to pull up a chair and join Yevtushenko and me on the air?

No way!

Could I at least regale my audience with my doltishness by relating the story of mistaken identity and letting them know that the first man to walk on the moon was in our live studio audience?

Again, “No.”

I could have, if I hadn't been polite enough to ask. I could have anyhow, even though Armstrong asked me not to, if I'd valued that little shot of glory juice more than respecting the wishes of the first man to walk on the moon. Neil Armstrong's presence and my failure to recognize him was, after all, factual and fair for a reporter to report. However, I respected his wishes.

It felt funny trying to impress my audience with Yevgeny Yevtushenko for a whole hour while Neil Armstrong sat silently on the side where the public relations people, the flunkies, the aides, and the spear-carriers usually sit.

You are not in the real world at the age of thirteen in Jewish tradition, the more conventional eighteen, or the even more conventional twenty-one.

You're in the real world when you begin to realize the football players are younger than you.

You're financially successful when you can live off your interest without invading principal.

You're a celebrity when an inmate of an institution for the mentally ill thinks he's *you*!

And you're getting a little too smug when you meet the first two men to walk on the moon and ten more years go by before it ever occurs to you that that's anything special!

If you pretended your life were a silent movie, could you pinpoint your ten favorite scenes? Among mine would surely be standing on New York's Avenue of the Americas in Greenwich Village with Buzz Aldrin, Neil

Armstrong's lunar module-mate and the second man on the moon, in a midnight drizzle looking for a cab.

Cab after cab with their protective "off-duty" signs lit slowed down to look us over, then resumed normal speed when we struck them as insufficiently compelling to occasion their stopping to pick us up.

Nuclear radiation works on you whether you know it's there or not. Celebrity status doesn't. I could only stand there wet and wonder what percentage of those off-duty cabs would have stopped if the drivers had known they were abreast of one of the first two men to walk on the moon! In the democracy of New York midnight, Buzz Aldrin and I were equals: two men with tuned-up raincoat collars who couldn't get a cab.

Aldrin and his smashingly good-looking date were my guests for dinner that night at Il Boccocino, the kind of interesting, intimate Italian restaurant astronauts thank you for helping them discover.

Sometimes, when making famous people talk, it's good to go beyond the obvious territory occupied by the "automatic" people with smiles frozen in pasty-faced reverence. Sometimes it pays to go beyond the signs marked "Safe," so long as you do it gingerly and intelligently.

I would never challenge Buzz Aldrin with the coarse question, "How do you feel about being only the second man on the moon?" or the coarser, "How come you weren't first?"

However, there *is* a way to ask it. First, you wait for enough layers of newness to flake off from just having met. You track the meters and dials of inner space, just like NASA tracks them for outer space, until that magnificent sense of instinct tells you that acquaintanceship has given way to ease, followed by positive signs of warmth on a healthy trajectory toward friendship.

Anything as important as a NASA launch has to wait for a "gate," a moment when conditions on earth and in the heavens are right for that launch. Anything as important as a sensitive question to a famous person has to wait for that "gate," too.

Mine came. I felt it well after the antipasto, somewhere between the vitello and the zabaglione.

“Buzz,” I said. “In getting into that capsule to blast off for the moon in 1969, you and Neil Armstrong were undertaking an unprecedented mission—to me a very frightening mission—not just on behalf of your country, but for science and all mankind.

“You’re a professional, and this question may be an insult, but after all, nobody remembers who came up the beach right behind Columbus; and I can’t help but think about the ‘fielder’s choice’ that made Armstrong number one while you, just *as* qualified and right there with him, followed him and became, for all time, number two to walk on the moon. Does that thought ever rankle you?”

Aldrin, I think, forgave the length of the question for its redeeming sensitivity. (The technique is known as Hiding the Razor Blades in Vaseline!)

“You know,” he replied, “you have that all wrong. Neil Armstrong may indeed have been the first man to walk on the moon, but don’t forget, it was a round trip.

“When we splashed down back here on earth and the ships with helicopters came out to retrieve us, I climbed out of that capsule first!

“I, therefore,” concluded lunar astronaut Buzz Aldrin, “became the first person in the history of the world ever to *return* to earth from someplace else!”

The Hall of Fame

You don't have to win at Wimbledon to gain great joy from tennis. The better you play, though, the more fun it is to watch the great ones. Your words alone may never cause the world to build a Hall of Fame around you, but the more adept you become at pulling off the bon mot yourself—the more you shape and sharpen your own conversational skills—the more appreciative you should become of those who won their way into that Hall of Fame, sometimes with but a single quip.

We obviously lack videotaped confirmation or courtroom proof that every great remark and riposte was actually uttered by the person who became a legend from that remark. Or that it was uttered in precisely the manner the legend tells. (Leo Durocher was decent enough to confess that he never said, “Nice guys finish last,” although that line is continually attributed to him by people who couldn't cite a single score or statistic from Durocher's baseball career, or who aren't even sure the sport he was associated with was baseball! The original, says Durocher, was somewhere in the same vein, but much less punchy.)

So what? Who can say every country should have precisely

the borders it has presently, every millionaire should have every single dollar he happens to own, or every hero deserves every single accolade? Some things should be allowed to lie where they fall. If a great remark falls to the credit of some great person, then in some metaphysical way he or she deserves it, not the anonymous bootblack in one of his armies who actually thought it up and uttered it to the delight of an attentive scribe.

Too many good stories are ruined by oververification. Not, however, the one about Alfred Hitchcock and me. It proves that occasionally, the best way to make somebody talk is to find yourself suddenly impaled on his wit, take it well, and harvest the rewards of his guilt forevermore!

Alfred Hitchcock is not among those likely to lose his reputation for wit of diabolical intensity if truth breaks out. Hitchcock will inhabit that Hall of

Fame forever, in my estimation, on the strength of one crack, the authenticity of which can never be challenged, because he made it to me. I was the victim, and I have it preserved on tape.

As a junior radio interviewer, I couldn't get Hitchcock to come to my late-night show live even though he was in town plugging a new movie, but he did agree to let me come to his suite in New York's St. Regis Hotel for a taping. He opened the door himself, and when he saw me and WINS engineer Frankie Caplin, he put the kind of look on his face I would want an actor to perfect if I were a director and we wanted to convey an attitude of "When am I going to learn to quit being so damned available?"

I stepped in and straightaway tripped over a rug, caromed into a table, and knocked it over, launching a vase that took to the air like a glass torpedo, flying across the room and distributing water and flowers all over his living room rug.

That didn't improve Hitchcock's look any. After apologies, I tried to repay him by abandoning all small talk and

getting down to business. Suddenly Frankie, the engineer, developed a look worse than Hitchcock's. The St. Regis Hotel, it seemed, was the only New York hotel still using direct current. Our recording equipment worked only on alternating current. I didn't have the guts to turn my head and check out Hitchcock's look at that juncture.

Frankie called the house engineer, who told him of a single alternating current outlet way down the hall and an extension cord he was welcome to use if they could find it in the basement. That would take a little time to arrange. Could Mr. Hitchcock be a sport and go along? That, oddly enough, improved Hitchcock's look.

I think I understand. Once it was established beyond a reasonable doubt that his morning was being bled white by a buffoon, he could, with honor, relax and wait to see what would come next.

What came next was an interview by a breathless boy interviewer who thought he had a pretty cunning opening question up his sleeve for Alfred

Hitchcock.

“Mr. Hitchcock,” I began, “I want to give you an assignment and let you direct it. The scene is a radio interview in a luxurious hotel suite. The guest is a famous motion picture director, and he’s going to be murdered. How would you stage it?”

“Nothing to it,” replied Hitchcock without requiring an instant of thought. “Given the proper interviewer, he could be bored to death.”

Hubris had not yet entered my ego chamber, and I enjoyed that remark of Hitchcock’s every bit as much as if I’d made it myself about some archrival. He knew it was overkill; and that, plus my leaving that line, my own annihilation, in the tape when it would have been so easy to cut out, won me his okay. Every time Hitchcock came to New York to make media appearances, he insisted my show be on his schedule. I’m sure it was because I had behaved like the buttercup, shedding fragrance upon the heel that crushes it.

The opposite art to Making People Talk is making them sorry they said something unkind.

After its defeat in World War One, the part of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire that became today’s Hungary lost its outlet to the sea. Hungary became landlocked. It still had a few admirals, however, and one of them, Admiral Horthy, became Hungary’s chief of state at the time of World War Two.

Adolf Hitler sent his emissary, Von Ribbentrop, to Budapest to pay a state visit to the Hungarian leader, and Horthy hosted a state dinner featuring limitless quantities of Hungary’s finest wines. Ribbentrop got a little giddy toward dessert, and in a coarse and derisive tone said, “I am amused, Mr. Horthy, that you carry the rank of admiral. Hungary doesn’t have a navy. Hungary doesn’t have a seaport. Hungary doesn’t even have a seacoast. How is it, then, that Hungary has a leader who’s an admiral?”

“That shouldn’t strike you as anything strange,” replied Admiral Horthy. “After all, doesn’t Nazi Germany have a minister of justice?”

Timid singles know the tortured feeling that says, upon spotting someone attractive, “If only I could start a good conversation, neither one of us would be single a year from now.” Not everyone can live up to playwright Charles MacArthur when he had that same feeling upon spotting Helen Hayes at a party one night, but his next move shows how far a little imagination can take us upward from, “Hi, haven’t we met someplace before?”

MacArthur simply grabbed a fistful of peanuts from one of the trays, rushed over to Helen Hayes, and said, “Cup your hands in front of you!”

As the startled Miss Hayes did so, he dropped the peanuts into her hands and said, “I wish they were emeralds!”

They, of course, eventually married.

Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill have too many verbal triumphs credited to them. Let’s ration ourselves to one exhibit from each.

Sycophants, opportunists, hangers-on, phonies and cronies abound around the source of power, just as moths and lesser insects congregate around outdoor lamps. One such marginal creature in Lincoln’s White House once awakened the President in the middle of the night crying, “Mr. President, Mr. President, I genuinely hate waking you from your sleep to bear such bad news, but our postmaster-general just died and I was wondering, sir, if you would permit me to take his place?”

“If it’s all right with the undertaker,” said Lincoln, undimmed by drowsiness, “it’s all right with me.”

Once World War Two was safely won and he was no longer Britain’s prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill became a bit less guarded about his afternoon tipping. One day, as he was walking zigzag from a lunch amply graced with the glory of the grape in the general direction of the House of Commons, a rather unspectacular-looking matron confronted him and assailed him.

“You, Sir Winston, are very drunk, and that is a disgrace.”

Mobilizing his faculties that were still intact, he managed to stop, turn, and face his accuser. He looked her in the eye as steadily as his condition permitted.

“Yes, madam,” he said. “I am very drunk. And you are very ugly.

“But,” crescendoed Sir Winston, “tomorrow, *I* shall no longer be drunk.”

* * *

Noah Webster, Mr. Dictionary to the English-speaking world, didn't believe in letting pleasure get in the way of business. When Mrs. Webster entered his chamber one day and found him quite a bit more than lexically involved with the maid, she gasped, “Noah, I'm surprised!”

“No, my dear,” replied Webster, “it is *I* who am surprised. *You* are merely astonished.”

The Swiss are frequently regarded as the most humorless people on earth. That's unfair. The Swiss simply took their century's supply of humor and blew it all in two short sentences in the middle of World War Two.

The Swiss border with Nazi Germany was a tense belt of territory, with German and Swiss border posts separated by a half mile of no-man's-land. The biggest danger in that particular spot in the middle of war-torn Europe was boredom.

One day the boredom was relieved. A motorcycle from the German post approached the Swiss post flying the white flag that signified an official message from the German commander to the Swiss commander.

Upon reaching Switzerland, the motorcyclist dismounted, gave a snappy salute, and handed over a huge, elaborately gift-wrapped package addressed to the commander of the Swiss border post.

Everybody gathered around as they opened it to see what was inside. They found it to be full of a commodity not uncommon wherever horses congregate.

The next day a Swiss motorcycle headed for the German post with an identical package addressed to the German commander.

The Nazi grunted at the Swiss lack of originality, but decided to go ahead and open it anyway.

To his amazement, it contained a huge block of golden, creamy, rich Swiss dairy butter along with a note that read, “My dear colleague: The ceremony you have initiated is altogether fitting and proper.

“Let us continue to send each other the best from our lands.”

Now What?

During World War Two America had the problem of providing drinking water for our downed fliers floating in life rafts sometimes for weeks and even longer, waiting for rescue.

Our scientists went to work. Obviously, only limited amounts of drinking water could be stashed aboard the rafts themselves. And the equipment to distill salt water from the sea into potable water would be too bulky and complicated to fit on a rubber raft.

It was known by marine biologists that the water inside the body of ocean fish is fresh, not salt. That sounded interesting, but not of much immediate help. Small fish are fairly easy to come by when you're floating on a life raft. They dart and hop constantly through the water and air, and they frequently land right there in your lap. But how do you get the fresh water out?

Could they maybe come up with some kind of press that would squeeze the fresh water right out of those fish so our fliers could stretch out the length of time they could survive afloat? Nice concept, but the working models of the equipment they hoped could do that also proved to be too bulky.

Back to the foundry workshop, this time with a model made of lighter-weight aluminum.

That didn't work either. Still too bulky for a life raft.

Science was down but not out. Wasn't there something lighter and smaller that could fit on a raft that could extract fresh water from ocean fish? What shape would it have to be? How small could they get it?

Doors were closed. Calls were taken by secretaries. This was one they really wanted to solve.

Finally, sheepishly and with some embarrassment, several of the scientists came to the conclusion almost simultaneously that the ideal equipment for this mission would be about the same size, the same shape, and have the same features *as the human mouth*.

That was the end of the research project.

Instead of a piece of mechanical equipment fitted to our fliers' life rafts, they merely added a line to the survival manual that advised fliers awaiting rescue in the middle of oceans to try to catch as many fish as they can and chew them well!

It worked. Lives were saved.

Making People Talk is much the same kind of proposition. Those who feel themselves no good at talking feel themselves so very no good at it that they don't even try. It's much easier to ache while the better talkers—the “conversationalists”—get all the attention and approval and results. It's much easier to relax and envy those who seem to have an automatic “gift of gab.”

Now, at graduation time, we remind you of one of the very first lessons, the most important one of all: Assume the Burden.

Force yourself to be conscious that there *is* a conversation locked up there somewhere between you and the person you're allegedly “talking to” and that it's your job to find it, free it, and let it prance. You will sponsor that conversation. You will nurture that conversation.

As in the case of obtaining fresh water at sea, you don't need elaborate “equipment”—a strategy, a game plan. The

lumps will melt, the stone walls will vaporize, faster and faster each time as you remember to “chew,” to Assume the Burden. Try to visualize either a pile-driving coach like Knut Rockne or Vince Lombardi or an equally energized Marine drill sergeant commanding you to “Get in there now and *talk?*’

The final lesson is equally chew-the-fish simple, yet failure to invoke it results regularly in communications lapses, disappointments, breakdowns, failures, and catastrophes.

Everybody who interviews people for a living will quiver with empathy upon reading this oft-enacted scenario.

The representative of the author—or the director, the playwright, the executive director, the chief engineer—calls the producer of the talk show and swears that the guest he’s asking the TV or radio show to consider is articulate enough to make Norman Vincent Peale sound like Arnold Schwarzenegger; sufficiently scintillating, in fact, to show up on the Fordham seismograph as an earthquake in Guatemala.

Our producers then come to us and repeat that praise. We’re intrigued. We make our living from articulate guests. We say yes.

The instant the guest arrives, we know what we’re in for. His handshake, lack of eye sparkle, absence of energy, and overall silent sourness make him seem less a candidate for interview than for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The red light goes on, indicating we’re live on the air. And all of a sudden it’s obvious this “killer of a communicator” can’t talk. We lovingly guide him over his target. We toss him leads and openings like underhand softballs. And all to no avail. He couldn’t ad-lib a belch after a Kurdish wedding feast.

Finally, the ordeal is over. Listeners have long switched to more exciting attractions, like to a station playing a civil-defense test tone. We can only hope that our sponsors, station owners, and program director aren’t listening. We can only hope they’re in a room somewhere together telling each other

how great we are, especially with “tough guests”!

Eventually it ends. We fake a “Nice show” comment, a teeth-gritting and tongue-biting good-bye, and wait for the carbolic acid level in our spleen to subside.

The payoff comes in the elevator. People who know me— in fact, people on my staff whom that guest didn't know were on my staff—have been anonymous passengers on the same elevator as the guest as he and his public relations representative depart after the interview. They tell me what went on.

Then, they report, on that down elevator after the show, is when the “audience”—the five or six other people on the elevator—catch the great show. *Then* that guest is truly articulate. *Then* the volcano blows its cone. *Then* come the outraged mutterings from the angry guest about “that saprophyte SOB of a host” who “never even gave me a chance to talk about our new prototype with the cadmium castings and the fourteen-inch flange, and what in hell does he think I wanted to come on his lousy show for in the first place?”

We have traveled in this book together from Assume the Burden all the way back now to the Parable of the Parrot.

The man seeking a suitable present for his wife in honor of their fourteenth anniversary happened to pass a pet store in the shopping mall that featured a parrot in the window. That parrot, though not particularly distinguished in size or plumage, nonetheless cost seven thousand dollars owing to the remarkable fact that it spoke fourteen languages.

The man figured, “Fourteen years, fourteen languages. Hmm.” It was considerably more than he'd intended to pay for an anniversary present, but the linkup proved not just potent, but irresistible. He went in, wrote a check for the seven thousand dollars, waited while the clerk called the bank to verify, then took the parrot, perch and all, and headed for home.

He decided to mount the perch right over the kitchen sink.

He got it where it fit best, put the parrot on the perch, and stood back to admire.

Suddenly he remembered he'd forgotten the birdseed.

He ran back down to the pet store, hoping to procure a supply of food for the parrot and get back home before his wife did.

Alas, she was already there when he returned. She flung herself upon him with uncommon affection.

“Darling,” she exuberated. “I didn’t think you’d even remember our anniversary, much less surprise me with such a marvelous gift.

“You remembered how much I love pheasant,” she continued. “Well, I’ve got him plucked. I’ve got him slit. I’ve got him stuffed. He’s already in the oven, and he’ll be ready in about forty-five minutes.”

“You’ve got him *what?*” the husband asked in shock. “You’ve got him where? That was no pheasant,” spat he. “That was a parrot! And, what’s more, that parrot cost seven thousand dollars because that parrot spoke fourteen languages!”

“Is that so?” said she. “Then why the hell didn’t he say something?”

BARRY FARBER

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