

## Experience in Speaking Well

My first contact with the talk of the world outside my home was with the boys in a rural school. It was not pleasant. All the boys were too bashful to talk with the girls. And even among the boys, the younger and possibly also the nicer boys were usually too bashful to participate in the general talk sessions. And the talk of the others, the older boys, was not only painfully silly and repetitious but shockingly indecent. People simply will not bring themselves to believe this - but it is literally true - and I fear the same is still true in most nondenominational schools. I say this because when later many of us were transferred to a parochial school, even the rascals who were the most foulmouthed in the public school, directly after being under the constant shadow of heaven and hell, cleansed their speech. I reflected much upon their attitude. By and by, however, I began to feel that these critics of conversation expected too much from the human race. As I got into the latter years of college and into graduate school, I found conversation an increasingly more satisfying pleasure. Nearly all of my schoolmates seemed to be people with whom one could, singly or collectively, have good talk. I began to suspect that what was irking the writers was that ordinary people talked about ordinary things, whereas these pen wielders probably thirsted for nothing but conversazione about sonnets, landscapes, and arias. I reflected that normal people cannot be expected to talk about these things, that their talk is probably all right and lively enough for their own tastes, that writers, teachers, and clergymen simply should accept the fact that the people of "Our Town" will confine their talk to measles, groceries, matrimony, and children, and that the intellectuals should therefore either go back to their books, lectures, and sermons, or hobnob exclusively with one another. Being a college teacher myself, I tended in my talking life to act accordingly. However, two observations slowly forced themselves upon me. One was that some of the greatest bores in the world can be found among the "intellectuals," so that evidently it was not brains and learning alone that made the conversationalist. The other was that the conversation of the "intellectuals," even when lively, seems to be far more about groceries and matrimony than about lyrics and existentialism. While, it is true, the conversations that were most memorable for me personally were those mostly about cultural and intellectual topics, the post-mortem of the normally interesting conversations of cultured or educated persons tended to show that they were some 90 per cent about the average interests of normal people, and only 10 per cent about so-called cultural topics. Nevertheless, whatever topics certain people talked about, it made for lively and interesting conversation. This led me to conclude that it is not so much the topic that makes for good talk - or the education of the speaker - but the handling of the topic. It was the manner of talking about it - possibly, as Johnson put it, the knack of placing "things in such views as they are not commonly seen in," that resulted in an "edge of liveliness." This impression was strongly confirmed by a stretch in army barracks. The talk of most soldiers most of the time was, of course, too indecent for comment or participation. But not all. There were enough conversationally decent fellows there of all degrees of education and talents to permit several observations. One was that bores were not confined to any profession or trade or nationality. Secondly, fellows with an "edge of liveliness" in their talk might be white or black, Catholic or Hindu, plumbers or professors. Again, one felt that it was not so much the topics discussed as the manner and method that made the conversation either interesting or boring.

## About the Author

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