

Marjorie Spock's The Art of Goethean Conversation
By Marc Clifton
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Marjorie Spock (1904-2008) wrote a short essay on [The Art of Goethean Conversation](#) which has been of interest to me since I first heard of the concept almost 20 years ago. Subsequently, I have been noticing on the Internet various commentary on her essay, most of which, quite frankly, seems quite far off the mark from her original essay. As I have been wanting to develop an understanding of this concept further in myself, it seemed appropriate to revisit the subject, and starting with her text, define and identify the characteristics of this “art.”

The Value of Conversation

The essay begins with a quote from Goethe's [The Green Snake and The Beautiful Lily](#), in which the serpent declares that light is more glorious than gold and conversation more quickening than light.

Commentary

Here the stage is set for the value of conversation – it is more life giving than light, taking the word “quickening” to mean “enlivening,” as in the expression “the quick and the dead.” Light is indisputably life giving, yet conversation is more quickening, leading to the idea that while light is life giving to the body, conversation goes deeper, giving life to the soul. Thus we arrive at the very premise of the concept of Goethean conversation: conversation enlivens the soul.

The State of Conversation Today

Unfortunately, we do not often *speak* in soul enlivening ways – our “conversation” has devolved into, as Spock writes “casual exchange, to the most idle, inconsequential chit-chat.” Spock contends that in the “salons of earlier centuries” conversation was much different. It was:

- disciplined
- built around a common purpose
- mutually enriching

whereas today our conversations are chaotic, irrelevant, and depleting.

Commentary

What images come up when we imagine “salons of earlier centuries?” A salon “is a gathering of people under the roof of an inspiring host, held partly to amuse one another and partly to refine the taste and increase the knowledge of the participants through conversation.”¹ Invented in Italy in the 16th century and so called for the large reception hall of Italian mansions, salons flourished in France in the 17th and 18th centuries and was a place for exchanging ideas and integral to the process of Enlightenment. Women played an important (though debated) role in

salons, seen either as the creating salons or facilitating the ideas and debates generally associated with the Enlightenment.¹

Regardless of the debate historians have, it is clearly connected to the Enlightenment, which was a “cultural movement of intellectuals...[whose] purpose was to reform society using reason, challenge ideas grounded in tradition and faith, and advance knowledge through the scientific method. It promoted science, skepticism and intellectual interchange and opposed superstition, intolerance and some abuses by church and state.”⁴

We can imagine a disciplined discourse around specific themes, bringing new understanding to the participants. However, being associated with the Enlightenment and its emphasis on scientific method and opposition to “superstition,” it would appear that the conversations occurring in salons were moving away from a spiritual world concept and towards a scientific world concept.

Intellectual vs. Spiritual Conversation

Still, Goethean conversations are not the same as the conversations in the salons of previous times, which were “displays of intellectual fireworks.” Rather, Goethean conversations “call forth a fullness of spiritual life.” An important premise to the concept of Goethean conversation is:

- one must have a belief in “the spiritual.”

If we have this belief, we can proceed with the basic tenets of Goethean conversation:

- “A thinker uses all himself as a tool of knowledge, where ... he takes part as a creative spirit in the ongoing creative process of the cosmos.”
- “A true Goethean conversation takes place across the threshold, in the etheric world, where thoughts are intuitions.”

Spock contrasts this spiritually enlivened conversation with that of “lesser forms of exchange”, having the characteristics of:

- mentalizing (intellectualizing)
- speculation or opinions
- arguing
- recounting experiences or reporting

and while these conversations can be disciplined, they are also often simply “mindless associative rambling.” While these are often necessary forms of conversation, they are none-the-less devoid of spiritual content.

Commentary

This leads to the following observations:

- Rather than knowledge being a tool for my thinking, I am instead a thinking tool for knowledge.
- My thinking is part of an ongoing creative process.

These two observations change my relationship to the process of conversation – rather than conversation being an egoistic process of talking about myself or trying to convince someone else of my way of thinking, conversation instead becomes the process of *receiving* knowledge as part of a creative process. This shifts my self-view from that of being the center and everyone else being the periphery to instead viewing myself and everyone else as the periphery and the “cosmos”, if you will, as being the center, from which conversation emanates. This change in perception helps take me from (at best) an intellectual discourse to a spiritual discourse.

As Rudolf Steiner writes regarding intuition in the [Philosophy of Freedom](#): “In contrast to the content of percept which is given to us from without, the content of thinking appears inwardly. The form in which this first makes its appearance we will call intuition. Intuition is for thinking what observation is for percept. Intuition and observation are the sources of our knowledge. An observed object of the world remains unintelligible to us until we have within ourselves the corresponding intuition which adds that part of reality which is lacking in the percept.” (Chapter 5)

Goethean conversation is intimately connected with thinking – and as such is related to the process of associating percepts with concepts (intuition.) “The moment a percept appears in my field of observation, thinking also becomes active through me. An element of my thought system, a definite intuition, a concept, connects itself with the percept.” (Chapter 6) But this is a process that takes place, not in the “physical world” of things, but in the etheric world, the world of forces animating the things in the “physical world” with life. Here we see again how Goethean conversation is intimately connected with life itself–“more quickening than light.”

Conversation Requires Listening and Openness

Conversely, “living thought” is the concept of focusing on a theme and developing one’s “mood of supernaturally attentive listening” in order to develop the skills of intuitive perception – taking our percepts and developing concepts from them in such a way that our thoughts are a part of a universal process and we ourselves are “a tool of knowledge.”

Commentary

This requires an inner poise of listening, not just to others but also to ourselves, our thinking process, and most importantly our impressions from the spiritual world. It also requires a receptivity, an openness “to the life of thought.” Thought, being the precursor of Goethean conversation, is a process that has life (distinct from the physical processes of life), and as such is entwined with the spiritual. It is at this point that conversation is transformed into a communion or fellowship.

Techniques of Goethean Conversation

How do we go about having this spiritually enlivened form of conversation? Here Spock provides some guidelines:

1. We must be aware that the spiritual world wishes to be known and will respond to our reverent interest.
2. Preparation is necessary – our initial thoughts, like children, must be nurtured and raised into maturity by further thinking. The theme of a meeting is set in advance and the participants meditate on that theme.
3. A willingness to sacrifice previous thinking to allow new thoughts to enter. “Invite the spirit by becoming spiritually active, and then hold yourself open to its visitation.”
4. Learn to live comfortably with outer quiet.
5. Develop “inner quiet” to cultivate intuition.
6. Treat silence equal with speaking: learn to distinguish the formed thought from the unformed thought so that the necessity of speaking becomes evident and only then breaks the silence.
7. Sacrifice the personal in order to allow the conversation to “find its way to necessity.”

Commentary

The recurring themes in these techniques are:

- equanimity
- non-attachment
- open
- ego-less
- inner quietness

all of which point to the necessity of meditation in one’s life.

Preparation however is also key – this is an opportunity to individually delve deeply into the theme of the meeting by exploring our individual thoughts on the matter. Personally, I do not exclude research to develop a deeper understanding of a topic – especially when the issues are complex, I find it helpful to understand the concepts, terminology, history, and thoughts of others. However, one cannot become attached to a particular way of thinking – in fact, Spock recommends that we sacrifice our previous thinking in order to let new ideas come to life.

Practice

Spock describes several practices that we can work with to deepen the techniques of conversation:

1. Meditation as described in Anthroposphy.

2. The repeated study of the Philosophy of Freedom.
3. Reading fairy tales and great poetry.

Commentary

These all aim at developing our spiritual life, enliven our thinking and develop our skills of intuitive thinking. These practices help to develop and refine the techniques described earlier.

The Group

Spock describes attributes of the members of the group when coming together for conversation:

1. There is no leader – the leadership comes from the spiritual world
2. Members are active and responsible (I would imagine this refers to the practices described above.)
3. Bring the theme, yet suppress the thoughts one has had regarding the theme, and prepare to receive fresh insight.
4. Listen to other members in the group as one listens to the spiritual world – “evocatively, with reverence, refraining from any trace of reaction, making one’s own soul a seedbed for others’ germinal ideas.”
5. Be discriminating and objective rather than succumbing to sympathies and antipathies with regards to what is being said.
6. Listen, as this generates interest and quickens (brings life) to the thoughts of the group.
7. Ask questions – “burning questions that have been harbored in the souls of the participants”

Commentary

When the group meets, the techniques described above (equanimity, non-attachment, etc.) are actively engaged. The image of the group being the periphery (easily imagined when the group forms itself on the circumference of a circle) and the spiritual world being the center from which knowledge emanates is perhaps a good mental picture to hold. Questions, which enliven the discussion, are not necessarily asked to other members of the group but are asked rather to “the center”, and members respond when thinking, formed out of listening, creates the necessity of speech. In this way the spiritual world is both an active participant and, through the members of the group, provides the leadership for the conversation – “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of you.” Here we see the concept of the salon enlivened by integrating and including the spiritual world into the conversation.

The Framework of Meetings

Spock describes the framework in which to have meetings:

1. Set an exact beginning and ending time for each meeting.

2. Arrive ahead of time to prepare the proper mood.
3. Begin the meeting by rising and speaking in unison a line (or several) with a spiritually oriented content. Close the meeting the same way.
4. There is a difference between discussion and conversation. In conversation, side discussions do not occur. Conversation occurs without side discussions or other interruptions and creates a sense of unity in the group.

Commentary

Adhering to a strict form and respecting the meeting's timeframe provides a physical structure that all members of the group can rely on and avoids the confusion and emotions that occur when people arrive late or talk amongst themselves. Beginning and ending the meeting with a spiritually oriented reading is creates an in-breath at the beginning of the meeting, bringing focus, and an out-breath at the end of the meeting, a concluding release.

Concluding Thoughts

In The Speech of the Grail, Linda Sussman writes:

“...the initiate-speaker has to leap in two directions, and both leaps are a kind of listening. The speaker, like language, stands at the intersection of the manifest and unmanifest worlds, whether ‘unmanifest’ refers to the unconscious, the spiritual domain or just to the unknown. If preconceptions, assumptions and the tendency to be judgmental have been sufficiently released, the initiate-speaker stands mostly in ‘not-knowing.’ One can then listen into what wants to be said, for which one must leap toward the unmanifest, and into what can or must be said, for which one must leap toward the manifest, the social context. Both are difficult leaps, but if accomplished, the speaker allows those two worlds to touch in and through the words.”

This eloquently summarizes the gesture of Goethean conversation: there is a “leap toward the unmanifest” through the act of listening to the spiritual world for what “wants to be said,” followed by a “leap toward the manifest” in which one determines what “must be said” and bringing those words to the social context of the group. This is the “art” of Goethean conversation, and Marjorie Spock has built a concise guide for the practice, technique, and framework in which to develop this art.

About Marjorie Spock

Marjorie Spock was born Sept. 8, 1904, in New Haven, Connecticut, the second child and first daughter of six children. The Spock family was prominent in New Haven; her father was a corporate lawyer, and her older brother, Dr. Benjamin Spock, became a renowned pediatrician. Marjorie became a student of Anthroposophy as a teenager in Dornach during the 1920s, and became a eurythmist, teacher, biodynamic gardener, and the author and translator of numerous books. In the 100th year of her life, she produced, directed, and choreographed a video about eurythmy, followed by two short training films when she was 101 and 102 years of age. Marjorie Spock died at her home in Maine, Jan. 23, 2008, at the age of 103. ²

Marjorie Spock was also an environmentalist, author and poet. In the 1950's, she was a biodynamic gardener on Long Island, New York, and sued the U.S. government for spraying DDT to control the gypsy moth epidemic. Her case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1960, which came to the attention of Rachel Carson and was the impetus for Carson's book, Silent Spring. While Spock lost the case, the government was required to perform an environmental review and Spock's action helped lead to the rise of the environmental movement.³

1 – Salon:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon_\(gathering\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon_(gathering))

2 – Marjorie Spock:

<http://www.steinerbooks.org/author.html?au=1300>

3 – Marjorie Spock:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marjorie_Spock

4 – The Enlightenment:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment