

## CHAPTER 4

*Stages of Conversation**Spontaneous Conversation*

The character of a conversation depends upon the consciousness with which it is conducted. Spontaneous, everyday conversation requires the least spiritual and mental effort. Little thought precedes individual contributions; we follow whatever occurs to us spontaneously and react in an unpremeditated manner. Such conversations occur in restaurants, on street corners, at home around the dinner table, at hair salons, and so on. They arise within, and result from, a spontaneous situation for which no one has prepared. At most, perhaps the external framework for the conversation has been arranged: the in-laws have been invited to dinner, or the Smith family is being visited at their new home. What is decisive is that the conversation simply arises through the situation. People meet and a conversation results from the encounter.

But how, in fact, do our contributions to a conversation arise if we are really only yielding to spontaneous impulses? Let us imagine that our parents have invited us on a beautiful summer evening to a family festival and that they set before us a freshly baked, homemade pizza. Our joyous "Ah!" is followed by various sequences of inner images. Perhaps the daughter remembers that six months earlier, when she ate pizza at the Millers' house,

that pizza was bought. Because of a misunderstanding, Mr. Miller was late, upsetting his wife—and so on. The brother, however, experiences something quite different. He thinks, "But there is much too much cheese on it! Watch out! Stomach ache! The doctor warned me only last week. And I haven't even paid his last bill. I really must have a raise." His wife, on the other hand, thinks of Florence as soon as she sees the pizza. "We were there at Easter. We always ate pizza, at noon, on the Cathedral square. There was a nice waiter. This year, we haven't planned anything yet for summer vacation." Everyone around the table similarly experiences a sequence of thoughts and mental images. The course of the conversation is thus determined as the participants choose any of these images and toss them into the conversation. The daughter, for example, may ask after the Millers. The brother might speak about the injustice of the pay scale, while his wife asks her brother-in-law where he vacations. All these contributions appear to be without connection even though, in fact, they all began with the pizza. Everyone has such associations but they are all different. If we follow this uncontrolled, inner production of mental images we create a conversation with a constantly changing theme that always remains on the surface. Of course, other people's contributions also provide material for association. Observing ourselves, we can note how ideas and images—some of them based only on sound—are attached to individual words heard in the conversation. When someone mentions a possible stomach pain or "cramp," caused by jogging too soon after pizza, another person may comment on how the car was too crowded on the ride over, and they really do need a larger vehicle. Such examples show how egotistic this

form of conversation can be. Here is an extreme example: Someone returns from vacation and wants to tell others about his experiences. Right after he mentions the location, his conversational partner remembers the time he was there and immediately begins to tell of his experiences without allowing the other to say a word. The advantage of such conversations is the casualness that permits uncomplicated conversational contact between partners.

If we ask ourselves what law the various associations are following, we come to the life of feelings. Those mental pictures with which we are united most strongly will rise into our consciousness most readily. Anyone who has just had a significant experience, or is about to have one—an examination, a wedding, or a painful insult—can experience how the sequence of associated pictures unfolds in so refined a manner that it inevitably steers consciousness toward the experienced or anticipated event. Even when we are engaged in focused study, a word we have read can set off a sequence of images in our mind that inevitably leads to the event. There seems to be a force that is powerfully influenced by what is emotionally important to us and works like a magnetic field in our half-conscious mind. Whatever lies closest to our feelings forces itself into our consciousness by attaching itself to our perceptions.

Conversations situated in feelings and sense perception in this way are full of life. We are warmed by them without having to exert any effort. It is difficult to organize such a conversation because the entire surrounding field of the senses exerts such a powerful influence. We can only observe a beginning phase of gradual warming and then the rhythmical ebb and flow of contributions from various participants. Phases

of the conversation, during which several people speak at the same time, come and go. Pauses in such a conversation are difficult to bear. People become uncomfortable when no one is speaking. The moment of embarrassment, in which many possible topics are considered, ends only when the apple pie—or some other *deus ex machina*—is brought and supplies the solution. Warmth and satisfaction arise through the fact of conversation, not through its content. Each partner's "You" is perceived through feelings that arise in hearing and seeing the other. When leaving such an encounter one does not say, "That was an interesting conversation!" but rather, "It was nice to see you again." In such a case it would have been entirely out of place to admonish one's partner to stick to the point. The casual jumping around from topic to topic—expressions of spontaneous insights—properly belongs in this kind of conversation.

Linguistically, such conversations are characterized by numerous exclamations and a full spectrum of sounds. We can see how strongly contributions are related to feelings and the speaker's I, if we note the typical sequence of subject and object in spontaneous conversations. Here are two actual sentences: "Wow, its so clear, this crystal!" The predicate follows the expression of feeling; the subject appears first as a pronoun, "it"; and only at the conclusion becomes a substantive noun. The speaker begins with what is closest to him or her and gradually finds the path to the listener, "Whew! Did you notice how fast it went by, this last week?" The listener hears first an expression of feeling "Whew!"; then the question concerning something he or she knows nothing about, "did you also notice"; then about a fast moving something, "how fast it went by"; and then, finally,

“this last week.” Logic would require the reverse sequence. First the listener should know the theme under discussion (this last week), then discover what is predicated—that is, what’s actually being said about the theme—and then the question about agreement. But such a logical sequence would signify a distance from what is being expressed, while the authentic form conveys the emotional connection.

The form of conversation we have described is a tendency that never appears to the total exclusion of all other conversational forms, because even in a spontaneous conversation a human being does not consist only of feelings. Sometimes a participant is allowed to consciously pursue an idea for as long as he or she wants; speakers generally remain on a topic only for a short time. My purpose here is merely to point out the connection between soul life and the form of a conversation. In other words, a spontaneous conversation is interesting, not because of its content but because of its psychology.

Any education in the art of conversation must know about these processes, because tendencies that are entirely natural and justified in spontaneous everyday conversations can have a devastating effect on conversations intended to achieve insight or to arrive at a collective decision. In the latter, spontaneous tendencies need to be overcome or directed.

#### *Intentional, guided conversation*

We begin with the form of conversation in which the leaders and the led are assigned fixed roles, by considering conversations intended to achieve insight or to arrive at decision. Here one conversational partner more or

less forces the others into certain paths or “tracks.” An extreme example of this is interrogation. In this case, the interrogator forces the individual being interrogated to answer with some content that is already fixed. All attempts at distraction are immediately suppressed. A milder form of interrogation is the examination. Here there is also clearly one who leads and those who follow. Nevertheless, we know that a certain ability in psychology combined with the necessary chutzpah can enable some examinees to guide or steer their examiners.

The next step in this process is the teaching conversation. The teacher clearly steers the process and expects the pupil to move within preestablished boundaries. Thus the teacher can convey material in a more interesting way than simply by lecturing. He or she can also test existing knowledge and thereby foster the learning process. We have become so accustomed to this assignment of roles that we easily overlook its one-sidedness. When the teacher asks the class, “Now, what did we discuss yesterday?” he or she ought to be surprised that no one responds by saying, “Don’t you remember?” This one-sidedness has a special effect in higher grades when an apparently free conversation is simulated, yet the results are inevitably what the teacher planned at the outset.

We must understand the difference between a skilled and an unskilled conversational leader. Both kinds can work within an accepted or institutionalized authoritarian relationship. One determines the conversation completely and uses the contributions from others only to serve his or her own purpose. Good conversational leaders, however, place themselves at the service of the conversation, so that it unfolds in an orderly fashion and no participant is suppressed or allowed to dominate. A good conversational leader may be compared

to a conductor who serves the piece being performed and uses the perceptions of the orchestra members to achieve a joint creation with all involved. The opposite would be a tyrannical conductor who subjects everything to his or her own will.

It is good to become aware of these forms in their purity because they can arise in every kind of conversation, usually with a negative effect. It is intolerable to be in a decision-making conversation among adults in which one of the participants, perhaps even the leader, either addresses others like a didactic village schoolmaster or willfully manipulates the proceedings like a demagogue.

The most beautiful examples of good teaching conversations in which the learning process is facilitated in an almost ideal fashion are Plato's dialogues. With great dialectical mastery, Socrates brings his conversational partners to the insight that they do not know, and hence to the possibility of truly knowing. Although, at the beginning, Socrates' partners may appear equal or superior to him in knowledge, nevertheless he always shows himself to be the true teacher who, through his competence, is sovereign in the field. Socrates can be forgiven his hidden, clever guidance because his pedagogical goal is to lead his partners to self-knowledge and thereby to independence. He acts not for himself, but for others.

### *Between Chaos and Rigidity*

Let us now consider conversations that have no naturally assigned roles and yet, unlike spontaneous conversations, are organized both as to content and to order of discussion. Conferences with colleagues, discussions, discussion groups, studying a common text, colloquies, negotiations, and so on, are all of this type.

Every appearance of concentration on the theme and all efforts to organize the discussion indicate thoughtful reflection. This fact alone can already awaken distrust or even antipathy in some participants. Such people fear that spontaneity, freedom, and warmth will be lost. They see leadership in the conversation as burdensome or patronizing and consider raising of hands, for instance, or any other preliminary indication of one's desire to speak, to be artificial hindrances. A leader for them is totally unnecessary. "Don't we trust one another?" they say. They do not want to forego the advantages of a spontaneous conversation. To some extent, they have a point. A conference with a written protocol that contains time allotments for individual items, together with all the other usual organizational forms, can become austere and official in tone. Indeed, we have all experienced how nothing new arises in thoroughly organized and strictly conducted conversations. The anticipated items unfold in the ritual form already provided. This phenomenon is connected with the kind of human thinking fundamental to every organization. This kind of thinking, which could be called intellectual (German, *verständing*), is oriented essentially by the past. A question is analyzed and structured for the conversation on the basis of past experience. If the question allows the planned path through the conversation to be followed, it is judged to be good. If, however, complications and new questions arise, the preparation is considered to have been inadequate. Intellect in this sense also addresses itself to the realm of things and rejects anything personal. Conversation dominated by the intellect is therefore exactly the opposite of spontaneous conversation.

If the crusaders for the intellect and logic emerge victorious in a group, then the conversation does not, as a

rule, last as long. No one really gets very warm, and the participants become less and less active. No good insights occur, or if they do, fear suppresses them. On the other hand, if the critics of this approach prevail, then the conversations last for a long time, and if decisions are made, they often remain unclear, and everyone interprets them in their own way. The result is that, by the next conversation, everyone has forgotten them, since no one kept notes. In conversations shaped by intellect and logic, personal colors recede into the background, but personal tensions are unavoidable when such a conversation is waylaid by critics who step forward and push their point of view with extreme one-sidedness.

Thus, we have become acquainted with the two possible forms of one-sidedness in conversation: on one side, luxuriant chaotic growth, the danger that everything becomes mushy, with too little structure, and ultimately, inconsequential outcome; on the other hand, we find the danger that the organization suffocates insight to the extent that participants and their qualities can no longer influence the conversation. Chaos and rigidity are both enemies of lively conversation.

Hence the question: How can we lead a conversation in such a way that we neither lose the positive qualities of a spontaneous conversation nor introduce uncontrolled elements? This question could also be asked the other way around. How can one organize a conversation without losing its objective efficiency, but so that as many people as possible can bring as much of themselves as they can into it? The technique known as "brainstorming" arose out of the experience of this kind of conversation. Brainstorming in this sense is an early phase of conversation in which everyone freely

expresses whatever occurs to them in response to the question at hand. Often a kernel of gold can be found under the verbiage of this process.

Once again, let me stress that some form of organization is necessary as soon as we go beyond a simple exchange of information—that is, conversation. Otherwise, because of personal friction and lack of form, the loss is too great.

### *The Ideal Form*

I would now like to illuminate the question from another side. As we have seen, the intellect is based on what has already become the past. When used as a means to organize, this leads to routine. However, in a conversation convened to arrive at decisions based on knowledge, just the opposite is needed—we want something new and unforeseen to arise. How, then, do we move from thinking determined by the past to presence of mind, the present where spiritual insights can enter our minds? We experience the present intensely in spontaneous conversation. But we experience it through feelings and emotions stimulated by the senses, by images from the sense world, and not through true presence of mind, or spiritual insight.

Certainly it can be an advance if we can suppress negative elements through forms of organization. But can't we move beyond old forms to arrive at new forms? Can't we regard all our preparatory work as a preliminary aid, to be dispensed with when we no longer need it? This approach would be similar to that taken by a teacher who carefully prepares a lesson, yet is prepared to modify or even drop it if the actual teaching situation requires it. This assumes a special sensitivity to what lives in the

present. We must perceive the circumstances, the situation, the individual participants as well as their contributions. The ideal is to act out of the situation as it presents itself in the moment without losing sight of the goal.

Doing this is a question of attitude and intention. We can see this clearly if we compare a conversation ruled by contradiction to a conversation truly concerned with acquiring insight. In the former, the participants in the conversation believe that they must win the others over to their own viewpoint in the course of the conversation. For this reason, participants take advantage and strengthen their own position by seeking out every weakness in their partners, every gap in their arguments, and every unclear formulation. They listen to the others' words only to discover what might be useful for a counterargument. This process does not facilitate learning—at most, it hones the participants' skill in dialectic. Conversations of this kind are not concerned with who is right, but only with who has the better arguments. That is why there is often a winner and loser at the end, unless, of course, arguments are simply repeated endlessly, as is often the case with teenagers. Anyone who departs from the original position in such a conversation has lost face, and therefore the debate. The only pleasure to be found here lies in the sparkling intelligence of argument. But this pleasure is often only the seductive pleasure of one's own cleverness at the expense of others.

Everything is quite different in a conversation genuinely aimed at achieving insight. Here, too, the play of dialectic and imagination governs the conversation, but now it is in the service of the search for truth. There is a common goal: greater knowledge. Therefore there are no losers. In this case, questions, objections, and

provocations have only one purpose—to highlight the subject under discussion and to further the development of thought. The fundamental attitude is that of a question addressed to the truth—to be unveiled and developed gradually so that, in the end, it is revealed equally to everyone. Of course, this presupposes that the participants enter fully into the thinking process, helping it along through their contributions, so that something hidden can be brought to conscious insight and lifted into the realm of knowledge for everyone present. Imagine a conversation in which everyone begins with this attitude of truth-seeking, in which every contribution is carefully taken up and weighed to discern what further questions and contributions appropriately connect with what has just been said, thereby giving the whole group thought-process an opportunity to further unfold. When this happens, we enter a realm where conversation becomes art.

### *Conversational Exercises*

#### *Word games*

- One person begins by saying a word, and the next must say a word rhyming with the first before going on to a new word.
- One person begins with a word; the next must say the first word backward before going on to a new word.