

# THE ART OF GOETHEAN CONVERSATION

Marjorie Spock 1983

Conversing, as Goethe conceived it, is the art of arts. The very place in his works where the subject finds mention lets us glimpse its singular rank in his esteem. This is in a key scene of his fairy tale, *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*. There, the four kings enthroned in the subterranean mystery temple are roused to the dawning of a new Age of Man when the serpent, made luminous by the gold she had swallowed, penetrates with her light into their dark sanctuary, and the following dialogue takes place:

“Whence came you hither?” asked the golden king.

“Out of the clefts where gold dwells,” replied the serpent.

“What is more glorious than gold?”

“Light!”

“What is more quickening than Light?”

“Conversation!”

Unless one understands what Goethe meant one can feel disappointed at the serpent's answer, which scarcely seems the revelation one expected. For is conversation as we know it in the Twentieth Century really more glorious than gold, more quickening than light? Hardly! We attach the term to every casual exchange, to the most idle, inconsequential chit-chat. Surely, we feel, the term must have come down in the world since Goethe's day, suffering severest diminution in its slide.

That this is indeed the case becomes apparent when we recall the salons of earlier centuries where great minds came together for significant talk. These occasions were of a wholly different order from our social happenings. They were disciplined, where ours are chaotic, built around a common purpose, mutually enriching rather than depleting. It is impossible to picture the participants in a salon all talking at once, babbling away on as many subjects as there were pairs of conversationalists present. No! The star of a theme hung over the assemblage as over a pool studded with crystals, and the responsively scintillating crystal intellects took turns voicing the reflections awakened in them.

Goethean conversations differ at least as much again from those of the salon as did the salon from today's cocktail party. Their purpose is to call forth a fullness of spiritual life, not to stage displays of intellectual fireworks. They have nothing in common with the salon's formal play of light-points sparkling in cold starlit glitter. Instead, they strive to enter the sun-warm realm of living thoughts where a thinker uses all himself as a tool of knowledge, where – in the manner of his thinking – he takes part as a creative spirit in the ongoing creative process of the cosmos.

This is to say that a true Goethean conversation takes place across the threshold, in the etheric world, where thoughts are intuitions (cf. Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom*), -- that it breaks through into the realm of First Causes.

Lesser types of interchange never do this; they remain mere mentalizing, speculation, argument, a recounting of experience, an offering of opinion, a reporting. At their best they are nothing more than disciplined discussion, at their worst a mindless associative rambling.

While most of these lesser forms of exchange can be made to serve useful purposes, the fact that they remain on this side of the threshold condemns them to spiritual barrenness; they leave earth and those who take part in them unfulfilled. They cannot overcome the isolation with which every man born since Adam feels afflicted.

True conversations have that power. As the participants strive to enter the world of living thought together, each attunes his intuitive perception to the theme. And he does so in the special atmosphere engendered by approaching the threshold of the spiritual world: a mood of supernaturally attentive listening, of the most receptive openness to the life of thought into which he and his companions are now entering.

In such an attitude the consciousness of all who share it shapes itself into a single chalice to contain that life. And partaking of that divine nutriment they partake also of communion, of fellowship; they live the Grail experience of modern man.

We have found Goethe depicting conversation as the art of arts. If it is indeed such, and we aspire to it, what does its practice require of us? Surely no amount of inspired groping will suffice; techniques of a very special order must be cultivated.

Perhaps the first prerequisite is to be aware that the spiritual world beyond the threshold wishes every bit as keenly to be known to us as we wish to know it. It does not have to be taken by assault; it comes gladly to meet us, much as a wise and loving teacher responds to the warmth of a student's interest. And no one genuinely eager to approach such a teacher with the proper reverence fails to elicit his responses. The spiritual world is no less eager to meet our interest. We recall Christ's assurance of this: "Seek, and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

The seeker's attitude thus proves a magically evoking wand that, like the rod of Moses, unlocks a flow of spiritual life. One must know this to be a fact, both in one's own and others' cases. Then the group's consciousness becomes indeed a common vessel in which to receive such illumination as the world beyond the threshold may, on each given occasion, find it suitable to offer.

One cannot step with a single stride from ordinary thought and chatter into Goethean conversation. The latter requires the most loving preparation. Thoughts must first be conceived like children, and then brooded out in the spirits of the thinkers. To this end the theme of a meeting is set in advance. Each member of the group lives with it as a developing concern in his meditation. As the day of foregathering draws near he begins to anticipate coming together as a festival of light which, if he and his fellows have done their work well, will lead to their illumination by the spiritual world.

What, specifically, is meant by work here?

Certainly not the production of any finished concepts, the amassing of quotes from authoritative sources, the getting up of a resume of reading done. Thinking and study engaged in prior to a meeting rather serve the purpose of rousing the soul to maximum activity so that it may come into the presence of the spirit all perception. Work of this sort is a warming up, a brightening of consciousness to render the soul a dwelling place hospitable to insight. One must be willing to sacrifice previous thinking, as one does in the second stage of meditation, in order to clear the scene for fresh illumination.

The principle here is the same as that advanced by Rudolf Steiner when he advised teachers to prepare their lessons painstakingly and then be ready to sacrifice the prepared plan at the dictate of circumstances which may point to an entirely fresh approach to their material. If one is well prepared, he said, one will find the inspiration needed. Indeed, the principle is common to all esoteric striving. Invite the spirit by becoming spiritually active, and then hold yourself open to its visitation.

Those who come to the meeting place thus prepared will not bring the street in with them in the form of all sorts of distracting chatter. One does not, after all, approach the threshold in an ordinary mood; and where an approach is prepared, the scene in which the encounter takes place becomes a mystery temple setting. What is spoken there should harmonize with a temple atmosphere. Conventional courtesies to the person in the next chair, comments on the weather, the transacting of a bit of business, are all completely out of tune and keeping.

To abstain from chatter means learning to live without any sense of discomfort in poised quiet. But then, a very special regard for and tolerance of silence is a *sine qua non* of esoteric life, under which heading conversations too belong. This means an about-face from accustomed ways. In ordinary social intercourse words must flow, or there is no proof of relating; silences signal breakdowns in communication. But as one grows in awareness of the threshold, words for words' sake come to seem disturbers of the peace. Unnecessary utterance intrudes upon and destroys the concentrated inner quiet that serves as a matrix for the unfolding life of intuition.

Conversations, then, rest as much on being able to preserve silence as on speaking. And when it comes to the latter, one can find no better guide to the ideal than is offered in another piece of Goethean insight. The poet saw necessity as art's criterion ("Here is necessity; here is art."). And one can sharpen one's sense of the necessary to the point where a conversation develops like a living organism, every part essential and in balance, each contributor taking pains to lift and hold himself above the level of unshaped outpourings. To achieve true conversations one must, in short, build with the material of intuition. And to reach this height everything of a personal, sentient nature must be sacrificed. Only then can a conversation find its way to necessity.

When it does so, it becomes a conversation with the spiritual world as well as with one's fellow earthlings. Though groups vary greatly, a good deal of practice is usually needed to grow into a capacity for Goethean converse. Most individuals today are so habituated to discussion that they can hardly conceive higher levels of exchange. We are conditioned to earth; the etheric realm has become a stranger to us.

Several means exist to school oneself in etheric thinking. A prime one is, of course, meditation as Anthroposophy teaches it. Another is an ever repeated study of Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom*, carried on with special attention to the way this book, which starts out on the customary ground of philosophic-intellectual argument, suddenly deserts it to lift, winged, into realms where every thought quickens and is free creative deed. Simply to follow that metamorphosis is to receive an infusion of etheric forces whereby one's own thinking is enlivened and one's mind tuned to intuitive perception.

A like transformation is brought about by steeping oneself in fairy tales and great poetry. For rhythms and images teem with spiritual life, and as one absorbs them one can feel one's own life being magically quickened.

It is wholly contrary to a truly modern community building concept to lean on leaders in a conversation. Rather does the creation of a Grail Cup consciousness require an intact circle of fully active, responsible individuals whose only leader is the spiritual world. If, before coming together, every such individual brings the theme of the meeting alive in himself and then, having arrived there, suppresses the thoughts he has had, while offering the life they have engendered to the spirit, the spirit will not fail to bestow fresh insight on a gathering prepared to receive it. This can be experienced again and again. One has only to be active and keep the way clear, knowing that “where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of you.”

The hope of that Presence can be strengthened by learning to listen to one's fellowmen in exactly the way one would listen to the spiritual world: evocatively, with reverence, refraining from any trace of reaction, making one's own soul a seedbed for others' germinal ideas. This is not to imply that the listener surrenders the least measure of discrimination. He weighs what he hears. But he does so in a novel manner by cleansing himself of sympathy and antipathy in order to serve as an objective sounding board against which the words of the speaker ring true or false.

Thus the speaker is brought to hear himself and weigh his own utterances. Correction – in the sense of an awakening – is there without others sitting in judgment on him. Nor is this all. Listening evocatively is a sun like deed. It rays the warmth and light of interest into the thought-life quickening in the circle and encourages it to a veritable burgeoning.

A question often asked by those who become interested in exploring conversations is: How does one go about choosing themes? Certainly not in the usual arbitrary manner. One cannot, as perhaps happened in the salon, seek out the intellectually most appealing theme, nor, like today's discussion group, run one's finger down a list of Timely Topics trying to light on the timeliest. Instead, burning questions that have been harbored in the souls of the participants will seek the light, -- questions that have sprung from a heart's concern with matters of the spirit and are therefore already full of life, and fire and rooted in something deeper than the intellect. Of their own vitality these will burst out to claim the attention of the meeting.

Often a theme teems with such fullness of life that it goes through a long series of metamorphoses requiring many meetings for its exploration. Themes of this kind are especially valuable, for they tend to become lifelong spiritual concerns of all the members, and it is easy to see how indissolubly conversations about such matters link the participants in the conversation.

For a conversation to become a work of art, its life must be given form within a framework. Otherwise it would straggle on amorphously. The framework that keeps conversations shaped is built in part of temporal elements, in part of a very simple ritual. Thus it will be found desirable to fix the exact time of both beginning and ending meetings, and to keep punctually to it, while everyone who intends to be present understands that he should arrive well beforehand to prepare himself to help launch the evening's activity in a gathered mood. These are invariable rules of esoteric practice.

The ritual consists of rising and speaking together a line or more chosen for its spiritually-orienting content, -- for example “Ex deo nascimur (Of God we are born);” “In Christo morimur (In Christ we die);” “Per spiritum sanctum reviviscimus (Through the Holy Spirit we shall live again).” The same or another meditation may be spoken to end the meeting, again exactly at a pre-determined hour.

It may be feared that rigid time-limits inhibit the free unfolding of a conversation. This fear proves ungrounded. A painter's inspiration is not limited by the size of his canvas. Rather do limits serve in every art form as awakeners, sharpening awareness of what can be accomplished, and composition always adapts itself intuitively to the given space.

To make a composition all of one piece as it must be if it is to rank as art, the conversing circle needs to take unusual measures to preserve unity. Here again, there is a vast difference between a discussion and a conversation. In the former, few feel the least compunction about engaging in asides. Disruptive and rude though these are, and betraying conceit in their implication that what one is muttering to one's neighbor is of course of far more interest than what the man who has the floor is saying, they are not as final a disaster as when they take place in a conversation. For discussions base themselves on intellect, and intellectual thinking tends naturally to separateness.

Conversations are of an order of thought in which illumined hearts serve as the organs of intelligence, and the tendency of hearts is to union. The conversation group must make itself a magic circle; the least break in its Grail-Cup wholeness would let precious light-substance generated by the meeting drain away. Sensitive participants will feel asides and interruptions to be nothing less than a cutting off of the meeting from the spiritual world.

Many individuals feel that no conversation could ever match the inspiration of a top-flight lecture. Hence, they tend to think conversing is a waste of time much better spent reading lectures or listening to them. No doubt lectures do serve important functions. Painstakingly prepared, they convey concentrations of spiritual substance to listeners, who sit down as it were to a meal someone else has placed before them. But to continue the analogy, dyed-in-the-wool lecture-goers do all their eating at restaurants, never learning the lovely art of homemaking.

There is something woefully one-sided in such a way of life. Not only does it avoid responsibility and neglect opportunities for creative growth: it means remaining childishly dependent in the most important phase of human evolution, when one should be progressing from having truth revealed to discovering truth by one's own activity.

Rudolf Steiner was no friend of dependency in any form. He seldom told people the solution to a problem, and the only when exceptional pressures of time required it. Rather did he show the way to solving problems for oneself. And that is what the times demand of us: that we become spiritually self-active, learning to draw sustenance from the spiritual world for earth's renewal. Goethean conversations will be found an ideal schooling for this task of foremost importance.