

The art and science of conversation

BY SARAH HOOK-NILSSON

Visitors are arriving at GISS to speak to youth whom they might not otherwise meet. Conversations are taking place about photography and film production, local history and long-distance running, medieval studies and monetary theory. What purpose does a conversation serve that cannot be equally well served by a good book and a knowledgeable teacher?

A good book? As Alice asked, even before she fell down the rabbit hole, "what is the use of a book, without pictures or conversations?" A Chinese proverb tells us that a single conversation across the table with a wise person is worth a month's study of books.

A knowledgeable teacher? But isn't it the exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings, which leads to learning? The process of conversation involves a creative participation between peers. Reading the manual or watching someone else is not enough. To learn to play you need to practise the game. "Conversation is the laboratory and workshop of the student," according to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Amos Bronson Alcott, 19th-century educator observed that debate is masculine and conversation feminine, or more graphically that "debate is angular and conversa-

tion circular." Milton Wright, in his guide to the Art of Conversation in 1936, pronounced women better at conversation than men.

According to more recent research about brain evolution, the definition of good conversation seems to depend on your point of view, whether you are male or female. In general it seems that men talk to give information or report while women talk to collect information or gain rapport. Men talk about things (business, sports, food). Women talk about people. Men focus on facts, reason and logic. Women focus on feelings, senses and meaning.

Then there is the method of conversing itself. Experts report that because men have single track brains, when they talk to each other, they either speak or listen — they can't do both. Their focused, specific and logical thinking has evolved in order to be able to track and hunt for food. Women can speak and listen at the same time because the right and left sides of their brain are better connected for multiple tasking. Their wide-angle vision is the result of watching for predators or collecting berries near the cave. Or, as Milton Wright put it, "Women are inclined to flit, men to plod."

According to Deborah Tannen, an expert on interpersonal com-

munication, we live our lives "as a series of conversations." With such different expectations and inherited abilities, is there any question that in order to prepare for life, we need to practice the fine art of conversation?

The only mistake we can make is to believe there is one right way to listen, to talk — or to have a conversation.

There are currently 23 people registered on the Living Links database, 13 adults and 10 students. Adults, some of whom are French speaking, are currently meeting with students in the French Immersion program (Grades 11 and 12) to talk about a wide range of interests. Students who are taking History 12 or Socials 11 this semester will have the opportunity to hear first-hand accounts of historical events from local Salt Spring residents, most of whom are seniors. In addition, several students have expressed interest in teaching adults/seniors computer skills, and coaching adult learners. If you would like to be a part of this exciting new project, please contact me at shooknilsson@sd64.bc.ca or call me at the high school: 250-537-9944.

The writer is coordinator of the Living Links program through GISS.