

BROCK'S BANTER: The Dying Art of Conversation

By Brock Weir

Over the past few days, circumstances have continually thrown my mind back to a lesser-remembered scene from I Love Lucy. The Mertzes have come over to the Ricardos' apartment to watch a movie on their television. It's a happening ? the refreshments are made, the popcorn is freshly popped, and is in a long-handled server to pass around to all the guests. The movie is rolling along nicely until the television set starts to act up.

After a few minutes trying to adjust the screen, they realise it's on the blink and their movie night is just not happening. Not to be deterred, they brainstorm other ways to occupy their time, eventually settling on having a good ole' conversation. This is about as far as they get.

After all, for the previous few years, they have been fully immersed in the worlds contained on their television airwaves. Sure, they could talk about the day's headlines, but their talking points struggle to even scratch the surface. All talk quickly winds to close.

Then, to the relief of everyone, Lucy finds a radio for them to listen to and sanity is restored and they don't have to put themselves through the wringer trying to come up with pleasantries and small talk.

This particular episode is nearly 65 years old, yet it highlights a long-running trend: the gentle decline and near fall of the art of conversation.

Don't get me wrong, I am no fan of small talk ? yet, some people excel at the smallest of the small talk. And, kudos to them. Somebody's got to do it, but it's just not for me. In everyday human interaction, I would rather keep quiet until I have something relevant to say to whatever the topic might be. Some perceive this as a degree of shyness, but it is simply having no desire to throw in a banality just to remind whatever group with whom I am interacting that I am actually present. They know. Conversation has become something of a lost art. I don't think anyone would necessarily disagree with that statement, but it is an art lost by our own device. After all, we're living in an age where people all too often believe the most effective way of communication is limited to 140 characters, a share, or an animated gif.

We've come to accept that and, in turn, have become complacent that this is our new reality.

But, am I alone in sensing there is some change in the air?

From where I sit, things have reached a breaking point.

Despite the anger and fear in the air felt by so many right now by so many from all points on the political perspective, there seems to be a renewed appetite for dialogue; an appetite to engage in a respectful way with people who might not necessarily share your particular worldview. Perhaps it is in the vain hope that your sound, well-reasoned views might change an opinion or two, or that hearing the equally sound and well-reasoned viewpoints from the opposition might give you valuable perspective to bolster your own case, but the important thing is dialogue is indeed happening.

I was heartened last week going over to Trinity Anglican Church to talk to their leaders about their new sermon program, Holy Shift. I felt in turning the traditional style of a sermon on its ear, and underscoring the fact it is a dialogue open to the community as a whole, they were re-filling a vital service that used to be the cornerstone of every vital community: dialogue.

Of course, when they told me the theme of this past Sunday's service would be, in a nutshell, the role of media and truth in the age of ?alternative facts? I just had to go in and see whether this new format would set out to achieve what was originally intended.

And, in the end, it did just that.

Between the ministers, there was a fruitful discussion not just on the role of media, but the search for truth embodied with the individual. There was also valuable input offered by members of the conversation. I left buoyed that conversation ? and indeed truth ? might have a future after all.

?Right from the beginning in our Christian narrative, Jesus and Pilate had a conversation about what's true, and we have been given a God given ability to think and reason and work through what's true,? Rev. Dawn Davis told me last week, a point which she reiterated to the congregation on Sunday morning. ?That is a huge responsibility. That is the form we felt we really needed to engage in.?

God, a higher power, or whatever you believe in, might have given us the ability to think and reason and work through what's true, but, in my opinion, our collective muscles to do just that have been atrophying. Thankfully, they seem poised for a workout once again.

In addition to Aurora, I also serve as the editor of a newspaper in a more rural community northwest of here. On last week's front

page, I included a photo of two local girls who took the time to travel to Washington, D.C. to take part in the Women's March. In the photo, one of them is holding a sign taking back a word that had re-entered the popular lexicon over the course of the most recent U.S. presidential campaign thanks to a certain handsy Republican victor in an Access Hollywood bus.

A provocative photo, to be sure, and it certainly created a stir.

'You are directly responsible for parents having to explain the entire conversation of the sign,' wrote one reader in response to the photo. 'Why you didn't have the inclination to smudge the words out is beyond me. You have insulted the good reputation of [the Town and the girls' high school] and placed families in a precarious situation via explanation.'

Since when did we, as a society, feel the need to shy away from having conversations on important issues of the day with loved ones?

If my inclusion of a young woman's sign 'grabbing back' can foster 'an entire conversation', a conversation that could lead to valuable dialogue between parents and their young daughters on (a) why girls not that far removed from themselves in age are standing up for their rights and what they believe in, (b) a talk between parents and their sons on why they might consider joining their sisters in the fight, or (c) give people in general any food for thought on how they might want to consider standing up for any children or grandchildren they might have coming down the line, then I am happy to shoulder even a fraction of the responsibility. But, let's be real, that responsibility lies with the women and men taking part in the marches.

The rest of us are talking ' or writing ' but we each have an important part to play, so strike up that conversation and see what comes from it.

You'll be glad you did.