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# **The TAO of Conversation**

*How to talk about things  
that really matter,  
in ways that encourage new  
ideas, deepen intimacy,  
and build effective and creative  
working relationships*

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**Free-for-Alls, Beauty  
Contests, and the  
Distinguished House Tour**

*Idea Conversations*

We have been considering the proposition that talking about ideas can be engaging and involving without being argumentative. But how? If you express an idea, how can I possibly re-

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respond without either nodding politely or challenging you in some way? How can I respond without simply “agreeing” with you, which would hardly move the conversation forward, or showing you some inadequacy in your idea, which is likely to lead to argument?

This chapter will propose that what I might do is join you in the building and elaboration of your idea. I might become your teammate, your colleague, your fellow musician jamming with you. We might wind up building a better idea than either of us could have worked out alone. Our conversation would be a living manifestation of the I-Thou relationship.

One of my academic responsibilities is leading discussions of ideas. For many years, when I polled my colleagues I found that many of us agreed that a college or graduate school seminar was apt to be one of two things: either a question-and-answer session or a series of arguments. Neither seemed very satisfying. And so some of us set about trying to learn how a seminar might work better. We assembled a group of interested students and began experimenting. What we learned completely changed the way I thought about idea conversations.

We discovered that there are four different kinds of seminars. We named the first three of them the *Free-for-All*, the *Beauty Contest*, and the *Distinguished House Tour*.

**The Free-for-All.** There is a prize out there in the middle of the floor. It may be the instructor’s approval or it may be one’s own self-esteem, but it’s out there, and the goal is to win it. Anything goes--elbows, knees, gouging, anything. You win not just by looking smart, but by looking *smarter*. And that means that making *them* look dumb is just as important as making yourself look smart.

**The Beauty Contest.** There’s a prize here too, but this time I try to win it by seeking your admiration. I parade my idea by you in its bathing suit and high heels. When it’s off the runway, I go to the dressing room and get ready for my next appearance while you’re parading your idea. Of course, I’m not paying any

attention to your idea, and you're not paying any attention to mine.

**The Distinguished House Tour.** In most cities you can arrange to be taken on such a tour. You are driven to a stately home which is a good example of Edwardian architecture and furniture. The hosts have spruced it all up for your visit; they show you through and explain it all, and you ask questions. Then you get back into the bus and go look at another house, say one that is a good example of Georgian architecture.

In the Distinguished House Tour seminar, someone advances an idea. The rest of the seminar spends some time exploring her house. They ask questions, they explore for inconsistencies, and they try hard to understand the idea. When they have a good grasp of it, one of the other members offers another idea. It may be a whole different point of view on the same subject. The seminar members, including the first idea's hostess, then explore that house. The houses are not compared, nor does one person claim that his or hers is better. Each house is thought to be interesting in its own right and worth exploring.

My colleagues and I found the Distinguished House Tour to be a high form of discourse and one capable of producing an interesting seminar. It also has some significant problems.

In one of our early experimental seminars we were discussing Lao-tzu's *Book of the Tao*. One very young student said, "I think Lao-tzu's way is a good one-just going along minding your own business, not trying to tell other people how to live, not trying to organize the world, just looking after your own garden." We had been invited into her house, and we set about exploring it.

One of the members thought he found an architectural problem. In a friendly and helpful manner he said, "Yes, but what do you do when you discover that someone is mistreating a child? Do you mind your own business and let the child suffer?" Our hostess hadn't been in many seminars, and she had never before read this kind of book. The friendly question was

all she needed to collapse and say, “Oh, yeah, I guess I didn’t think it out very well.”

She didn’t speak for the rest of the seminar. No one felt good about it.

Later on, we invented the verb “socratease” to describe what happens when you ask friendly questions to show the holes in a person’s idea. We realized that this young student had been badly socrateased.

Even in friendly territory, it’s not just the young and shy who find defending or explaining a position lonely and stressful. It’s lonely and stressful for almost anyone. It’s lonely and stressful for me to feel the pressure of a roomful of people on me when I’m trying to explore a new idea in a seminar. At best it’s like being a witness in a trial, and at worst it’s like an inquisition. It’s an adrenaline starter, not calculated to bring out my best thinking. Fortunately, we discovered a fourth kind of seminar. We called this one the Barn Raising.

### **The Barn Raising**

When a family in frontier America needed a barn and had limited labor and other resources, the entire community gathered to help them build it. The family described the kind of barn they had in mind and picked the site; the community then pitched in and built it. Often neighbors would suggest changes and improvements as they built.

A Barn Raising seminar begins when someone brings the group an idea or asks a question. The original idea may be barely fledged and not at all thought out. It doesn’t matter. The community gathers to build the barn, to put together that idea.

Suppose you offer an idea in support of Lao-tzu. Your idea may be one I believe and support, or one with which I disagree, or a totally new concept that I’ve never thought about before. In any case, your idea now becomes my project, and I set about helping you build it, helping us build it.

After you’ve offered the idea, you have no more responsibility for developing it, defending it, or explaining it than any-

body else in the group. If I have a problem with the idea, the problem belongs to the whole seminar, not just to you. Whenever someone seems stuck and can't find any way to put a couple of bits of the architecture together, it becomes the task of the entire seminar to help him or her connect those two parts of the barn.

So you say that you think it would be desirable to wander through the world like Lao-tzu, leaving other people alone, and I want to help you build your idea, but I still can't bring myself to ignore the problem of the suffering child. I might say, "Okay, I'd like to develop that idea. But what if a child is suffering? That thought really troubles me. How do we deal with that, everybody? I need help." A third person might enter the conversation and say, "Well, as I listen to you two, it occurs to me we might handle it this way. Maybe Lao-tzu is saying that intervening will ultimately cause more suffering. Now if I have to set up a political system, and an army to defend it, in order to make sure that child doesn't suffer, there are surely going to be a lot more suffering children before very long. Painful as it is, maybe I'm better off with one mistreated child than with a whole Vietnam full of them. Does that help?" And there we are, building your barn.

An interesting thing about the Barn Raising seminar turned out to be that people didn't come out of the seminars with the same ideas they went in with. They learned, and they expanded their point of view. You may have heard the psychological principle that trying to persuade someone to accept an idea is a good way of stopping them from even considering it. What I will succeed in doing is entrenching that idea into my own head even more firmly. But if I make it my task to help build your idea, then my defenses are down, my creativity is mobilized, and the ground is fertile for learning.

### **Who Teaches? Who Learns?**

Those are the four kinds of seminars we observed. No seminar is a pure case; they all go through periods of fitting into each of

the categories. Sometimes they are unclassifiable. But the goal is to spend as little time as possible being stuck in a Free-for-All or a Beauty Contest, and as much time as possible raising a barn.

The conception that emerged from our experiments with college seminars was very similar to Plato's belief that we all know a good deal more than we know we know. Plato taught that there is deep wisdom buried in each of us, and it takes only friendly midwives to bring it to awareness. In our experimental seminars, people were repeatedly surprised by the quality of the ideas that they discovered in themselves. Everyone in the seminar was everyone else's teacher and also everyone else's student.

We also discovered that the participation of *every* member was important. In most groups, conversation is dominated by a few assertive and verbal people, and the only available points of view are theirs. One goal of our seminars was to maximize resources, and we found that the more widespread the participation, the richer the experience. Each consciousness is unique and irreplaceable, and when some people get shut out, the loss is significant.

The linguist Robin Lakoff teaches us what we must overcome to achieve the goal of widespread participation:

In conversation, power is demonstrated by the holding of the floor. In general the one who has the floor the most, and/or is responsible for more successful topics than anyone else, has the most power—at least for the purposes of the conversation.... If topic choice is charted in mixed-sex conversation, men generally contribute the lion's share of "successful" topics. (A topic "succeeds" when others take it up; an unsuccessful topic is one that is broached and left to die. Women are responsible for an unusual number of these, largely because neither men nor other women are eager to take up women's topics, but everyone is more responsive to men's.) A speaker who has been made to feel powerless by the devices



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mentioned will tend to become progressively more silent as the conversation goes on, or at least will take shorter and less assertive turns, thereby diminishing her power still further... To respond to someone's topic signifies approval of both the topic and its originator; to say nothing can convey the worst kind of disapproval or lack of interest. (*Talking Power*, p. 49)

Lakoff goes on to note that in ordinary conversation there are two kinds of speakers: *involved* and *considerate*. People whose conversational style tends to be involved are likely to be aggressive and dominating, while considerate people tend to hold back and appear less interested. What we have discovered in our experimental seminars is that it is quite possible to defy that correlation and be both involved *and* considerate.