



SIEBENQUELL

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# The Art of Conversation

## Jesus and the Woman at the Well

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SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is, among other things, a story about the high art of conversation. In the regard, John O'Donohue once wrote:

»You have to ask yourself, 'When is the last time that you had a great conversation?' A conversation which wasn't just two intersecting monologues, which is what passes for conversation a lot in this culture. But when had you last a great conversation in which you overheard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew, that you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost and a sense of an event of a conversation that brought the two of you on to a different plain, and then fourthly, a conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterwards.«

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What does the woman at the well want to talk about? What does she request?

Basically, she does not want to talk about very much and she asks for too little. She has few expectations of the conversation, likely because she has too few expectations of life. At the beginning, she more or less wants Jesus to leave her alone.

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The last thing she wants is the pesky interruption of this man. She wants to live in peace and quiet. She is looking for water, not an encounter and certainly not a relationship.

That is where we encounter a classical problem of all conversation. How do we enter into a conversation with someone who does not want to talk to us?

What does the woman at the well want to talk about? What does she request?

For her, the conversation evolves around instant and practical results. »Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.« She wants it right now. After all, she is a pragmatist. She wants instant relief, instant gratification. She does not care about anything in the long term. The fact that the Messiah will come is not a problem for her, but that is something for the distant future and of no immediate concern to her.

Here, too, we encounter a classic problem of all conversation. If everything revolves around immediate and practical solutions, then the conversation always remains superficial.

Essentially her whole world revolves around filling that jar. Filling her jar is her obsession, her one care, her singular goal. If she can fill it, fill it with ease, fill it swiftly and then go home, all would be well. It is her deeply-held belief that if she could fill the jar, she would be happy. But the entire conversation proves that this is not true. She will return with a full jar to a village that shuts her out and reviles her, to a series of failed relationships that were unable to fulfil her.

Here we encounter the painful problem of all good conversation, namely, when a person reduces his or her life to one topic, fixate son that personal issue and everything else falls away as meaningless. I only have one topic, but I can go on endlessly about it.

II

What does Jesus want to talk about? What does he offer?

He certainly wants more than the woman at Jacob's well. For Jesu, the conversation is an offer to go deep, to fathom the deep heart.

The Samaritan woman wants to be left alone, but he offers her encounter. And encounter is always the birthplace of conversation.

Jesus conversational partner wants to have water to fill her jar so she can get on with her daily life. But Jesus offers her water that will give her an authentic life. For the art and craft of grand conversation looks for the real issue and does not settle for the surface.

The bearer of the jar wants practical results for short term gain. Jesus offers her a conversation that offer her long-term meaning. For the art and craft of grand conversation is set for the long haul, rather than merely the shortcuts of pragmatism.

The relentless questioner asks for alleviation of the thirst that touches the tongue and burns in the throat. Jesus offers her relief from the thirst that rages in places other than the stomach and which leaves you with a parched heart rather than dry lips. For the art and craft of grand conversation wants to touch the deep places where life yet slumbers.

This sojourner of the well asks for instant satisfaction. Jesus offers her a conversation that deals with the fullness of life. She is living on the wrong side of the comma: »I have come that they might have life, life in fullness«. In her five marriages she has sought for instant gratification five times, and yet remains deeply restless, unfulfilled and unhappy. In the end, she remains alone. In the conversation that Jesus dares with her, he offers her the fullness of life, not just final results and finished products. For the art and craft of grand conversation does not treat yearning as if it were dissatisfaction).

The offer of Jesus is the offer of the grand conversation with God, who offers us an entire world beyond the narrow worlds of our jars. In her obsession to fill it, she has missed a wealth of meaning that cannot be contained in so small a container. What will make her happy cannot fit into the jar, so Jesus refuses to let the jar be the topic of conversation.

III

At the moment, the countries of the world and their citizens are in crisis. Like the woman at the well, we are attempting to somehow carry on with our lives, as well as we can. Yet, when the hour of Jacob's well strikes, and it has come, what will we talk about?

The art and craft of the grand conversation with God is the art of the midwife. It helps us to recover what has been lost. It awakens us and accompanies us home to the foundational fullness and depth for which we were created. It is not a matter of offering up quick and superficial answers. The hour of crisis demands more than leading the little boat of our yearning into a safe, dull harbour. The art and craft of the grand conversation with God wants to make us aware of the depths of possibility in our hearts and lives. It wants to tear down barriers that hold us back from being what God has made us to be.

So, what are we going to talk about?

Will we converse about living water or will we be content with the endless social chatter about watered down life?

Will we speak of the questions of fullness and about the deeply meaningful or give ourselves over to the panic filled prattle of the moment?

Can we have a conversation about the challenges of the hour what they demand of us?

Will we speak of sharing instead of hoarding?

Of protection for the weak and endangered instead of demanding our rights?

Will we have a concentration on the essentials, instead of holding tight to insignificant distractions?

Will we speak of solidarity instead of self-satisfaction?

Will we accept limitations so that others might live?

Will we speak words of comfort and encouragement to each other instead of feeding the panic and hysteria around us?

Will our talk be of helping each other instead of exploiting the situation?

Not just Jesus has mastered the high art of the grand conversation. The Samaritan woman lived out in finest style this art and craft of conversation. She enters into every offering of new depth. She combines the new insights of the conversation with her situation and her existential need. She meets the challenge, shows her truest self, dares the conversation and does not evade the questions.

In this hour of crisis, may Jesus find us to be the grand conversational partners that he found in this extraordinary woman in Samaria.

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From the series: May you be sheltered!