

The Art of Conversation

If you were to name your five favorite forms of entertainment, would conversation make the list?

In *Conversation: History of a Declining Art*, Stephen Miller chronicles the history of conversation throughout western civilization. From ancient times to present day America, Miller explores the evolution and decline of free conversation, which he believes is the essence of free speech and democracy. While the book is uneven, the topic deserves some thought:

- Has the art of conversation been compromised by the distractions of modern day life?
- Are we still able to exchange ideas through objective discourse?
- What does modern conversation look like—does it have to be face-to-face or does blogging count?

Do we still engage in conversation?

A conversation is a communication that allows people with different opinions to share and learn from each other. Long ago, Cicero wrote the rules: speak clearly, be brief, give others a turn, don't interrupt, be courteous, treat serious matters seriously and light topics lightly, never criticize people behind their backs, focus on subjects of general interest, do not talk about yourself, and never lose your temper. Good conversation should be full of give and take; a dialogue, not a debate or a speech.

Some people believe the art of conversation has been in decline for long time. According to the Guardian, cheap books, newspapers, and better home lighting were considered a detriment to conversation during Victorian times. In the twentieth century, George Orwell was certain that radio would be the downfall of the conversational arts, to say nothing of television. Today, experts say, the Internet, cell phones, Mp3 players, and other innovations have caused us to have less time to think, and less interest in conversation for conversation's sake.

Has conversation become extinct? It just might be a conversation worth having.