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My son was assembling something requiring dexterity and was frustrated. Knowing his short fuse, I tried to help, even though my fingers aren't as nimble as they once were. He was cussing under his breath when I said, "Remember our neighbor, Mrs. Armstrong? She told me she quilted to keep her fingers agile in spite of arthritis. I play guitar for the same reason."

"Really?" He seemed surprised.

"It's not the only reason I play guitar," I added.

What I said seemed to calm him. We finished the project in good time.

Later I wondered how my comment, which seemed little more than small talk, had the effect of diffusing his anger. Was it that my admission reminded him, he wasn't the only one who had difficulty with the project? Was it that the reference to the neighbor evoked memories from his early teens, a time that seemed, in retrospect, more congenial and less complex than the present? He and his brothers used to visit the eighty-year-old neighbor to pick boysenberries from the huge bushes she no longer attempted to hold in check—some berries for her, some for us. Whatever it was, the exchange served to remind me how talk—everyday small, friendly talk—lubricates human interactions.

Malcom Gladwell once wrote an account of a dog whisperer, a man called on to help families whose dogs have gotten out of hand. The behavior of these animals often reflects messed-up family relationships. Cesar Millan is extraordinary in his calm and measured demeanor (which calms the animal he is trying to reeducate), but in one instance, he lost his cool. A chihuahua bit the teen son of the owner, a boy seated next to her. The owner merely took the animal into her arms and hugged it. Earlier she had described the dog as "so small and helpless."

"If your son kicked the dog, you'd discipline him," said Millan. "Then why do you not discipline the dog when he hurts your son?" Later he elaborates further. "I love dogs. I'm a dog whisperer. Do you get it? But I would never choose a dog over my son."

By then the home was in uproar. The owner upset, her son stricken. The dog began to growl. "Sh-h-h" said the dog whisperer to the animal. "And everyone was still," concludes Gladwell.

"The human voice is an instrument we all play . . . it's the most powerful sound in the world," says Julian Treasure, a voice coach based in England, in one of his TED talks. Sadly, many people are not heard when they speak. We are not taught how to speak such that we will be heard, he points out.

One of the coach's videos highlights habits we need to let go. "The Seven Deadly Sins of Speaking," analyzes habits like gossiping, which is the tendency to speak ill of an absent someone. Anyone listening to gossip is going to conclude, he or she will be next in the rumor-monger's big mouth. A relationship is damaged when we gossip. It no longer serves the health of either party.

Judging, or being judgmental, is next on Treasurer's list, a no-no we violate again and again. When we say, "You're so bossy," or "You're too critical," that, too, damages the relationship. Who wants to listen when you are being judged and found wanting? Not me!

Complaining, "the national art of the U.K." as Treasure calls it, is another of his no-go, a "viral misery." We complain about the awful weather or the obnoxious co-worker—but our audience can't do anything about the problem. We leave them frustrated and dissatisfied.

Dogmatism, "My way or the highway," comes next. Sometimes an irritant exists between two people, an issue long ignored like a pebble in the shoe, when one or the other decides to bring it out in the open. More often than not, the conversation becomes a power struggle, with each speaker adamant "my way" is "the right way."

Awareness of these transgressions and their deadweight in conversation is but the initial step. Next we should consider what we want to bring to the conversation. Treasure alerts us to four qualities to take on, and he summarizes them via the acronym HAIL:

Honesty—"be clear and straight"

Authenticity—"be yourself"

Integrity—"be true to your word"

Love—not the romantic love but "wishing people well."

If we structure our talk around HAIL qualities, it brings us to effective speaking. That's a big step because, in order for a relationship to thrive—at home, with friends, in the workplace—it must be nurtured by effective conversation.

Treasure includes warm-up exercises for our vocal cords. The exercises will be familiar to anyone who has sung in chorus or choir or barbershop quartet, where warm-ups precede rehearsals and performances. For me it's been a lifelong practice; even today, I use the exercises to get rid of my "morning voice" and its throat clearing.

Adar Cohen wants us to think about "How to Lead Tough Conversations." Cohen's method requires a learning curve, but it provides an effective approach to conflict. I have watched his TED talk half a dozen times and each time, I've marveled how carefully he sets the stage so as to engender dialogue while avoiding confrontation.

Cohen's three steps seem simple but they take some practice.

The first step is to decide to walk toward the conflict and embrace the resulting discomfort.

Second is to refrain from offering opinions or even facts. Instead, we ask questions. We sit with the premise, “I don’t know anything,” even when we think we have the knowledge.

Number three is to keep quiet and not get anxious. A lull happens; a pause in the conversation seems endless, but that’s ok. We need to have faith that, given the leeway, our partner(s) will continue with the dialogue.

Cohen gives the example of asking a prison guard, “What do people not get about your job?” The question provides a turning point; eventually, every participant discloses information about the self—and a solution is found to the problem of releasing inmates back into the streets.

Gladwell’s story includes quotes from researchers whose studies show that dogs observe people’s behavior with intensity; they adduce a great deal from our gestures, our glances, and our tone of voice. People who are aware note these things also.

When I first started “snowbirding” in Texas with my formerly Wyomingite son and daughter-in-law, we used to play cards after dinner. Often my son got upset when his wife won. Lynda has a competitive streak—she’s a lawyer, after all—and Walter can be thin-skinned. One day I introduced the idea of working together on a crossword puzzle.

It happens, the local newspaper, which my daughter-in-law brings home from work, carries the New York Times daily puzzle, which gets incrementally more challenging as the week progresses. My son subscribes to a weekly periodical that features a page of less-challenging fare.

We tackle each puzzle with gusto. I’m no good at the game, since I pay scarce attention to cultural icons, but my daughter-in-law does. She recalls the names of film directors, performance artists, rave bands, and sports idols. She also comes up with correct answers like “THE EU.” My son doesn’t mind her preempting us; in fact, he delights in her encyclopedic memory. He, in turn, contributes when cues ask for mathematical or biological or scientific answers. I provide the occasional German or French word and musical or linguistic definitions. Other times, we all toss around possibility and pencil in a provisional answer that can be erased and replaced. So far, we’ve been able to find answers without having to look them up first. We smile; sometimes laugh. Our hard-won accomplishments make us feel good. They may even make me feel loved. That’s no small feat in relationships that sometimes feel like a pebble in the shoe.