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As a member of the travel club ATC, the "Affordable Travel Club," every so often, I host couples or single travelers on their way to somewhere else. Typically, guests arrive after dinner; the next morning, I serve a substantial breakfast that's included in the gratuity. In Saratoga, guests might take a dip in the town's famous hot springs before getting underway again.

Every time guests email their inquiry I look forward to an evening of enjoyable conversation. Unfortunately, this rarely happens. I have found, people seldom invest themselves in engaging talk, primarily because they are unwilling or unable to ask follow-up questions.

What are follow-up questions? They are more than questions; they're inquiries grounded in curiosity.

For example, my guests often ask when we meet, "Where does your accent come from?"

I answer that I was born in Germany and came to this country as a young woman.

This information lends itself to a variety of follow-up questions. "Did you immigrate with your parents?" "Was it tough, pulling up roots to risk everything on an unknown fate?" "What was your reason for immigrating?" "Have you ever regretted the move?" "Did you wrestle with the idea before deciding?" "Do you still visit your home country?" "What family or friends did you leave behind?"

Uncurious people will not ask such questions. Instead they'll tell you that their grandpa immigrated from Norway a hundred years ago, their dentist's assistant is German, or there's a German bakery in the town over from their hometown. What am I to do with the info? It's nothing but clutter. In a matter of minutes, the talk has proceeded from a promising beginning to something mundane. From then on it's gossipy small talk about other ATC hosts they've visited.

With follow-up questions, interesting things can happen. One couple arrived saying, later in the evening they wanted to watch the harvest moon rise from behind the mountain peaks. When I asked about it, they knew exactly where in the mountain range they needed to look but wondered about a good lookout point. My widowed neighbor, who was hanging with me when they arrived, said, let's take a drive and scout the area. The four of us drove for less than five minutes before we found an incline with a playground and a couple of picnic tables.

"Perfect," said my guests, adding they hadn't had dinner and asked for recommendations. We suggested a pizzeria, The Grumpy Italian, famous locally and beyond. They said they'd pick up a pizza and take it to the picnic table. "You're invited to join in," they said. "We have veggie juice." My neighbor volunteered a bottle of brandy he had in his cupboard as after-dinner drink.

We went back to my house, where my guests called in their pizza, unpacked their veggie juice, and went to pick up the pie while my neighbor went to get the promised brandy.

We had a great time at the impromptu picnic. The moon did its share by rising in splendid magnitude. We clambered atop the picnic benches for a better view across the treetops. It was quite the experience.

Sometimes I reminisce to myself that the thought of getting to America caused me a lot of anguish. Childhood experiences had conditioned me to a phobia of airplanes as well as a phobia of water. (Early in my California sojourn I wrote a poem with the lines “I can’t remember/Mother/ever putting a washcloth to my face.” Her dad drowned in the First World War when the ship on which he served exploded in the Baltic. She was a toddler then; her mother may have passed on a terror of water that, in turn, passed to me.)

To get to my destination, California, I opted for a cruise from Amsterdam to New York, where I visited a brother who had migrated to the Big Apple the year I lived in France. I’d take the train, I thought, first to Detroit to visit a friend, then to California to reunite with the man I met two years earlier, who had made reservations at Yosemite National Park and Lake Tahoe. With input from my brother I concluded, in deference to the dates Darold specified, I’d have to fly to Detroit and from there to San Francisco. The thought left me sleepless.

One time I told guests the following story.

On the flight to Detroit a girl from France, thirteen, maybe fourteen years old, sat next to me. We talked in French while boarding, which calmed me by focusing on the language I loved, but when the plane began to roll down the tarmac I panicked, as I feared I would. About to jump up and scream, “Stop! I have to get off,” I felt her hand on my wrist.

“*N’avez pas peur,*” she said, patting my arm. “Have no fear. I travel this way every summer to visit my relatives. Nothing bad will happen to us.”

Imagine, a fourteen-year-old trying to keep me from going berserk! It worked, though. A week later I boarded a flight from Detroit to San Francisco, abject terror driving me on. *N’avez pas peur,* I kept repeating to myself. Be unafraid.

Here again were opportunities for follow-up questions, the most obvious being, “Have you flown since then?” “Did you get over your phobia?” A daring guest might ask, “Did you ever uncover the origin of your phobia?” Instead, the male of the visiting couple told how, as an eighteen-year-old enlisted in the army (serving in the military was mandatory then), he boarded a flight for the first time in his life. He looked forward to spending a week of leave with his sweetheart back home but was worried about flying.

“I was nervous,” he said. “An undertaker sat next to me. When he saw how jumpy I was, he made fun of me, telling me about the people he buried who died in car crashes and such. He razzed me. I was relieved to be rid of him when the plane landed.”

A follow-up story of sorts, one that contrasted with my own. I made the sympathetic noises I felt were called for and took the story in stride.