

Conversing is not a luxury, it's a necessity

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I was struck by the a comment made in passing by Christel Fricke, a magnificent German philosopher who teaches at the University of Oslo: “I like luxury, but I don’t need it.” It was a delicious spring evening, while I was enjoying a glass of white wine on the terrace by Yamaguchi Park in Pamplona and conversing amiably with her and Alejandra Carrasco, a professor from Chile. I don’t remember the content of that conversation, as I was saying farewell to the two guests at our university, but I took note of her comment because I thought it reflected well our own situation and, in addition, expressed something very profound about us human beings in a simple manner.

Her comment came to mind, perhaps in contrast, when I was at a recent lunch in a fancy restaurant in Pamplona with a friend from my adolescence with whom I hadn’t spoken in forty years. We were both excited about seeing each other again, and much more interested in telling each other about our lives than in the wonderful lunch that we were being served. The prestigious *restaurateur*, as they now call those who run this kind of establishment, came to our table to explain to us the details of how his staff had prepared the delicious plates that we were eating, but what really drew our attention was hearing ourselves talk to each other. For me, the best thing about a meal is always the conversation.

To eat with a bit of hunger is a pleasure, to die of hunger a torture, and to eat without hunger a disgrace. Gastronomy aspires to multiply this pleasure via sophistication and refinement, encouraging us to try exquisite and carefully cooked foods. Just as Babette did at the banquet she gave to the Danish puritans, as Isak Dinesen marvellously recounts. The French cook spends all her savings on a splendid dinner that returns warmth to the souls of those whom she had invited to table, and which culminates with emotional discourses and hugs.

“He who eats alone, dies alone”, says a sobering Kikuyu proverb. I don’t like eating, much less eating alone. The British philosopher Susan Haack told me that when she was a teenager she thought that eating was an unpleasant physiological function that one had to inevitably put up with, and which did not require any particular attention. But when she was 16, when she spent a summer as an au pair in Normandy, she discovered there that her French host family dedicated a full hour at midday to eating and another hour at night to dine on simple yet exquisite food. And even more, during these times—she recalled—they would almost always talk about food. For her, accustomed as she was to insipid English food so often eaten in silence, the experience was a real discovery.

Their friendly conversation made their meals more pleasant. Years ago the bibs that were put on babies in Spain would sometimes say “Shut up and eat”. Now, perhaps, they should say instead “Eat and talk”, or, even better, “Eat and chat”: that way the televisions would beshut off, the headphones would be disconnected, the cellphones and other annoyances would be silenced so we could enjoy mealtime conversation. It’s not enough to eliminate the noise that distracts us; we must also, as good hosts know, arrange the diners wisely around the table so that the conversation will be easier and more fluid, without bothersome squabbles and embarrassing silences.

Eating is necessary, eating with others is an expression of our social nature, and listening to one another is too. It’s not a luxury, they are deep human needs whose satisfaction can even go so far as to create true works of art.