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Interview with Daniel Menaker Author, “A Good Talk”

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KENNEALLY: We're in New York, hoping to have a good talk with Dan Menaker, the author of *A Good Talk – The Story and Skill of Conversation*. And I want to welcome Dan Menaker to *Beyond the Book*. Dan, it's good to see you.

MENAKER: Thanks very much. Glad to be here.

KENNEALLY: What this book is about is a lot of different things, but it's about conversation, the art of conversation, the history of conversation. But I want to challenge whether in fact it's a memoir. You're a conversationalist. Is it a conversationalist's memoir?

MENAKER: Well, actually somebody recently said – and I don't know if it was you, Chris, but someone recently said that it was a memoir in disguise. I'll cop to that. There's certainly a lot of personal anecdote and so on.

But I think the main thrust of the book is to use some personal material for the purpose of talking about talking. And I don't think it's straight memoir – that's next.

KENNEALLY: We'll have to look forward to that. But in this book, you break down conversation into four distinct categories, or steps, if you will – survey, discovery, risks, and roles. And I thought I'd ask you to take us through that briefly, and why you think a conversation typically follows that progression.

MENAKER: Well, first of all, certainly conversations between friends don't follow that structure. This book and my ideas are mainly about people who don't know each other very well, and getting to know each other, and seeing if they want to have a stronger connection in the future. And therefore, the steps are kind of natural. Like many sort of would be sociological ideas, this one is kind of obvious.

Survey consists of people finding out where they're from, who they are, possibly where their parents were from, what they do for a living, what their interests are.

The discovery is the fact that almost everybody, as in the play *Eight Degrees*, or *Nine Degrees of Separation*, has something in common with someone else. And



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that's the discovery aspect. They both like country music, as in the case of you and me. They both like – they've both been to Siberia, for some strange reason. Who knows why? So that's the discovery part.

The risk has to do with, after establishing the fact that you're not necessarily going to keep it at a superficial level, you begin to give certain kinds of confidential information. It doesn't have to be scandalous. It doesn't have to be sensational. But it has to be something that reveals something about you that you might not have told to a complete stranger, because at this point, this other person is not a complete stranger. Maybe something medical, might be marital, might be occupational, but you take a chance. So you don't like your boss, you're facing surgery, something along those lines that will turn you into a real, specific, live human being.

After that kind of risk is taken – by the way, it's often reciprocated, and if it's not reciprocated, then that's a sign, then comes a role playing in a way which is when at the end of a conversation – sorry, a conversation or near the end, people begin to take on roles. For instance, consoler, advisor, confession – confessor.

And again, it doesn't have to be deep. That's for later on. But where you sort of say, this person that I'm talking to wants or needs to hear from me in a certain way, or, I need to hear from him or her in a certain way. And you sort of agree that for certain portions of the conversation, you will act almost as if you were playing a role.

So those are the stages. They're very fluid. Sometimes people jump the gun. We all know people – you sit down with them, and they say, you know what? My son is giving me a real pain in the neck, and it comes out of nowhere. But for the most part, this is what I've observed over many, many years, that it kind of follows this pattern of deeper and deeper contact.

And if it doesn't, that's fine, too. You could have a perfectly civil exchange with somebody, and then part ways on a perfectly polite note, but one out of 20 or 30 times, if you sit down for an hour with somebody, you find that you'll make a connection. And that's what is worth preserving.

KENNEALLY: Well, in fact, we jumped the gun just a bit here in our own conversation for *Beyond the Book*, because I should tell people a bit about you and your background. You've written for many publications, including the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Slate*. You are now the editor and contributor of a section in *The Daily Nook* called *Grin and Tonic* – it's a humor feature on the new Barnes & Noble site tied to its own eReader.



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You've authored many works of fiction, two of them *New York Times* notable books. You were a senior editor at the *New Yorker*, editor-in-chief at Random House, and I'll catch my breath and ask whether writers are by nature interested in conversation genetically. Do you think that's the case?

MENAKER: For the most part, yes. They are verbal people, by definition. And they like to talk. Often, they like to talk in order to avoid writing, a ploy second only to making sure the ice trays are filled, which is another way to avoid writing. We can find any number of ways to avoid writing.

I will say, and qualify it, by saying some writers actually are not talkers. They are solitudinist people, like Salinger, and famously, Thomas Pynchon. There are a set of writers who are not particularly sociable. But for the most part, we like to jabber.

KENNEALLY: As an editor, though, you had to have – it was your job to have conversations with writers, with authors, about their work. And to do so in a way – I mean, you knew them after a time, but you met them all for the first time at some stage. And you either challenged them, or they challenged you. Can you share a story or two about that?

MENAKER: I think there's one in the book about a writer who liked to talk so much – a perfectly nice man, very intelligent man, who liked to talk so much about extraneous matters and pertinent matters that I deliberately underbid for his next book, because I simply didn't have the time to listen to him. That's one anecdote, but that's extreme.

Yeah, I think when you first meet a writer, when you're in it – first of all, the book is mainly about non-goal oriented conversations. There's no agenda. When I was an editor, usually the agenda was, eventually, get to the book, try to help to make it better, publish it well, and do a professional job.

But you're right – at first meeting, it was like meeting anyone else. You do have to get to know each other. And writers – my rule of thumb is that writers talk about their parents after about 15 to 20 minutes. Most people talk about their parents after about 40 to 45 minutes. So the parent parental figures – I think probably that's – I haven't made that up, but it's just a rule of pinky, not a rule of thumb.



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Writers tend to be very interested in their own childhoods, I think, and I think it's one of the reasons they are writers. And so, that's an interesting conversational difference. Often, they'll say, you know, my mother, or my father – and there will follow a story of inattention, often, of some kind.

KENNEALLY: And for the writer then to begin to share that narrative, the storytelling piece that's very important there, there's a danger that they will make it a one-sided conversation. The reason I was asking about writers and conversation is, to me, they are less inclined to invite the back and forth aspect of conversation and much more inclined to pronounce, if you will, to control the floor. Is it hard for writers to share that way, to share the space, the air?

MENAKER: I think it's – I think writers are highly varied in that regard. I would say generally speaking, I do agree with you. I subscribe to your thesis. I think writers have a greater attention need than most people, and therefore, they tend to dominate conversations.

But particularly with editors, they're supposed to. I mean, you need to hear from them, and you need to learn to be what I call a para-literary. That is, you're not the writer, you're not the principal person, you need to sort of sublimate your own desire to talk about yourself to the writer's need, first of all, to talk about his material, or secondly, to talk about herself, because you are partly there in a transferential relationship.

I mean, you think about therapists and teachers. Students transfer to them. They attribute to them certain kinds of authority. And the same thing happens with writers and editors, and I know, because I've been both. And I know that when I take my editor's hat off and put my writer's hat on, I do become a needier person. It's quite interesting.

And therefore – but again, these are all sort of professional conversations. They're not just sitting down at a bar somewhere, or on an airplane, and striking up a conversation. So the book is more aimed toward the history and skills of non-agenda conversations.

KENNEALLY: You use the word aimlessness, that there's an aspect of real conversation that is aimless. It's not working towards any particular point, it is, as you say, that kind of interaction that just seems to happen. It seems to happen naturally to us. We're not aware of the forms that it takes. Well, nor should we be aware?



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MENAKER: No. No, we shouldn't be aware, because – and in fact, you know, I once talked to a therapist, and I said, surely when you go out on the town and go to a cocktail party, you're thinking in sort of therapeutic terms, like this person's a narcissist, that person's an anxiety neurotic, and so on. And he said, no. And I said, I don't believe you. He said, no, I really don't.

And since I've written this book and given some sort of abstract thought and research to this, I've found myself worried that I wouldn't be able to throw that away and just talk to people. That hasn't happened, luckily. I – somehow, the ideas go out the window every now and then.

In an extreme case, if someone become – is obviously conversationally pathological, yes, that part of my brain kicks in. But generally, we shouldn't be aware of a shape or a structure, because that puts us outside ourselves, and we really need to be inside ourselves to talk well.

But I'm sorry, aimlessness you talked about. Yeah, in a way, that's phony, because no conversation, good or bad, is totally aimless. The aim is to knit the social fabric, and since conversation evidently has evolved from grooming behavior in primates, it is an essential ingredient of our lives, and one that may be in some danger.

And as I say in the book, and has often been reported, in deeply poverty-stricken circumstances, like refugee camps, one of the first things to go is conversation, because the conditions are so oppressive that this very essential human ingredient is not able to be sustained. So it's aimless in the sense, no, you're not necessarily trying to buy somebody else's company, or you're not necessarily trying to pick a guy up in a bar. But all human exchanges have their results and benefits, so that's not – I need to qualify that a little bit.

KENNEALLY: Well, what's undermining conversation today? Because we live in an enormously rich society. It's not that we're under stress the way that somebody might be in a camp in Darfur. What, though, is undermining conversation in Manhattan or Boston or San Francisco?

MENAKER: Well, that's a very wonderful, well-put point, because at the extremes of affluence or poverty, there is, perhaps, a mortal danger to conversation. We talked about the one. The other that you just asked about seems to me that with that wealth, and especially with the increased means of communication that are electronic rather than personal, two things have happened.



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One is, we – perhaps less often than we used to, sit down, look at each other, get the kind of cut of each other's jib, sort of figure out in that primate way who the other person is, how they look, how they gesture, and so on.

And the other is that electronic means of communication tend, in some way, to shorten – despite the length of the answer of this question – tend to shorten communications. And obviously, we know teenage texters use the shortest possible means – in some ways, a very impressive use of English, I must say. But also, I think it tends to interfere with and reduce conversation so that you miss not only the personal visual contact with the person, but you also miss verbal nuance and so on. Everything becomes modularized, so that LOL, for instance, is – instead of just laughing, you put that down, and it seems to shrink.

So I think the sort of fringe model of expatiation and nuance – we've never had it here in this country as much as they have in continental Europe. But what we have had, I think, is in some danger from, basically, electronica.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're just about 15 minutes into the conversation, and you beat me to it, because I was going to bring up my family – not my parents, but my daughter. And I can't tell you how many times I have said to her, are you just texting all those people? My God, call them on the phone and talk to them. I recalled being her age, and spending an hour on the phone with a friend, and that seemed to have gone out of her life. It was all down to either Facebook exchanges, or texting on the phone. And I felt that there was something lost there. She laughed at me and just kept at the texting.

But you have a section in the book that looks at, as you say, electronica and its impact, e-mail specifically. You've got some good suggestions for improving e-mail conversation. Talk about those.

MENAKER: Well, I think they can be improved only up a certain point. They have – when you write an e-mail, it automatically is circumscribed by the medium in which you're writing. The reason for the abbreviations like LOL and emoticons, those things happen because e-mail is very bad at conveying actual attitudes, so that if you say something very simply, it may be mistaken for abruptness rather than simplicity, so you add an exclamation mark, or a smiley face, or something like that, in order to – so it is a kind of constricted thing, and I think I also talk about, e-mail is made for brief exchanges, for the most part. I think I made up the term "eNormanMailers" for people who write very long, and even I feel somewhat oppressed by that.



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Handwritten notes – maybe it's a matter of my generation, seem to be able to – long letters, as if they existed any more, seem to be able to contain a more conversational tone. It may be the handwriting which is so distinctive versus the pixilation of the characters on e-mail. It may be the paper, it may be the fact that pixels are always moving even if we don't know it or perceive it.

But I think you can – what you can do in an e-mail is, first of all, try to add some humor to it if it's not deadly serious. Understand – look at what the other person has written, and not only respond directly to the questions or the comment the other person has made, but add something. Add a little panache or some other French word like that.

And I think that's a big help, because it emulates what happens in a real conversation, face-to-face conversations, where you're not simply going back and forth as in an interview and saying, yes, no, I don't think so. But you're picking up on what's been dropped before. That can be done to a certain extent in e-mail.

Also say, don't put a salutation, don't put a signoff, except in formal circumstances, if you're writing a recommendation for somebody or something like that. But these are meant to be jiffy communications, and you might as well surrender to that. But not 12 hours a day, because that will keep you from going to have coffee with Chris Kenneally and an interview like this. If you're on e-mail – I know people, and you know people, I am sure, who are literally glued to their machines. That's asocial, and a bad trend.

KENNEALLY: Well, I deplore it. Every time I see it, I just wonder how they can get by with just texting each other. A book like this, while it may be a memoir, intentional or otherwise, will certainly be picked up by many people and thought of as a how-to. They'll say, well, Dan must have had some great conversations, he must really know how to get one started, what the pitfalls are, how to keep it going, and also, how to end a conversation.

So with that, can you help us – give us a few top tips around conversation, things to avoid and things to be sure to include?

MENAKER: Well, I resort to what I've written, although actually, I've added to it recently, because I have a website, and one of the things I'm doing is blogging about sort of addenda to the book.



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I'll give you one – I'll give you, I think the worst conversational sin, short of not paying attention, eyes wandering around the room and simply not heeding what – you're not even trying to continue what you may have started yourself. It's what I call me first. And somebody in my family who is now departed, a wonderful person, used to do this all the time, and it drove me crazy, and I think it drives most people crazy.

I say, you know, the *Good Wife* on CBS is one of the best TV shows ever about the law. And the other person says, I applied to law school when I was in college. Or you say, that new airplane, the 787, looks like it might be a little bit better to fly in. And the other person says, yeah, you know, I'm getting really tired of coach class on such-and-such an airline. And it's the reflexive response to a neutral, impersonal comment, immediately appropriating it to oneself. It is a conversation stopper.

And after – and of course, it's natural to use one's own experience. But I'm talking about the equivalent of a knee-jerk, and we all know people who do this relentlessly, and they're very hard to talk to.

KENNEALLY: And conversation should be not, as you say, just about me first, but it should have – it should draw on your well of knowledge and experience, and it should be surprising, and it shouldn't just be a relation of gossip. You said, I think, in the book, that gossip takes up 80% of what passes for conversation, and I put that to people today simply speaking about their kids, their family, their work. These are the things that immediately bore me to tears.

MENAKER: Well, yes. I think ultimately, one hopes that that kind of personal exchange, which is perfectly natural, will lead to – I won't say higher thoughts, but less personal thoughts. There are so many issues to be discussed, and I think it's important – I mean, first of all, gossip is not necessarily a bad thing altogether, at least in its strictest definition, which is, as somebody put it, talking about named others, which is a pretty good capsule description. We need to do that, I think.

First of all, it is light grooming. We need to know where we stand on, God help us, Tiger Woods and Eliot Spitzer and all those kinds of scandals, because they tend to set social and moral guidelines for us. But that doesn't mean we have to stop there. In fact, one hopes – I hope that it will – that such conversations will lead to, perhaps even, not any less passionate or less interesting, but slightly more abstract ideas about politics and religion and opinion, and positions about the way things are and the way things ought to be.



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To some extent, it's a great help, as we've seen in the Obama campaign, for beginning to build consensus, and that's very important. Right now, I'm talking to people about the healthcare reform, as everybody else is, and really objecting strenuously to Senator Lieberman's, I think, truly heinous position on this matter. And I'm talking to people about it directly, because I'm hoping they'll talk to other people. It's not exactly an agenda, but I do agree with you, basically, that one hopes that we will sort of leave the kids' orthodontics behind, and get to some higher ground. Nothing wrong with orthodontics.

KENNEALLY: I like the idea of coming to a dinner party or whatever – agenda is perhaps a strong word, but prepared to talk about some things that you care about. That, perhaps, runs against the aimlessness piece, because there may be people at the party who you have not met before, so you will have to go through the various stages. But at some point, you might have something you just want to focus on and to learn from them, see how they react to it.

MENAKER: I think that's true. I think that at social gatherings, there's nothing wrong with having something on your mind that during the course of the evening or afternoon you want to say. And I think most of us who read extensively and care about social and political and such matters will say those things.

I think – what has often happened to me – first of all, I think it's a mistake to ever give a diatribe or a jeremiad. I think we all know people who do that, who – I certainly – I mean, I can give you an example. Somebody asked me what I thought of Obama's speech in Egypt some months ago when he went to the Middle East. And I said, I liked it very much. And he said, well, you know, you seem to have a reservation. I said, well, he's a brilliant speaker. And he said, no, what's wrong?

And I said, well, if I had been his speechwriter, I would have had him say Koran instead of Kuran. And I would have suggested that he use fewer Arabic words. But it was a brilliant speech, other than that. He just asked me, so he said, he wasn't talking to you. And he launched into a kind of lecture about how dare I – and I didn't take it personally, I swear it. It sounds like I did, but I didn't. It was more amusing than anything, when he turned the conversation, which he had asked for, into an opportunity for sort of holding forth, for a polemic about the way an American President ought to act, and it wasn't conversational.

So I think that's a mistake. But I think it's a perfectly honorable and interesting thing. And one of the things that happens is when you go to such a gathering of any sort with certain ideas, you must keep your mind open. I've had my mind changed,



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actually, by the same guy that same evening, when I was talking about American culture. And he delivered this – another sort of like papal bull. He said, there is no American culture except for black culture and Jewish culture. And I thought – I have to think about that. I don't think it's right, but it's something to think about.

So you can have your mind changed, and if you're not open to that, then you might as well not go to talk to anybody, because if you're so set in your ways and your opinions that they are is simply like stone, then you're not going to be much fun to others or to yourself.

KENNEALLY: There's a moment in the book when you talk about talk shows, and what passes for talk on television and radio, and you said, have you ever heard anyone say in response to something, well, let me think about that. This never happens, and you just pointed to something which I think is important. While you're doing the listening, you need to also be doing the thinking. And rather than just sort of waiting for the opportunity to come back and present your position, it has to be – there has to be movement in a real conversation.

MENAKER: It's funny. Writing this book made me actually more aware of that, and I hope I was doing it before, but I really do it now. I really – as a function, as a sort of result of writing about this, I often say, let me think about that. Or, I give – I simply – I just listen more closely to things that I may have been resistant to before, because I realize that when people do it with me, it's very welcome.

And you have sometimes silences which are anathema to some Americans, but not to me anymore. I think you can have a thoughtful silence that represents a real engagement. It's not verbal.

And Alison Krauss sings a song called *You Say It Best When You Say Nothing at All*. And sometimes that's true in conversation.

KENNEALLY: And you just did something I think you talk about, which is sort of, drop in something very personal and surprising, by mentioning Alison Krauss in a conversation that seems so literary and serious, and – I'll do this, and say, you know, of all the things we have in common, it never occurred to me that we would have Dartmouth College in common, or for that matter, that your parents used to let Flounder stay at their house.

MENAKER: Yeah, it's actually vicariously one of the proudest and kind of saddest aspects of my life. My brother went to Dartmouth and was in Alpha Delta Phi, the



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famous Animal House. And I think Chris Miller was a freshman when my brother was a senior, and I think he ended up either writing or co-writing the screenplay for that.

My brother died when he was 29 and I was 26, so this is a highly nostalgic fact for me, and I visited Animal House, and it was, indeed, very crazy. And the film character Flounder really did exist in real life, and he did stay at our house, because he was from Oklahoma, and he didn't go home for Thanksgiving. So he'd often come up to Nyack, New York and stay with us. And this, for me, is a real romance.

And you're right about surprise. I think when people talk to each other, they so value being surprised, or even slightly provoked, or mischief – something that is – and this you see in dating all the time, in good dating. People will – men and women, or men and men, or women and women, or whatever people do these days, I think it's a kind of testing. It's not done for that reason, but we sort of test each other for resilience, not only in romantic circumstances, but in social circumstances. See if the other person – what kind of give they have, if they can take a joke about themselves, if we can take a joke about ourselves.

And so, this mischievousness that I do talk about, impudence, it tends to get conversations off a very narrow gauge railway and make them more exploratory, because people are sort of like – oh, I didn't expect you to say that.

Now, you can be insulting, and that's going too far. But if you take someone by surprise, then often what you get, it leads to a deeper exchange.

KENNEALLY: Well, there's a surprising turn in the book, and we'll finish talking about *A Good Talk with Dan Menaker* by, if you will, previewing the very end, where you speak about the – not the intellectual rewards, but the physical rewards of conversation.

MENAKER: This is something that someone told me about many years ago, and it stuck with me, and it was in a regular conversation. And I didn't realize that there was a whole body of research about the hormonal – literally, endocrine effects of conversation. When you have a good one, evidently, the reason you feel good – and people will say, or I will say, you know, after that lunch, I felt better. And it turns out there's a physical reason for it.

Good conversation, like touch, like breastfeeding, and like orgasm, all release a hormone called oxytocin, which is now, sadly, marketed as Liquid Trust and other



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products, as if you could wear something that would make you able to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to somebody.

But yeah, it is – and I think probably it's true in other primates as well, that that kind of social fabric knitting, as in grooming and conversation, must have a physiological effect, or we wouldn't do it. It wouldn't make us feel good.

So there's a kind of high that can happen. It's the sort of verbal equivalent of endorphins from exercise, where you just feel good.

I remember someone giving me one of the best compliments that I ever got, and I hate to pat myself on the back, especially here at the end, when I was at Random House. And people would come in and talk to me, and one guy said, when he was leaving, he said, you know, I always feel better after I talk to you. And I didn't know that this would dovetail into the research that I ended up doing for this, but it's a very well established medical fact, that conversation of a certain personal sort is healthy.

KENNEALLY: Well, Dan Menaker, it's been good talking to you. I can't say it's been healthy talking to you – I don't know about that, but it's been good talking to you.

MENAKER: My great pleasure. This has been fun to do, and I hope – of course, I hope people read the book. But more important than that, I hope they put this and other books down sometimes in order to talk to others.

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