The Changing Conversation in America

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***Some Distinctive Features
of U.S. American
Conversation***

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**AN AMERICAN METAPHOR,
MORALS, AND THE MUNDANE**

America and Conversation. These are two great ideas. Each, alone, suggests a particular site: America, a geographic site, full of different peoples, a great political experiment; Conversation, a social site, an activity among people, a great form of participation. Putting these two ideas together, America *and* Conversation, suggests that this particular place and this particular form of life should be conceived together, dedicated to the ideal image and full of potential.

The ideal is espoused prominently today through phrases such as *the National Conversation* or the more particular *citizens' dialogue* or *multi-cultural discussions*. Conveyed is a hoped-for vision: People in America can (and should) engage in dialogue, thus committing themselves to a form of participation together. Conveyed also are beliefs and morals for action: This dialogue can (and also should) engage differences between these individual people and between different cultures, classes, and races, with the views of each being active in the conversational process; furthermore, this conversational process can (and should) be conducted in a cooperative, mutually beneficial way. Symbolizing America through this metaphor—as a conversation—is to hold this geographic and social place up to a grand ideal: a place where people are dedicated to the cooperative

dialogue of their differences and will create anew with them. The ideal in this metaphor, at least as I have cast it, contains, then, both a geopolitical and a social site, a diversity of peoples and positions, and a cooperative form of participation. Holding all of this cooperatively together is the great work of the metaphor: America as a Grand Conversation.

Suggested also when combining America and Conversation, or when discussing “the National Conversation,” is something much more mundane: There are actual conversations, and these occur in a place called the United States of America. In this sense, conversation is used to draw attention less to ideals for living and more to actual conversations in actual contexts. These conversations may sometimes achieve some version of an American ideal, perhaps through an integrative dialogue of differences, but they might also achieve something else, such as a singular monologue championing its own cause against the others, or uncooperative assertions of difference. In such a process, what is produced is not a creative participation through dialogue, but a division through monologue and difference.

In this chapter, I want to keep both of these—the metaphorical and the mundane senses of conversations in America—in mind. I will focus my initial remarks, however, on the latter, on actual conversations among actual people in particular social settings. My hope is to show how a careful treatment of these conversations can lead to a reinvigorated ideal. I want to show how focusing on cultural conversations can offer a way of thinking about American scenes and to show how cultivating conversations in America can help develop our ideal sense of America as a Grand Conversation.

ENLARGING THE IDEA OF CULTURAL CONVERSATION: EXAMPLES FROM FINLAND AND AMERICA

Over the past decade, Gerry Philipsen (1987, 1992) and others (Carbaugh, 1988; Fitch, 1998; Katriel, 1991) have been working to develop the practical idea—and ideal—of a cultural conversation. The emerging idea is this: In particular places people use particular communicative practices to craft conversations. As they do, they cultivate deep beliefs about, and values for, being, relating, acting, feeling, and dwelling with nature. To the extent that these beliefs and values are a condition for, and an active di-

mension in, conversation, and to the extent that they fashion a communion—even if contested—sense of life, people are engaging in a cultural conversation. When actively employing these beliefs and values in social life, people can be understood to be presuming cultural codes and to be crafting cultural discourses through their conversations.

Of course, people do not always happily agree with each other's beliefs and values, codes and discourses about current matters. But in the Grand Conversation, and in the local give-and-take it requires, as these ideas are practiced interactionally, people display some sense of membership in a cultural community, and thus identify, or seek to identify, with at least some of its customs for living. When the conversation uses a common code, a "shared cultural identity" may be creatively affirmed. When the conversation crafts differences out of that code, "shared social identities" may be creatively affirmed. Both a shared cultural identity and different social identities may be creatively crafted through common codes in communication (see Carbaugh, 1996, especially pp. 24-34). As peoples effectively affirm their commonalities and differences together, they thereby demonstrate, through cultural discourses, ways of relating with each other as members in cultural communities (Carbaugh, 1996, pp. 198-202; Fitch, 1998).

Whatever the particular dynamics in particular cultural conversations might be, we can presume the following: In social living, cultural conversations create practical bases for being, acting, feeling, and dwelling; cultural conversations operate both at the level of common, popular features and at the level of particular, local features; cultural conversations implicate deeply held beliefs about what exists and what is to be valued; and cultural conversations are creatively enacted in the actual scenes of societal life.

As we explore how cultural conversations vary by scene and group, we can learn something about what is distinctive to each and what is common to both or across many. Let me introduce this point by describing a kind of cultural conversation that occurs in Finland. When conversing in public with others in the Häme region of Finland, it is preferred that one say something that is worthy of everyone's attention, that one speak in a way that is harmonious or not conflictual and contentious, that one not say things that are obvious, that one's comments reflect one's deeply held convictions, and that what one says becomes a part of one's future social exchanges and relations. Because these rules are quite robust, and because they require great care in planning and forethought, Finnish conversations, especially in some Häme Finnish scenes, can take great amounts of

time. In other words, if a contribution is to be deemed appropriate according to these Finnish rules, if it is to be worthy of everyone's attention, properly harmonious, not obvious, personally involving, and socially enduring, it may take some time to formulate. At least in some Hame Finnish scenes, this is the way some conversations work (Carbaugh & Poutiainen, 2000). Note that the social practice of these beliefs and values may produce much less talk, but this does not imply that talk is not valued. It implies perhaps the contrary: Talk is so valued, like good wine, that it must be properly fitting to the social occasion and must be used quite sparingly.¹

Contemporary Americans often find this part of the Finnish cultural conversation difficult to live with or to understand. Many of us here in the United States are more accustomed to speaking of matters that are personally important (rather than socially worthwhile), to playing the devil's advocate (rather than preserving harmony), to commenting on the obvious (such as the weather or personal appearance), to thinking out loud, and to not tying people too closely to the things they have previously said. Each of these American conversational practices is counter to what some Hame Finns may expect in Finland (or prefer from Finns). For some of these reasons, it is easier perhaps for Finns to "hear" American conversations as *superficial*, overly talkative, and overbearing. In turn, Americans may sometimes find Finnish conversation to be rather brooding and silent, or slow and uncooperative. But also, Finns, like Americans, can sometimes appreciate the play of relatively "loose" American talk, though they may find it difficult to produce, just as Americans, like Finns, can appreciate discussions constructed with relatively great care and forethought, even though they may find this difficult at times to produce.

Cultural conversations like these provide basic social resources for linking people together into networks of communal living. Because of this basic "linking" function, cultural conversations provide powerful means of living together. Because of their distinctiveness, they can also provide ways of keeping peoples apart.

In the body of this essay, I want to draw attention to dynamics like these, to explore how conversations in America can be sites where people are linked together, but also to show how they can produce scenes that keep people apart. Another dynamic will eventually enter our picture. This will involve a play between popular and local conversations. By recalling these dynamics, we can further our understanding of cultural conversations generally and of American conversations in particular, and we can hope to provide a renewed vision of the prospects for American cultures and conversation.

**AMERICAN CONVERSATION AND
ONE FORM OF POPULAR CULTURE:
HOW TALK SHOWS EXPLOIT THE
BIZARRE AND REVEAL COMMON CULTURE**

One prominent scene where contemporary Americans converse about current social issues is the talk show. There is no other place like it. Millions of people gather for hours every day at this scene. While there, they talk, converse, address each other about issues, and witness others doing the same. In Athenian society, people addressed one another in the great Assembly. In Colonial America, they gathered at the Town Hall. Today, a public scene for conversation appears on an unprecedented societal scale: It is the talk show.

Talk shows carry with them popular impressions. Although the shows themselves are exceedingly popular, the spoken impressions of them are largely negative. After all, what else can be said about “male born-again go-go dancers,” “women who gave birth under water,” or “freeform marriages”? Topics and lifestyles such as these capture a lot of attention and often lead to impressions of talk shows as off-color, silly, and even ridiculous. Yet why do millions participate in this scene every day, watching and listening to those who produce this “showing” of “talk”?

Talk shows do a number of things, and because of this variety they captivate a large audience. The shows can inform people about various topics that they might not typically encounter, such as those mentioned previously. They can also, of course, entertain. As a result, they can make a lot of money for television personalities, for some guests, and for owners of the television stations. But I think they strike a deeper, if less heard, chord in this society: By responding to troubling or unusual issues, they can display or even create features of a popular cultural conversation. For example, a “freeform marriage”—three people, two men and one woman, all in one “marriage” and living together under one roof—got people discussing what “marriage” is and should be, thus measuring their thoughts about marriage by comparing it to the unusual freeform version. In this case, introducing the unusual form of marriage created reflections of the common views and preferences for marriage. Similarly, in response to “male born-again go-go dancers,” people began discussing what a *Christian* is and should be and what a *male* is and should be. The unusual male Christian go-go dancer provoked talk of what is a good man and a Christian.

Viewers of talk shows have learned not to expect absolute answers to the various questions being posed. In fact, they will often resist great, encompassing answers. But what they do expect, and what they hear on the talk show, are the common people in the audience who have something they want to say. As they listen to their contemporaries speak, they hear, not grand solutions to the unusual or distressing social issue of the day, but rather the common ways common folk make sense of that issue through their talk. The bizarre characters or issues, therefore, motivate the folk to speak, and what they speak can reveal something of a common life, sometimes even transforming their common sense about that life—a point to which I will return shortly. In the process, some parts of the common culture are on display through this talk and are being tailored to the issue of the day. As a result, and in the face of the bizarre or unusual, one can hear the creation of common cultural commentary, the weaving together of rather customary sayings by the common folk.

One function of the talk show, then, is the common display of diverse responses and the witnessing of these common and diverse responses to these current events. In this sense, when talk shows begin by introducing something “bizarre,” they tend not to promote the bizarre behavior, but to produce a cultural conversation in response to it, mostly by audience members. In the process, as the common conversational lines come forth, two very general outcomes can be monitored, viewed, or witnessed. First, how do the various lines of talk make sense of this issue or lifestyle? This talk provides a kind of sense-making function. Second, what do people think about these specific conversational lines as they are applied on this occasion? This reveals a kind of opinion-making or polling function. As one man said about the freeform marriage, “This is not really a marriage at all” (applause). The conversation, then, contains assessments about the sensibility of conversational lines, with each line being potentially subjected to the immediate evaluations of the audience, through applause or boos. At times, the conversation might surprise some observers by stretching the folk’s sensibilities; for example, “If there is long-term commitment and love, even if among three people, perhaps this marriage is acceptable” (applause). The conversation can also snap back, as for example in the following: “No matter what, a good Christian boy should not wave his pelvis in the face of patrons.” As a result, sometimes the audience extends the bounds of sensible and appropriate discussion (and lifestyles), sometimes not. In any event, and whether one likes it or not, the jury is the public in talk show discourse, and when the discourse is public, it displays, partly at least, some features of its common life.

A CULTURAL FORM OF PARTICIPATION: PROBLEMATIZE!

By participating in this scene, people witness not only variety in what can (and should or should not) be said about social issues but also variety in the ways or styles of saying these things. In other words, by watching, people are exposed not only to public opinions about problematic issues but also to ways these issues can and should—or should not—be engaged in conversation. Topics and opinions, therefore, are not the only things at play in talk shows. Also at play are the forms for speaking properly about those very issues as one in a group.

Consider these examples. A barbershop quartet had been introduced to the talk show audience. This happy group of older men sang a very upbeat tune. After finishing, they were standing together and smiling at the host. A male audience member stood and was the first to comment: “It must be hard to travel and be away from your wives and families.” What was this audience member’s move in this conversational game? “After hearing your delightful song, I would like to talk about the strains on your home life.” On another show, a woman described in detail her “self-cleaning house,” which she had designed and built by herself from secondhand materials. She described how the cupboards cleaned dishes, the closets cleaned clothes, the floors were washed at the push of a button, and so on. After hearing of this remarkable invention, the first comment made by a female audience member was, “Your house wouldn’t work for me because . . .”; a second woman replied, “The trouble I have with your house is. . . .” In each case, first responses are begun with phrases like, “That wouldn’t work for me because . . .,” “The difficulty with that is . . .,” or simply, “Here’s the problem with that.”

These opening moves are deeply ingrained in many scenes of American conversation. Whether inherent in the topic of the day or not—whether talking about freeform marriages or self-cleaning houses—the flaws and limitations of social life are deemed most salient for conversation. For this reason the question “what’s wrong here?” can open a rather lengthy conversation. (How long could the conversation be sustained by these people if focused on the question “what’s right?”) It is as if people follow a cultural rule: Notice the flaws and criticize. I have witnessed this rule myself not only on talk shows, but in many other scenes, such as university meetings, classroom discussions, business negotiations, school council deliberations, and even in family gatherings. When used, this approach sets conversational scenes, popular American conversational scenes, as ones perhaps on the order of a weird kind of societal or group

therapy, where people are preoccupied with identifying problems and thus create a grand discourse of difficulties and talk endlessly about them. In each case, and sometimes regardless of one's initial upbeat purposes, we are led into a popular and problematic conversational world. A collective belief is, apparently, that indeed imperfections are here and that we had better talk about them. The belief is so strong that denying those problems, or denying the need to talk about them, is to risk being cast out as an uncooperative, naive, or uninformed stooge. (One woman claimed that her husband's unwillingness to talk about his problems was terrible for their marriage. Apparently problems and talk about them are needed for healthy marriages and societies. Without problems, marriages and societies fail.) In turn, to sound cooperative, appropriately aware, and informed, one talks about problems. In the process, one is "linked," through a communal enactment, into a large-scale American community.

This communal rule that prescribes problem-talk can run the conversational engine for a long time. Why? Because when this rule is applied, we reaffirm our belief that we have problems, and this recognition gives all of us something allegedly important to talk about together—a grand communal linking through problem-talk.

But the rule has its limits—namely, and to employ it myself here: The problem with this problem-focus is its unrelenting and unreflective use. Amplified too much, it creates what Robert McHughes (1993) has called "the culture of complaint." It can overshadow, and at times even supplant, serious bids for constructive proposals. When I was in Finland, I was asked to respond to a well-known and controversial American scholar who had been invited to speak at a Finnish university. I went to his keynote lecture and listened for an hour to a catalog of problems with American capitalism, media, imperialism, and foreign policy. After his talk, there was what seemed to the Americans in the audience, but not the Finns, a very long silence. Then, the American speaker was asked by a thoughtful Finn for a proposal of possible ways of correcting some of these deficiencies or for suggestions on ways to respond to these difficulties. The speaker interrupted the Finn's rather carefully measured question and replied by saying: "I don't pretend to have any solutions. This is all very complicated." Then he proceeded at great length to further detail more problems. Even famous American intellectuals lapse into an unrelenting and unreflective use of this rule, thus unwittingly replicating this American form of conversation. As we chop through problems one at a time, we risk producing a barren conversational clear-cut, with each of us left holding our own individual axes. We must be leery of producing a

wasteland of talk. We must be especially leery of forcing others, elsewhere, at home and abroad, to do the same.⁴

We should note here, again, that this popular American style of talk, as performed in this case, was somewhat bewildering to some of the Finns. Some Finns wondered out loud at the contentious tone. Although some thought it was “courageous” to speak so outwardly and defiantly about American policies, they also wondered just how socially worthwhile it was to list seemingly endless problems, to refuse to discuss their status as such, and then to have nothing constructive to offer by way of a remedy. Some Navajo people as well, who hold to the belief that “talking about rainy days” produces rainy days, find that all of this problem-talk solves nothing while further precipitating societal problems (Witherspoon, 1977).

Talking about problems—noticing flaws and criticizing them—is not, then, a necessity for all conversations. The problem orientation does, however, provide Americans with a popular and persistent way of speaking about various matters.

MANAGING POINT OF VIEW: PERSONALIZE!

As Americans foreground this kind of problem-talk in public scenes, they also speak their views in a characteristic, personal way. The examples given previously show a way in which people use the little phrase *for me*, as in, “that would not work *for me*,” or the phrase *what I think*, as in, “that’s not *what I think*.” In this kind of usage, conversation is drawn to the experiences and opinions of the singular one. The matter conveyed is often put in terms of “individual rights” or “choice.” These sayings are ways of making this point: “What I am saying is my own personal belief, not necessarily anyone else’s.” Unlike some Hindi speakers, who envision the person as composed of transpersonal particles and planes of energy, the person here is a contained entity or individual. To speak as “one’s own person” is a way of expressing this individuality. To grant others this right is to affirm this model for being. Through the attendant American values of tolerance (for other’s beliefs and opinions) and equality (each person has the right to hold and to speak his or her own beliefs and opinions), issues are individualized: This is their “right” (legally) and what’s “right” (morally). These American values (i.e., individuality, tolerance, rights, and equality) are important, and we can hear them being realized, through these terms, at times, in our everyday, popular conversations.

Although I have no quibble with statements of individual rights or personal choices or with the values of tolerance and equality, at times the requirement for personalizing an opinion can cloud the social nature of discussion. Consider the woman who was the biological mother of five and the adoptive mother of five additional children. She was a part of a discussion about “open adoption,” an arrangement in which adoptive children maintain “open lines of communication” with their biological parents. About open adoption, she said, “Open adoptions sound so good but it’s very confusing for kids.” The talk show host, Phil Donahue, intervened, saying, “No one is going to deny you your position, but the question is why do you impose it on others?” Note that the mother’s opinion was that open adoption should not be an option for anyone. But because this mother’s opinion, as stated, sounds as if it denies other individuals the right to decide for themselves, the form of her statement itself is questioned. This functions conversationally to criticize both the way the mother stated her opinion and her stated opinion, implying the rule: It is best to speak for yourself, not for others. By invoking this rule, the talk show host has taken the conversation back to the level of individual opinions, with the mother’s proposal of a social policy on adoption never getting off the ground. In popular American conversations conducted this way, personal commentary triumphs over public legislation. Or, to turn the phrase, what is legislated publicly is personal commentary. Unlike the “tyranny of the majority” that de Tocqueville observed in the America of 200 years ago, here it is the opinion of the one that can hold the group hostage.

SELF-INTERESTED GROUPS: POLITICIZE!

At times in our cultural conversations, group interests and identities do, however, come into play in a particular way. Consider the following. A Christian described his education in a public school by saying: “We were taught the Big Bang theory; we were taught evolution. We were tested on them and I had to take the test on them. It was a matter of passing the grade. There I as a Christian was ripped off because I had no choice.” His comment presents the social world in two groups, one Christian, the other not. He claims his right to his religious belief had been infringed upon by the others. In so many words, his discourse presents a difference in group identifications and values, and the difference is reduced to disagreement, with the one—non-Christian—winning over the other.

In a discussion of unemployment, a woman who was married to an unemployed auto worker explained how she and her family had gone 3 years without any financial compensation or benefits. The tenor of her remarks made the point: “Those of you who have not been through this—and that is most of you—can never understand.” The social world is thus divided into groups—the employed and the unemployed: Each group is deemed different from the other, and each group allegedly misunderstands or disagrees with the other.

Consider a third example. A young black man described how he was repeatedly stopped by police officers for “walking through white neighborhoods.” White people were asked if they would call the police if a black man were walking in their neighborhood. The pivotal point in the ensuing discussion was this: Black speakers claimed that whites do not know what it is like to be black in a white neighborhood and to be continually suspected of wrongdoing.

In these examples, and in others concerning class, race, gender, ethnicity, and the like, a conversant begins speaking—or is heard to have spoken—as a group member. Speaking as such—as a Christian, a black, an unemployed person, or a woman—thus involves standing as a representative of a group. One’s interests are thus deemed different from those of others and are typically heard to be misunderstood, and disagreed with, by the others. The cultural conversation becomes reduced to a discourse of group difference, one group battling the others, with the connections between groups and the commonality among them being muted. All too often in this way, human community gives way to a flawed version of identity politics, with differences erupting into disagreements and misunderstandings. Cooperative connections and commonalities give way to a competition between different groups.

WHITHER (OR WITHERING) COMMUNITY?

Against this popular scene of the problematic, the personal, and the political, it is no wonder that Americans today are largely seeking the constructive and communal. As one hears the loud sounds of problems, individuals, and divisive politics, so one is led to seek the prospects for community. The resurgence of interest in spiritual living and the tremendous support for the new communitarian movements all suggest the potency of this need. These recent cultural needs also suggest the tight hold the above conversational features have on us. For cultural conversations not only willingly address, but unwittingly create, their own problems.

As many of us have experienced, this popular conversation can have a kind of self-sealing quality. This quality appears when people sit down and talk about things and in so doing endlessly replay the problematic, personal, and politically divisive dimensions of life. The deep belief underlying this sometimes tragic trend is, again, a uniquely American belief: that talking about problems together itself provides something by way of a remedy for them. Helping people with problems and mediating between people and parties with problems lie behind many American institutions—from therapy to Jimmy Carter. We not only need these institutions but create the need for them. And there are undoubtedly times when these institutions can help things along.

However, if the “talk” we produce replays the problem-focus, solidifies personal opinion and political division through the values of equality and toleration, further problematizes proposals, and further personalizes and politicizes the stance of each person and group about these, then what are we producing? A kind of popular culture that is unproductively self-sealed in its own habitual—problematic and personal and political—ways of doing things. This conversational dynamic outrages many who get caught up with it, including many who watch talk shows, where they see all problematic and personal talk and no constructive community action. It seems to them that too often problems, personalities, and politics are being painted onto the popular American canvas. Too rarely do particular, productive proposals for the community come into play.

To recap: A popular culture of American conversation can be energized into action when current events, especially the bizarre or unusual, are introduced, thereby inviting the reflections of the common folk. These reflections can demonstrate various conversational lines and reactions to them, thus displaying features of a common, popular cultural life. Some of the distinctive features of this popular conversation are a preoccupation with problems, a personalization of opinions, and the politicization of group interests. Some of its unintentional consequences include a muting of constructive proposals for community life. These are certainly not all of the features, but they are, I hope, suggestive of some of the conversational terrain that we find in popular American culture today.

COUNTERCULTURAL CONVERSATION: SOME CORRECTIVES FROM OTHERS

If we return to the ideal with which we started, we can reflect further upon these features of American conversation. The ideal suggests that U.S.

American conversation can be at its best when differences are engaged and when the form of conversational action is, in some sense, mutually beneficial. Note how this summary of the ideal brings into view both difference and commonality as bases for the ideal. Note further how the features mentioned previously themselves suggest remedial countermoves that may shift our focus, for a while at least, onto virtues more than problems, sociality more than personality, and the communal more than the political.

A basis for our first task, however, and a very difficult one at that, is to enable differences among peoples to be active in our conversations, and to engage these in mutually beneficial—connected and communal—ways. Given various incidents of hatred in the world today, I recognize that this can sound very naive. In response, I offer this: Because there are continual slugfests and hatred is not a reason to abandon the ideal. Just because some people cannot engage in forms of participation aimed at the ideal is no reason for all of us to give up on it. I think further that responses to this ideal will come not in one absolute form—a grandly modeled form of participation for all—but in hundreds of different local forms. Although general guidelines can be helpful—as I attempt to sketch here—most gripping and captivating solutions will be local and locally nested—from national to state to municipal—in design. What is designed as a general conversational form must be tailored in ways that open it to local resonance and force. Conversations, like people, may navigate in global or national waters, but they inevitably dock and dwell deeply in the local harbors of regions, neighborhoods, and communities.

From local harbors, we can learn how other cultural conversations work, some placing a strong emphasis not on problems but virtues. Recall the Navajo, who have reminded us that speaking of stormy days invites the very trouble mentioned (Witherspoon, 1977). Similarly, in some public scenes, Russian speakers espouse collective morals and virtues more than facts and problems (Carbaugh, 1993). Periodically in our conversations, we could (and should) stop to ask: What vision of the common good is motivating what we do? Can we sustain a discussion about that? Attending to and discussing moral bases for actions may help shift our attention from problems to prospects for better living.

Such prospects as these can be enhanced if we also try to shift our point of view. Here, rather than speaking solely for self, we might monitor more carefully what we can (and should) say as a collective. In some public scenes, among some Finnish people, one should say only those things that are worthy of everyone's attention and that are not contentious. In other words, the simple fact that something is personally important does not make it worthy of the group's considerations. Monitoring conversations

in this way results in a kind of socializing effect, bringing a group consciousness—through a particular application—up to parity with the personal. Asking what is worthy of this group's attention and what can be offered that is nonvolatile or noncontentious may help shift our attention from personality to sociality as a renewal of prospects for better living.

Shifting dimensions of conversation for a while from problems to virtues, from personality to sociality, will undoubtedly bring into view differences in what is virtuous and proper as a basis for social living. Solutions will express differences, with part of the test being how these differences themselves are handled. One prominent, traditional American voice has reduced differences to individuals, thus making difference a matter of personality. Another trend has reduced differences to social groups in the aggregate, thus making difference a potential basis for political and cultural division. A third option may be more place based, or region based, making difference something radically situated, to be related into local scenes and communities of living. As a result, some scenes—even for single individuals—may best be conducted on the basis of commonalities, whereas others may best be conducted on the basis of difference (e.g., cultural theater). In any event, we might ask periodically: How best can we move from political difference to community? Can community embrace, in a beneficial way, an organization of diversity?

Each prospect above, alone, is by itself insufficient and incomplete. Each provides at best only part of a response.¹ For example, a discourse of virtues without a proper, deliberative social base can be fascist. Together, however, they might provide us with some ways to proceed. Educated in global and national concerns and grounded in local scenes, our cultural conversation may shift from problems to virtues, from personalities to socialities, from political to communal concerns. And in time, inevitably caught in various human waters, the conversational tide will shift yet again. For this is the continuing work of cultural conversations, tacking between the global and local, the individual and the communal, seeking ways, good ways—and a variety at that—of navigating differences between different peoples and different times, in search of productive forms of participation that can hold us—here and there—together.

NOTES

1. The themes of this paragraph are developed elsewhere (Carbaugh, 1995).

2. These remarks were written prior to the daily "slugfests" on *The Jerry Springer Show*. These shows, at their worst, show the chilling effect of differences

that cannot be discussed or debated and that thus await physical force for their adjudication.

3. Recent trends in at least one talk show have demonstrated forms of participation, when in the face of disagreement, that involve: (a) shouting and name-calling, and (b) physical confrontation. At this same time, as a casual observation, I have witnessed increased incidence of such acts as these by children at playgrounds. Is this correlation incidental?

4. I have discussed how this problem-form can be imposed on cultural others (Carbaugh, 1993).

5. These themes are treated in more detail elsewhere (Carbaugh, 1996, especially pp. 193-202).

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