

Some Principles and Practices for Goethean Conversation

adapted and expanded from Marjorie Spock's essay

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“Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you.”

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INTRODUCTION

Many people have some form of conversation everyday, though these conversations may not elevate to the level of an artistic experience. But we feel the potential that, when two or more gather in a fluid exchange between each other, it may be possible to transcend the personal experience and to invite the presence of something unifying and light-filled, where the air feels enlivened by a substance.

Goethean Conversation, or the art of conversation, has been a vital part of our Drama and Inner Development course. It is a way to strengthen our inner muscles, expand our senses, and apply them to the social field through a generative process. It works from the understanding that the spiritual world wants to be known as much as we want to know it. We cultivate a social soil for the work of spiritual beings and/or archetypal presences. Another picture for the process is that we become midwives for the conversation that wants to be born and find its own life between us. This humble seeking and invitational gesture creates an atmosphere like the sacrament of communion. The group becomes a vessel or chalice for revelations of the spiritual world.

The conversation engenders a living organism, every part essential and in balance, emerging out of necessity. Goethe: “here is necessity; here is art.” Our contributions paint upon the canvas of our collective attention, achieving more and more dimension and relationship. When it works, it becomes a conversation with the spiritual world as well as with our fellow human beings. In inspired moments, we may not notice if I was the one who said something or someone else, as our voice has become a shared voice; the stream between us one life.

This sounds like a high task. But like all arts, it takes practice. We hone our skills, sharpen our senses, find new points of discipline and sacrifice (habits, preferences, attachments, thoughts I had before), and evolve our listening. Marjorie Spock's essay on “The Art of Goethean Conversation” helps to build a picture and understanding for the potential of Goethean Conversation. Borrowing from this essay and other experiences, here are some guiding principles and practices for entering this realm that is “more quickening than light” - for conversations that enliven the soul. As this is an evolving art, this list is not complete or prescriptive, but perhaps something to steer by.

FORM

- A **strict timeframe and opening and closing ritual** empower the inner, outer, and social space for the “right invitation” for what wants to happen there. This engages us all as equally responsible and conscious co-creators of what unfolds.
- We have found it helpful to prepare a lit candle and flowers in the center of the space.
- Begin and end exactly at the pre-determined times. You may decide to create a policy that anyone who arrives late will have to sacrifice their participation for this round. Likewise, if someone would need to leave early. This let’s our higher selves and the spiritual world know that we are firm in our commitment to hold this space for them. Generally, we have found that 60 minutes is a good time frame for holding the process. As the end time approaches someone can have the task to give a 5-minute notice by silently reaching 5 fingers into the space.
- Begin and end the conversation by everyone standing behind their chair and speaking together a spiritual verse or text that all participants know or have learned before. This can help to call upon the highest in us and invites the spiritual world’s participation. Entering and leaving your seats together effectively opens and closes the space of the conversation.
- We sit into the circle, offering our **upright presence, with eyes open, and engage all of our senses** with the life in the space.
- There is **no leader. We share a common center** of focus and speak to and listen from this center. We **don’t address people personally** or direct our speaking to any one person. If we need help to understand what someone has said, we can say “I need help to understand what Peter said” and not “What did you mean, Peter?”
- No **side-talking or chatting or phones** in the space. As soon as we enter the space, we are holders of the space, and a deep listening is called upon.
- Silences tend to have a life, a kind of shape, thickness, quality, tone and sometimes even a clear movement or gesture. Being interested in the life of a silence, perceiving its “voice”, dynamic, and dimension, allows its contribution to be felt more by others and for its contribution to work more effectively in the space.

PROCESS

- The conversation is not a discussion, debate, speculation, a recounting of an experience, giving opinions, sharing our knowledge, or reporting. It is a sharing of perceptions, impulses, and experiences that arise out of the space and process we have created. This sharing can reference thoughts and feelings or experiences we have previously had, if they emerge out of a living relationship with the context of the conversation.
- We strive to suppress all previous thinking but if thoughts do come that we have had before, and they belong to this moment, these thoughts will naturally emerge differently in this new context. As we speak, we attend to the form and weaving that these thoughts want to have now. We speak and listen simultaneously.
- We bear witness and name or speak that which is given us to see and speak. Starting can be difficult, like any initiating. It can sometimes feel like breaking the seal of the gathered force of our listening. Sometimes a long silence will temper the space before the first impulse is felt. As we are all co-responsible for the process, it can be a wonderful opportunity to move beyond our comfort or habits: if we speak a lot, to hold back; if we are shy to speak, to take a step.
- Each person who has an impulse to speak **connects and weaves their contribution into the stream of what was spoken before.**

- Leaving a little space after each offering can help us and the space to receive fully the movement and direction of the contribution. Although this is not required, especially when the conversation begins to take on its own life and flow or movement, it can be helpful. The life of the conversation begins to reveal its own rhythm and qualities. It is probably obvious that we don't interrupt someone's speaking. We are listening together to **what needs to be said**, or not said.
- We listen to how our offering lands in the space. Did it create further forward movement among us or did it fall flat or die on arrival? Did it stop the stream, put a hindrance in the stream's path? Did it arrive vibrant and full or thin and personal? Was it connected to what was previously said? Did it emerge organically from the flow that preceded it? We are not the creators or shapers of our thoughts but the placeholder for them to live out their nature. As Rudolf Steiner points out, in these experiences a "god becomes the creator of the thought." (See passage quoted near the end.)
- Questions can be more helpful than answers and are particularly potent activators of the space and the stream. A fully asked question opens the space for beings to enter. "Ask and you will receive; knock and the door will be opened." Not all questions are asking for answers but we want to acknowledge and speak into the question that enlivened the space. It is important not to ignore a question or any contribution. It is equally important not to answer directly a question that is spoken, but to seek how that question can be deepened or further reflected upon.
- Each contribution does something. If it seems to pull us off-track or feels disconnected, we can sense into what it did to the space. Our objective perception and willingness to see it may allow its significance to be revealed.
- We don't agree or disagree or vocalize approval or disapproval of any contribution. This would make the contribution, and our attachment to it, personal.
- The primary attention is: what is needed? What is called for? If a silence has gone flat or stale, this may be a necessary composting or it may ask for something to be named.
- We are seeking to call upon three levels of consciousness: Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition. Their presence can be experienced as capacities of our thinking, feeling, and willing forces. By Imagination, we do not mean fantasy or idle daydreaming but pictures that reflect realities of the spiritual world.

TO WATCH OUT FOR

- Obstacles to catch: being eager to speak can get in the way of listening to what is truly needed just now. This can be wonderful to catch because it presents us with a point of sacrifice. Knowing what I want to say or coming prepared with a particular contribution is another. Can we sacrifice all we know for a collective process of knowing?
- For people who have the habit of chatting or connecting on the personal level, if not through words then through eye contact, it may feel like an exhilarating liberation to have a form that gives them freedom from that habit.
- Don't be too careful so as to hold too tightly onto the space; to be too hesitant or labored in speaking. This can dry up the space and create a feeling of stagnancy. Free movement is necessary to start or sustain the stream and to offer a flow that others can enter into. We might feel our contribution came too early, too late, or landed awkwardly, but perhaps it simply nudged the process back into movement again. Like learning how to drive, our steering can be choppy and awkward at first, until we can let the car drive smoothly.

- Not all that comes to us asks to be shared. **Discerning whether what has come to me is personal or belongs to the collective process is the heart of the art.**
- Don't quote anyone who is not in the room. Drawing on the words of others not present or referencing outside authorities or experts or spiritual teachers draws our attention away from the life at hand. It can be possible to represent pictures from others as you understand them: "some traditions describe experiences of reincarnation like this..."
- Rather than knowledge being a tool for our thinking, we are instead a thinking tool for knowledge.

LISTENING

The conversation is rooted in deep, will-full, full-bodied listening. Our listening can be as powerful as our speaking. When the listening builds substance between us, it can feel like a voice. We don't want to interrupt this voice but listen for when a speaking is called from within it; a speaking born out of listening.

To warm up our listening capacities, we often borrow from Otto Scharmer's Theory U approach, which looks at four kinds of listening. We practice these activities in order to understand their unique quality and contribution:

- *Downloading listening*: reconfirming what I already know, staying with myself. I agree or don't agree; like or don't like what is said. I have an opinion about it. It reflects the past. I listen from inside myself. *I in me.*
- *Open mind listening*: object, details focused. "Oh, look at that!" What are the essential facts or vital information? We notice what is different or what contradicts what I already know. I suspend my voice of judgment. *I in it.*
- *Empathic or open-heart listening*: I connect to the feeling behind what is spoken. I see through the eyes of another's experience. I want to understand how they feel. My attention is with the other. I still receive the essential information with my open mind but I add my awareness of what is living in the soul of the other. I listen from the field (of another's experience). It reflects the present moment. I suspend my voice of cynicism and allow myself to be vulnerable. *I in you.*
- *Generative listening or open will listening*: I listen from the emerging field of the future. This listening connects with something larger than myself and, through it, we together generate the highest possible future that wants to emerge. I am changed by it. Through it I have a sense that something shifted in me toward who I really am. It works with the understanding that we have a common future and I will help create this future through my listening. I become the vision that is shared. The way great teachers listen to their students, not seeing the student as they appear now, but the emerging possibilities and potentials that live and are burgeoning within them. When this listening is present, often new ideas come through the speaker, a new commitment to action is aroused, and we feel that we are more than we came with. I suspend the voice of fear. *I in the becoming now.*

Generative listening requires a fuller body presence. We place our whole being, with all senses tuned, at the disposal of what wants to emerge. Fully to stand with what is speaking means activating enough body awareness and sensing that I effectively become what is spoken. My inner movement moves with the rhythm, tempo, and life of the movement of the conversation. I embody this emerging life. It creates a very powerful sense of future potential, not only for what is coming, but for my capacity to carry it out. I embody not just what is spoken but I empower this human being in a process of becoming whole.

Also worth exploring and reflecting on is where we listen from in ourselves. Do we mostly tune our listening to the thoughts of others, a meaning they want to convey; do we mostly experience what's going on in the other's feeling life, or are we listening with a desire to know what the other wants? Are we quick to judge or to understand, or do we prefer to linger in what was said, to ruminate? Do we make sounds as we listen, inwardly or outwardly, or do we hold a stillness? If we listen closely to our listening, we might recognize a familiar gesture or habit in it. Do we grab, sponge, sieve, wade, penetrate, spin off into associative fantasy, mash it into what we know or believe? Is it needy, caressing, inviting, tasting, waiting? Is it more passive or active? Is there usually a whiff of doubt or fear or distrust in it? Do we recognize more sympathy or antipathy? Are we super-conscious of what the other says, are we in a pre-set mode, even a default physical habit gesture (as if to say "this is how I listen"), do we "team" listen - all my listening says "I am on your side, *with* you, on the same team", or do we tend to be lightly attentive to the actual words? Of course, different people inspire different forms of listening in us. We might listen to an officer who pulls us over on the road with a different quality than our partner during dinner or our child before sleep.

Such honest self-reflection can awaken interest and intention to bring a different quality or gesture to our listening. It can raise awareness for the power and the process and the many layers of experience that this *sense* of listening brings.

Rudolf Steiner offers the picture that if we can open and free the space of our thinking, angels can work there; if we can open and free the space of our feeling, archangels can work there; if we can open and free the space of our will, archai can work there.

7 PRINCIPLES OF GENERATIVE LISTENING

Adapted from Matthieu Daum's work, which can be found on YouTube under Generative Listening. These can be helpful practices for daily life exchanges as well, like going to the gym strengthens the muscles we need for the work that we will do later.

1. Slow down; unite with the tempo of the conversation; if it feels unnecessarily fast, I can allow my tempo to slow down as a gesture toward balance
2. Listen with all my senses; embody the listening
3. Listen to the words/images chosen; stay with and honor those images; be literal and exact
4. Listen to the feelings of the speaker; tune into that tone of voice, pace, use of silences
5. Suspend judgement; avoid liking or not liking, it's good or bad; avoid assumptions about why they are saying what they are saying ("he says that because he's ...rich, ...a man, ...conservative, ...a teacher")
6. Notice what I don't understand; did I really understand what they said?; notice what am I responding to when I am interested or when I am bored
7. Notice what I am feeling or how I am moved or affected by what is said; if I notice this movement, I am less likely to react

"...the initiate-speaker has to leap in two directions, and both leaps are a kind of listening. The speaker, like language, stands at the intersection of the manifest and unmanifest worlds, whether 'unmanifest' refers to the unconscious, the spiritual domain or just to the unknown. If preconceptions, assumptions and the tendency to be judgmental have been sufficiently released, the initiate-speaker stands mostly in 'not-knowing.' One can then listen into what wants to be said, for which one must leap toward the manifest, the social context. Both are

difficult leaps, but if accomplished, the speaker allows those two worlds to touch in and through the words.”

- from *The Speech of the Grail* by Linda Sussman

ATMOSPHERE

Seeking to create a temple-like atmosphere, a communion, as if we were approaching the spiritual world, supports the experience of a tangible boundary or threshold. My personal self and habits have less room to enter the space and act up. It also supports a mood of supernaturally attentive listening. In this atmosphere the group becomes a chalice or vessel to contain the life that wants to come. The group becomes an organ of perception. There awakens a sense of wonder and “not-knowing.” A wakeful, divine uncertainty fills the inner space and the shared space.

We are not passive, however. We are calling forth a fullness of spiritual life through the fullness of our attentive senses. We are creative spirits in the ongoing creative process of the cosmos. Our contributions are in relationship to the contributions of other beings. We perceive the larger context of this happening.

The conversation takes place across the threshold, in the etheric world, where thoughts are intuitions. We listen to our fellows as if listening to the spiritual world, making our souls a seedbed for their germinal ideas. If a contribution feels not true, we don't correct it but listen in a way that the truth can be heard. The listening and the presence of the spiritual world can then offer its own reflection to what was spoken. This is the practice of great teachers: they don't need to correct something if the truth stands strongly enough with them. The student then sees how their work is reflected by this presence.

THEMES

The theme is set in advance and, ideally, meditated upon by the participants. We prepare as if preparing for a festival of light that our shared intentions and questing will summon into being. Many thoughts and feelings may grow out of our preparation, but we are willing to sacrifice them, in order to clear the scene for fresh illumination. The preparation is like going to the gym. We practice becoming spiritually active with the theme, attuning our intuitive perception to it.

Other ways to school ourselves in etheric thinking: meditation, studying Rudolf Steiner's *The Philosophy of Freedom*, and steeping oneself in fairy tales and great poetry. The spiritually rich content can quicken and activate our inner resources.

Choosing the theme together can be a valuable process for preparing our inner muscles for the conversation. We often invite people to share burning or living questions that they have. For those who have a question, they speak them out and let them sound. As they begin to articulate what lives in them, they may adjust their wording to convey most effectively their experience. It can already be a powerful exercise to go around a circle and invite people to speak out the question most living with them at the moment.

Then we invite people to vote with their eyes closed for two themes that most compel their interest. People who voiced questions are invited to repeat their question, with the option of adapting it again, if they wish. Often sharing the question the first time will start a process in

their relationship with it. When they speak it again, it may have changed. Sometimes the theme that the group most alights upon will be obvious in the first round of voting. Sometimes further rounds are needed when themes share the same amount of votes. The themes are spoken out again and every person has one vote. Occasionally we have merged two popular themes into one theme. Then we speak the chosen question or theme together to light the way for the conversation to come.

Sometimes the theme is in the form of a question; sometimes an objective naming of a subject or concern. Occasionally it has felt necessary to modify the wording to allow the theme a fuller naming or to make it less personal to the one who brought it. Often the conversation will reflect into and incorporate other questions and themes that were shared but not chosen.

REVIEWING

We have found it valuable to have a review of the conversation, after at least one night of sleeping. This supports a rich harvesting of how it went, when it came alive, when it bubbled or flowed, when it felt thin, what qualities or atmospheres joined it. Without naming any person, we can share our experience of the life, shape, color, or dynamics of the conversation's movement or lack of movement.

It has been helpful to remember: whatever happened, however it happened, we all created the circumstances for it. We all share responsibility. Even if it seemed like one person's reaction strongly colored the experience, we created the context for this happening together. We can ask ourselves: what did I do or not do that allowed us to seem to veer off track?

It is also helpful to remind ourselves that we are learners in this process. It is important for it not to be easy and not to go well, especially at first, when we meet the internal habits and resistances that naturally come up. Often what needs clearing out, what stands in our way, comes loudly to the surface at the beginning, allowing us to see where our work is. However, it is not uncommon to receive a graceful first experience, which builds trust and faith in the process.

From *Awakening to Community*, by Rudolf Steiner, page 82:

“Nowadays we have to exert purely human forces, work in a purely human way, to develop thoughts. But once we have made the effort and achieved thoughts free of any taint of egotism, self-seeking, subjective emotionality or partisan spirit such as colors thoughts with prejudiced opinions, once we have exerted ourselves as human beings to experience thoughts in the form they themselves want to assume, we no longer regard ourselves as the creators and shapers of our thoughts, but merely as the inner scene of action where they live out their own nature. Then we feel the largeness of these selfless and unprejudiced thoughts that seem to be our own creations, and are surprised to find that they are worthy of depicting the divine; we discover afterwards that thoughts that take shape in our own hearts are worthy of depicting the divine. First, we discover the thought, and afterwards we find that the thought is nothing less than the Logos! While you were selflessly letting the thought form itself in you, your selflessness made it possible for a god to be the creator of that thought. ... That is our scientific ideal.”

MEETINGS AS A LIVING ART

A meeting is a form of intentional community. We could see it as having two tasks:

1. Create plans, projects, programs, policies; make decisions; build pictures and visions. These aspects could be seen as its outer body.
2. Create an atmosphere or context or environment that invites the spiritual world to work into our shared space, and into the world. This aspect could be seen as its more expanded, invisible body.

We have all attended meetings that came up with a great plan but the plan could not be realized in reality. A piece was missing. It could not stand up or manifest. We have also experienced meetings where what was eventually achieved went far beyond our planning. What was present or different about these two experiences that made the outcome so different? When it doesn't work, we can point to many outer "reasons" like timing, resources, money, the right people, etc. But perhaps we did not invite enough presence or inner "content" to help it to stand up. We know that we cannot do it alone. Whatever we create on the ground needs inner sustenance to stay alive.

So what supports a meeting to become a living form? What can I bring to that form to support its enlivening? What raises a meeting to the level of an art? Perhaps a first step toward evolving what a meeting can do is to ask: am I willing to change how I show up and participate in a meeting? What would such a change look like? What step could I take to strengthen this vessel we are creating together so that the spiritual world might lean into it? How could I evolve my listening and support a richer quality of atmosphere?

In 100 years, all the plans and projects the meeting created will be gone. We will leave them behind. But whatever transformation I brought to the meeting - whatever I gave up, sacrificed; whatever habit or judgment I set aside; whatever virtue or ideal I developed - *that* goes with me. Whatever inner development I achieved endures.

How we meet each other determines what forces come to work with us. How we speak and how we listen shape the space. In these two activities - speaking and listening - we are both sculptors and inviters of substance. These activities in every moment point toward the personal, smaller experience of self or to a larger more eternal picture. They are full of knowing or not-knowing; movement or stagnancy. If we gauge them by these sensations present in us, then we can make an honest assessment of the direction of these activities. My sensation tells me whether my speaking and listening is for my little me or if it is pointing toward the eternal.

When I become an observer or judge, I can feel the space cool and I become more distant, closed off. When I can follow the movement of the conversation and the movement in those who are present, I can feel something weaving between us that is warm and full.

If we look at speaking and listening (listening being the other part of speaking) as vehicles for revealing the spiritual world, we can see three parts:

1. The **sounds** of speech. They sculpt the air and shape the space. If they have enough form and life, these sounds can give presence to the forces working behind them. We could see them as the outer body. If the listener is attending to the sounds, the listener empowers them. The listening provides a shaping garment to them, a holding body.
2. The **meaning** of the words and the intended meaning of the speaker. This may be seen as the soul aspect. The life and pictures behind the words. An attentive listening may draw out a deeper sense of meaning and help the speaker to see aspects they did not see before, to speak in ways they had not spoken before. The listening witness is co-creator of the meaning experienced.

3. The **atmosphere** created by the speaking and listening. This always reflects the inner activity present. If the speaking is from a more personal place in the soul - defending, debating, arguing, making a point - and the listening is distracted or shut off, the space hollows out and feels barren. If speaker and listeners are active in their senses and are bringing focused attention to what is unfolding, the atmosphere thickens and becomes a body for the gods to dwell in. This spiritual aspect, called upon by inner sacrifice and inner activity, has a feeling of creating space and dimension. Then the atmosphere can be felt as sacred or holy. We remember why we really come together. The outcome of the meeting, what is executed as a result, tends to take on some of the light of this atmosphere, like an invisible body around it.

THE ART AND POWER OF NAMING

If I can successfully say a person's name in a way that they feel recognized and called upon, they light up through the recognition. Sometimes they become more upright and present. Some people can call our names but we don't even turn around because we feel like they are calling someone else. We all remember as a child how a beloved grandmother or elder said our name like no one else and our heart was always warmed by it. Perhaps we had a teacher who said our name in such a way that it felt like they were calling on our future selves, our becoming self. They didn't name what was in front of them, but the future potential they saw emerging.

Naming can bring things alive. A lot of research has been shared about the power words have to effect the very cell structure of matter. Negative words have a deteriorating effect; positive, encouraging words have an enlivening effect. Naming calls what is named into focus or enlivened presence.

In a conversation or a meeting, naming plays a major part. We are naming our experience, feeling or thought, and we can feel, after speaking, whether our words reflected our experience truthfully or not. We have all felt when someone was able to articulate a problem or tension in the space and how it helped the space to feel more free. The conflict was called forth, which allowed us all to see it. We also clarify a picture or vision through naming, and understand the past. We articulate the future. We name what is between us, what is in our way, what has left us, what is coming toward us, what we are looking at, the process we are seeking. Naming is always a process of calling into place, into the space with us. We acknowledge the invisible contributors to the conversation or meeting.

The art of naming skirts a fine line. It is not looking at the situation as if through a glass as an outside observer. It is not labeling or giving pet names. A living sense of naming grows out of being completely embedded and participant in the experience being named. It is a leaning in, allowing what is being named to find its reflection within us.

We can name things too early or too late. If I name an experience too early, I may prevent it from ripening into its fullness. I name it before it has fully realized itself. For example, if I name a crisis, conflict, or a feeling before it is fully present, I may scare it off or steal its glory. If I name it after its moment has passed, my recognition of it may awaken a sense of learning from it. However, if I name it too late, the opportunity of learning from it in the same way may be gone. I may diminish its presence, reducing it to an idea.

When I can really name someone, I notice so many levels of letting go. I let go of my understanding of who this person is, my agenda or my desire to move on, my fear, my projection, my distraction, my sympathy or antipathy, my unnecessary playfulness. I find myself in a process (full of not knowing how to do it exactly), of entering the other's space in such a

way so that I *become* the other enough to speak as if from within them. I don't lose myself but I offer my senses to their space. A wonder and humility attend this process, if I can find it, as I become aware of encountering a spiritual being.

As a teacher, if I can find this gesture in my naming of a student, then I don't need to "teach" them. I stand in invitation to their emerging being. I hold the door open to the future. I bear witness. The steps they need to take can now emerge from within them.

In a conversation, naming has a similar task. It calls in our co-creators and partners, the invisible beings whose communion we seek, and we give space for their working.