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Avoid deadly dinner table conversation

Published Saturday July 25th, 2009

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My last column stimulated some keen responses and interesting questions from a number of readers. I thought I would use this column as a continuation of an important subject, the dinner table, where the roots of etiquette are well-defined and exhibited. A local friend and celebrated host wrote:

[ENLARGE PHOTO](#)



Dear Jay,

What do you think of the emerging practice of asking guests to contribute something by going around the table asking for input?

Curious Reader

Dear Curious Reader,

As with many practices at the dinner table, I find this one to be mildly amusing and, at the same time, quite annoying - sometimes infuriatingly so - and potentially devastating. It has the function of disrupting a discussion that is probably already lively enough. What is the point to this interruption?

I believe the act, in most cases, is ego-driven and often it brings the conversations that have been percolating around the table to a complete halt. It also can make some people ill at ease by asking them to speak extemporaneously about a surprise topic, most likely well-considered in advance by the host.

Such games, although intended to be fun, can have quite the opposite effect. This is contrary to all rules of etiquette, where the main function of the host is to put people at complete ease. Rules of etiquette are designed to benefit others, not ourselves. To force someone to share their thoughts on a particular subject at the drop of a hat can be entertaining, but usually it's at someone else's expense and can be potentially humiliating.

I would hope that an 'out' would be possible for those guests who find this practice upsetting and detracting from the pleasures of an otherwise enjoyable evening.

The reader goes on to ask: "I often like to challenge guests by introducing provocative ideas for comment. Am I being too aggressive?"

Provocative discussions are welcome around any dinner table as long as no guest will be insulted. But such subjects are difficult to identify. Skating on thin ice is best avoided.

For example, controversial topics such as same-sex marriage or abortion can elicit opposing points of view that can be extremely personal and therefore defined as taboo. I find political and religious discussions dangerous, yet many consider them to be appropriate for the dinner table and manage to find their way there anyway.

The use of the word 'aggressive' in the question interests me as it indicates intent. This strikes at the very core of civility. Aggression is an act that enemies thrust upon one another. This is the antithesis of civil behaviour. There are some serious issues that can surface here and are best debated away from the table. Perhaps after dinner, such topics would be more appropriate.

Having said that, it is important to remember that it is the host's prerogative to lead any discussions and to bring up any subject he or she sees fit. It is, after, their party. Such actions would be most inappropriate if initiated by a guest.

A friend living in Morocco wrote:

I really like this column, Jay. Here in Morocco, dinner parties are so much fun and last forever. Of course, the French influence means we don't eat until quite late by American standards. It isn't unusual to start a meal at 9 p.m., the meal often lasting until midnight or later. There are several courses. Everyone enjoys the company at the party and no subject is taboo. Even as a Christian among Muslims, there is lively discussion and discourse, which makes the meal even more enjoyable.

So here is a great example of how no subject is off limits. Whatever one decides to do as host, whatever subjects one feels compelled to discuss, and whatever entertainment one finds amusing, be sure to do so with the pleasure of the guests as the main ingredient. Variety is, after all, the spice of life. Some of your guests enjoy surprises and practical jokes. Some do not. A good host knows the difference. Nowhere does respect for our friends reflect more clearly the respect we have for ourselves

than at a dinner table.

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