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Rebekah McCloud
University of Central Florida

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Cat Got Your Tongue? (The Lost Art of Conversation)

By Rebekah McCloud
UCF Forum columnist

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My mother and I were eating dinner recently at her favorite restaurant. We spent several hours talking, laughing and enjoying our meal.

We noticed that while the occupants of the surrounding tables changed a number of times, their behaviors were almost identical: Most seemed transfixed by an electronic device. There were cell phones, tablets, MP3 players, games and a few portable DVD players. No matter the device, most users sat hunched over a screen of some sort, oblivious to the world around them and unfortunately dismissive to their tablemates.

The bits of conversation we overheard were sharp, short, staccato utterings. Mom and I talked about what we thought was wrong with the picture before us. She declared, “Becky, people just don’t talk anymore.” I agreed and we reminisced about one of my childhood teachers.

When I was a kid, my three siblings and I could be found every Saturday afternoon at Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Rochester, N.Y. We sat at the center of the front-row pew, not by choice but because in addition to being church kids (CKs) we were also preacher’s kids (PKs). My dad, the Right Reverend Doctor, was the pastor.

Saturday afternoons were set aside for Baptist Training Union meetings. Scores of other PKs and CKs sat alert and attentive to Rev. Baker, our instructor and youth pastor. By day, he was a retired professor. He was determined that, in addition to religious instruction, we would all master the King’s English and the art of conversation – correction, polite conversation.

Rev. Baker was convinced that the 1960s was a tumultuous time for kids and somehow as a result of the use of what he called “emergent vocabulary” (which included words

and phrases such as cool, cat, dude, man, groovy, dig it and what's happening) people had forgotten how to speak. Worse yet, they had become so preoccupied with the gadgets of the time (namely television, transistor radios, 8-track tapes and records—45s and 33½ LPs) that coherent and fluid conversations were becoming a thing of the past. He often told us that before the “radio days” people talked.

A portion of our time together with Rev. Baker was spent with elocution and extemporaneous speeches. He taught us to speak without using his “no-no” words, which were: so, many, little and thing. No hand gestures, shoulder shrugs or head nods were allowed. He ran us through verbal drills akin to those Colonel Pickering provided for Eliza Doolittle in ‘My Fair Lady.’ We learned that some topics were inappropriate for mixed company (male and female), and further, there were taboo topics for children.

Rev. Baker always ended our afternoon by assigning homework. Most times it was to have a conversation with our family about a predetermined topic.

My family had very lively conversations as we rode in the car and as we sat around the kitchen table. My dad would start us off with a fantastic story sprinkled with bouts of raucous laughter. As I was an introvert in a family of extraverts, entertainers and divas, it was often a challenge for me to engage. But my dad was a master at drawing me out and into the conversation. He'd say, “Beck, tell Daddy what you think about ...” It always worked.

As a result of my participation in our family conversations and Saturdays with Rev. Baker, I mastered the art of conversation. Just ask anyone who knows me. Although I was, and still am, an introvert, I learned to masquerade as an extrovert, earned a degree in communication and became a professional journalist. The lessons I learned so long ago have served me well.

Now as I people watch, I often toss around the idea that the world is becoming increasingly populated with introverts. What else could account for the gradual disappearance of conversation? Does the cat have all of their tongues?

Conversation is vitally important to our well-being, the preservation of our culture and to our way of life. Conversations, including brief verbal encounters, can make the difference in the life of a senior citizen, a crying child, a disengaged student or a fellow traveler. A kind word and a compliment go a long way.

As our world becomes more dependent upon electronic devices and electronic forms of communication, I wonder if the generation that follows the millennials will engage in conversation at all. Or will the truncated vocabulary of texting, the abbreviated messaging of Twitter, or the bantering of Facebook become the status quo? I hope not. Like author Ray Bradbury, I hate the Roman named Status Quo.

Where are the Rev. Bakers, the Saturday afternoon lessons and the family discussions of the world? Lost? Forgotten?

No, I believe they are just conversations waiting to be had.

Rebekah McCloud is director of the University of Central Florida's PRIME STEM/Student Support Services Program. She can be reached at Rebekah.McCloud@ucf.edu.