

Tips for talk

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Theodore Zeldin

THE HIDDEN PLEASURES OF LIFE

A new way of remembering the past and
 imagining the future

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Theodore Zeldin Photograph: ©Francesco
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world. Zeldin takes Sayyah, along with his other emblems, to point towards the nature of a good life. A good life involves curiosity.

What is a curious life? One in which you seek to know other people. Not impersonally, as falling under this or that system of categories, nor superficially, in the ways in which we ordinarily interact. No, the point of living is to know each other properly – where that involves sharing our private thoughts and conversing on those topics which shape our lives. (Zeldin’s Oxford Muse Foundation organizes meals at which strangers are seated in pairs and given a Menu of Conversation, including such questions as “What are the limits of your compassion?” and “What moral, intellectual, aesthetic and social effects does the work you do have on others and on yourself?” Zeldin would be a wonderful lunch companion, but you might hate sitting next to him on a long plane journey.) Conversing with others gives meaning to our lives by allowing us to learn how others see the world and, in turn, to share what it is that we see.

Zeldin’s curiosity demands that we give up on the superficial frivolities that grease our everyday interactions and open instead the secret chambers of our hearts and minds, displaying, in Virginia Woolf’s phrase, the “tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out would teach one everything but [are] never offered openly, never made public”. Sometimes this seems noble, an attempt to reach beyond the

Curiosity – that desire to know – has an uncertain status. Is it a virtue, one which distinguishes us from the animals, as Hobbes has it, leading to the “continual and indefatigable generation of knowledge”? Or is it a vice, “a vain inquisitiveness dignified with the title of knowledge and science”, as Augustine puts it in his Confessions, tempting us to seek knowledge of things we should not know? And how much more stark is the contrast when the object of curiosity is another person. When is curiosity about other people a good thing, distinguishing the concerned citizen from those self-interested boors who care only for their own accomplishments and achievements? And when does it shade into gossip, prying and meddling?

Theodore Zeldin is a curious man. And *The Hidden Pleasures of Life* a curious book. Over the course of twenty-eight interconnected reflections, each beginning with the reported experiences of some figure from history, the author addresses those old-fashioned philosophical questions: what makes a life go well? how should one live? We begin with Hajj Sayyah, an Iranian student who leaves his home in 1859 at the age of twenty-three and travels for eighteen years, meeting the great and the good, without any letters of recommendation or influential relatives. Sayyah is an adventurer whose quest is to discover the people of the

separateness of persons and make the intimate connections which so enrich our lives. When Zeldin comments, for instance, that he wishes he had known more about his parents, you feel the sadness of a child disconnected. But more often the curiosity extends to eccentric extremes. Zeldin wants to know “the intimate thoughts and muddled feelings of each of the 7 billion unique individuals” on the planet. This is curiosity about others taken to its limit.

Such curiosity has instrumental value. Talking to others aids understanding and overcomes prejudice. Zeldin reports a conversation with an Iranian ayatollah who spent an hour denouncing the activities of the West. When he finished, he said to Zeldin that he would like to come and see him again. Why? “Because you listened to me.” It enables us to know ourselves better: in talking to you about your values and priorities, I come to better appreciate my own. And since, for Zeldin, the private sphere is the prime mover for change, expanding our knowledge of the private sphere, in all its varied glory, opens up different ways of thinking about the future.

But a life in which one knows the private thoughts of other people is also valuable in and of itself. This is why Zeldin takes the severance of emotional links with others to be a kind of suicide: it cuts one off from that which makes life worth living. Such severance can take many forms. It is caused by poverty. (Zeldin sometimes suggests that it is the most serious of poverty’s effects.) It can be brought about by being rich. It can take place through a cowardly abandonment of one’s ideals. For Zeldin, a life which is ignorant of others, one in which one’s private thoughts and feelings are never shared and compared, is a life wasted.

There is a challenge in this extolment of the private. Zeldin thinks that our shyness, our inscrutability, results from cowardice and dishonesty, or at least from the fear of being received unsympathetically. But there are good reasons for keeping some of our thoughts to ourselves. Some of our relationships – pedagogical, judicial – demand it, and even parenthood has an aspect which is enhanced by the parent’s having a private life unknown to the child. (My views are coloured here by the fact that both of my daughters are under four. Perhaps as they grow older I’ll find myself happier to shed the illusory image of justice and perfection.) Indeed, some of the value of sharing our private lives rests precisely on the fact that we don’t do so indiscriminately. That moment when a friendship opens up is all the more special for our knowing that it isn’t available to everyone. All the more so when the process takes place between lovers.

Still, when Zeldin is at his best, it’s hard not to be swept up in his enthusiasm for a better, brighter conversational culture. How, he asks, can the world be changed to open up new ways of living, ones which promote interesting lives and create opportunities for conversation? Hotels could become centres of conversation, places to meet ambassadors from the host country and talk to one’s fellow residents. Car parks could become art galleries. Shops could have phones next to their products so shoppers can talk to the person who created the object. (When Zeldin was offered control of an IKEA store, he offered language and music lessons alongside the flatpack furniture.) It is tempting to sneer at these suggestions – do the Bangladeshi factory workers making clothes for Primark really want to talk to the bored shoppers of Oxford Street, or do they want improved pay and conditions and the enforcement of safety regulations? But cynicism seems cheap when compared with Zeldin’s almost holy devotion to his ideals.

Zeldin is never dogmatic; his style is discursive rather than argumentative, suggestive rather than instructing. But there are dangers in this form of writing which he doesn’t always avoid. Some of the observations border on the twee. One of the obstacles preventing men and women from having better relationships, he tells us, is that they have trouble communicating (“21 tips to help you talk to your lover!”). Some of them are facile. Scandinavian women have all the forms of equality that the law can guarantee, but have they neglected the unique relationship between parent and child? And Zeldin often underestimates the limits to which some of us can exercise the curiosity he values. I’m curious about the mindset of the English Defence League members who marched through Oxford chanting “You’re not English anymore”, but I’m not about to sit down and chat with them about it.

More curious is his depreciation of the incurious life. Sometimes Zeldin comes close to Socratic extremes: an incurious life is a wasted life; rigor vitae – rigidity of the mind – is worse than rigor mortis. This isn’t a million miles from the claim, beloved of philosophers, that the unexamined life is not worth living. But a little curiosity shows that claim to be false. There are ways of living incuriously which benefit others and are good in themselves for those concerned. The parent who raises a child, thinking about no more than the child’s

continuing development. The settled member of a community who stays close to where she was born. The religious novice who withdraws from the world to spend time communing with God. These can be valuable ways of living – whether or not their adherents spend time learning about the private lives of others and whether or not they share their private lives in return.

There's a telling moment which highlights the extent to which Zeldin valorizes curiosity. He is reflecting on the fact that, had he made a habit in his youth of having one conversation with a stranger each week, he could now have clocked up 15,000 individual encounters – a small inroad, he tells us, into the 7 billion people he would ideally need to know to feel that his time on the planet has not been superficial. This is a strikingly high bar for living an unsuperficial life. And one wants to know why that should be the measuring point for a life which goes well. Zeldin can no doubt point to the fact that we all fall short of this target in innumerable ways, and falling short is no reason not to aim high. But the unattainability of the standard should make us wonder whether it is the kind of ideal which guides every possible way of living well.

Theodore Zeldin is an interesting and interested companion, thoughtful, learned and generous. There is intellectual stimulation and pleasure to be gained by spending some time in his company. His visions for how to reshape the worlds of business and leisure have a playful beauty which may prompt the derision of some, but will command the respect of many. Readers of his book are likely to be already convinced of the value of curiosity. But one of the curious things about curiosity is that it teaches us that living curiously is but one way of living well.

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