

# 86 the Conversation: A Side of Flat Screen TV with Your Burger?

*by* Teri Pastore

On a recent trip to Chicago, I took my mother to lunch at one of those homey chain restaurants in her neighborhood. You know the type: burgers, salads, and pie for dessert. The young hostess took us to a faux-leather booth, and on the wall opposite of our booth hung a large flat screen television. Wait a sec; this couldn't be a bar; I was with my mother. It took a few seconds for the collision of senses to clear, and I realized the restaurant had not only one, but two flat screen televisions hung in their dining room, and a fake fire blazing in the fireplace. Did I mention it was June?

As my mom poured over the menu, it struck me that something must seriously be wrong in America if restaurants now include television as part of their ambience to attract customers. Are Americans that vacuous that we cannot have a conversation anymore, even with our family members?

In the final season of the *Sopranos*, Tony and Paulie head out of town to lie low for a while. A *goombah* from the old days plays host and takes the two to dinner whereupon Paulie starts reliving the past, talking up the war stories about bustin' heads, and busty blondes.

The contempt on Tony's face for Paulie drips on to his plate. Denser-then-lead Paulie notices the affront and asks Tony whattsamatter with you? In one of the best lines to ever come from that HBO series, Tony replies, "*Remember when*" is the lowest form of conversation."

If those TV's hung in America's restaurants are any indication, we've fallen below the lowest standard set by Tony Soprano. Why is it that, in America conversation has become a dying art? Ideas,

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dreams, a personal observation, or the fecund ground where opposite beliefs intersect are being buried under the dead weight of Reality shows, advertisements, and the need for HD TV, all apparently inescapable. Worse still is the loss of language.

In Edith Wharton's novel, "The House of Mirth" a daughter-in-law has a conversation with her mother-in-law. The discussion is about the man the daughter-in-law is married to, i.e. her mother-in-law's son. The conversation goes on for pages, and the language is stunning. It's beautiful. Words that have fallen over the cliff into the void of atrophy spin in a flourish of senses that delights the reader. We are a fly on the wall of a fascinating, intimate exchange between two women who use words as a paintbrush to illustrate their point. If that conversation were translated into today's vernacular it would be boiled down to one sentence, "Your son is a mama's boy."

The attrition rate for which native languages, dialects, and accents are lost tops any endangered species list out there. The linguistic signature that contained the history of their culture has been replaced by the misguided desire to not be different. It's the same dictum shared by modern psychology whose goal is to make everyone with a quirky, unruly, disquieted personality, quiet, "normal" and typical. America's melting pot has become one flavor: vanilla.

As I sat in our booth, and scanned the dining room of the restaurant, most customers entranced by the high def quality, it became clear to me that those flat screens symbolize the furthering of our disconnection from one another, are a lost opportunity to test the boundaries of our own tightly held beliefs, and of our continued failure to participate via discussion in the lives, stories and experiences of others.

The waitress came and my mom and I ordered our burgers and salad. As we sat and waited for our food, the day's programming drifted into the spaces between us, and filled the chasm like an invisible blizzard.

