

Conversation

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.2 (posted on 14 May 2019)
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Below are the lyrics to Elvis Presley's pop song, "*A Little Less Conversation*," written by Billy Strange and Mac Davis. According to Wikipedia, the song was recorded and initially released as a B-side single in 1968, then later included on Elvis' 1970 album, *Almost in Love* (which was the A-side of the single). The song was only a moderate hit in the U.S., peaking at #50 on the *Billboard Hot 100* list. In the UK, it did considerably better, spending four consecutive weeks at the top of the *UK Singles Chart*.

Basically, the song has a decidedly masculine perspective. The presumably romantic phrase "open your heart" is clearly manipulative code for more directly sexual drives. The singer is saying, "*Give me what I want*," and we all know what that means. The idea that men want only one thing was getting long in the tooth back in 1968, and now — half a century later — it's even more tiresome. Not that the stereotype is entirely wrong, but it does portray gender differences in a simplistic fashion. One stanza of the lyrics is probably sufficient to reveal the song's basic tone, but I'll include the entire song anyway:

A little less conversation, a little more action, please
All this aggravation ain't satisfactioning me
A little more bite and a little less bark
A little less fight and a little more spark
Close your mouth and open up your heart and, baby, satisfy me
Satisfy me, baby

Baby, close your eyes and listen to the music
Drifting through a summer breeze
It's a groovy night and I can show you how to use it
Come along with me and put your mind at ease
A little less conversation, a little more action, please
All this aggravation ain't satisfactioning me
A little more bite and a little less bark
A little less fight and a little more spark

Close your mouth and open up your heart and, baby, satisfy me
(Satisfy me) Satisfy me, baby (satisfy me)
Come on, baby, I'm tired of talking
Grab your coat and let's start walking
Come on, come on (come on, come on)
Come on, come on (come on, come on)
Come on, come on (come on, come on)

Don't procrastinate, don't articulate
Girl, it's getting late, gettin' upset waitin' around
A little less conversation, a little more action, please
All this aggravation ain't satisfactioning me
A little more bite and a little less bark
A little less fight and a little more spark
Close your mouth and open up your heart and, baby, satisfy me
(Satisfy me) Satisfy me, baby (satisfy me)

Come on, baby, I'm tired of talking
Grab your coat and let's start walking
Come on, come on (come on, come on)
Come on, come on (come on, come on)
Come on, come on (come on, come on)

In recent decades, Elvis' versions of the song (there's more than one) have been used in various political campaigns for the Presidency, including Howard Dean's in 2003, and both John Kerry's and George W. Bush's in 2004. Obviously, the song wasn't commandeered by political advisors because of its sexual implications. Instead, it was meant to imply getting things done by breaking through the gridlock that the public associates with government.

Most recently, the song has appeared as background music in television advertisements, which is a now-standard destination for so many pop songs, both current and classic. That's how I was reminded of it. Not that popular music was ever pure or sacred — it has always been an economic commodity — but it does seem that the road to Pop Music Heaven now leads straight to marketing and the sale of products. Even a cover version of "Sympathy for the Devil" is used these days in a pitch for Acuras, the irony of which seems lost on the young marketing geniuses. But then, damn near everything in our culture is consecrated to that same destination.

This commentary is not, however, a screed against marketing, nor about sex versus love. It is about the danger of impulsive action without thought, without consideration, without conversation, and without serious contemplation of the consequences.

Unlike the song, which urges more action and less conversation, I lobby for the reverse — more conversation, more contemplation, and less unconscious action. These days especially we suffer from the unintended repercussions of too much action initiated on autopilot and undertaken with little conversation and virtually no contemplation, except in the narrowest possible sense of immediate tactics rather than overall strategies. Collectively, we've reached a fever pitch in the urgency of stringing our bows with the arrows of activity and loosing them toward whatever targets we presume will give us what we want.

We've become prisoners to the accelerating speed of the marketplace as dictated by the distorted economics of the beehive. The pace of the treadmill is faster, always faster. We have to race in place just to keep from falling behind. Growth is the goal — endless and infinite growth. More productivity, more profit, more

stuff. And yet, so much of what we're producing provides nothing more than the most immediate, temporary, and superficial satisfaction (if even that), and the insane pace is killing us, turning our dreams into nightmares.

Among the enduring myths of humanity is the assumption that our ancestors — so-called "primitive" human beings of the kind that lived in the small, nomadic hunter-gatherer bands that comprised 95% of our history — were not like us. The myth would have us believe that such people's lives were brutish, short, and altogether awful, and that we today are blessed to live in modern civilization, with all its commercial conveniences and technological enhancements. The ancestors I'm referring to are the so-called "primitive" homo sapiens who lived in small, nomadic hunter-gatherer bands over the past 200,000 years, not the earlier transitional hominids from 1-2 million years earlier.

No such bands of people exist today, for even the few remaining tribal peoples (scattered sparsely around the world in the tropical jungles of the Amazon and Indonesia, the extreme northern latitudes of North America and Europe, and the high plains of Asia) have been infiltrated and changed by the products of modern civilization. My reference is to people who lived during the long prehistory before civilization began, which amounts to 95% of homo sapiens' past.

Our hunter-gatherer forebears were, effectively, identical to us physically. All the biological drives that motivate us also moved them. Yes, their racial backgrounds were varied, but not substantially more so than among modern humans today. In all the ways that matter, however, such tribal people — whether they were forager-hunters, horticulturalists, or nomadic herders — were fully-fledged human beings. No, they didn't have literature, television, cars, and cell phones. They didn't go to high school and live in cities or suburbs, and they didn't drive to the grocery store to buy food. Like us, though, they were curious about life's origin and meanings, and they told stories and created myths to explain things.

Although anthropology is not unified in agreement about what life was like for these earlier human beings — various anthropologists differ quite widely in the ancestral pictures they paint — a view that resonates for me is that the pace of life for our ancestors was slower than ours. They probably toiled fewer hours than many of us today, and I'd be willing to bet that they were less stressed. Whatever anxieties they suffered — about survival, disease, death, etc. — my guess is that existential anxiety, alienation, and the disconnect from nature weren't typically among them, since these seem to be an unhappy by-product of civilization. Of course, there weren't enough of those earlier humans to do serious damage to the environment. Ecocide seems to be a uniquely "civilized" endeavor.

When the burning of fossil fuels ramped up in Britain during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century (along with rampant deforestation), the amount of carbon in the atmosphere (as carbon dioxide) was about 280 ppm. By 1996, a century and a half later, the concentration had increased to 360 ppm, right at the tipping point for real disruption. In just the last 30 years, however — the span of a single human generation — atmospheric carbon has

risen to more than 400 ppm. And with it, average global temperatures are approaching 2° C above pre-industrial levels. Doesn't sound like much, but it is. We're likely to blow past that 2° increase in the 2020s, which is scary as hell. If the methane feedback loops kick in, as they may, taking the earth to 4-5° warmer, it might as well be hell.

Admittedly, the earth's climate is infinitely complex. As I wrote in last week's post, we remain ignorant of so much. The most dire predictions might be depressingly accurate, or they could turn out to be overblown. Environmental science knows enough, however, to assert that, no matter what we do, we cannot completely reverse or avoid the cascading long-term effects of climate disruption. Whether we can ameliorate the worst scenarios remains in question, but we need to try, and soon.

The "first rule of holes" is: *If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.* Unfortunately, we're still digging like there's no tomorrow, which may be all too possible. We are leaning into the greatest crisis that humanity has ever faced, one that will determine or at least influence the future of our species. The gigantic scale and frantic pace of industrial activity due largely to short-term economic imperatives are hurtling us toward an unimaginable abyss. Right now, at the end of the 2010s, we are too divided to even agree on a plan of action, much less act on it. Oh, we know a lot about what to do, but we lack the collective will.

At some point in the not-too-distant future — perhaps even the very near future — climate disruption will move to center stage in our collective awareness, and then we will act to address it, or at least make the attempt. In the meantime, while we're distracted and blocked and still far too full of ourselves, we'd be well-advised to use this period to develop greater mindfulness.

How? A little more conversation. In fact, a lot more conversation.