THE GIFT OF GAB SURVIVAL

Getting Through the Holidays One Careful Word at a Time

By Deborah Tannen

AS HE'S SLIDING down the chimney tonight, Santa Claus might overhear a conversation like this: "Your parents aren't interested in me," Carol complains. "They never ask me a single question about what I do. Sometimes I think they see me as part of the woodwork."

"Of course they're interested," her husband Jim reassures. "They just don't want to seem intrusive. They'd be happy if you told them about your work."

"I can't just start talking if they don't ask," Carol protests, no more convinced of her husband's account than he is by hers.

"My parents are just trying to be considerate," he goes on. "Not like your parents." Now it's his turn to complain. "They fire so many questions at me, I feel like I'm under machine-gun attack. I don't know where to start answering."

"Start anywhere," she tells him. "You don't have to answer all their questions; just pick one and start."

Though they think they're arguing about how their in-laws treat them, Carol and Jim are actually caught in the web of conversational style differences. And like the poor fly that gets more enmeshed in a spider web each time it flails to get free, well-intentioned souls talking to someone with a different style often find their efforts to make things better end up making them worse.

The very reason Carol's parents' questions come so rapid-fire when they talk to Jim is that he hesitates in answering—which he does because he's taken aback by the pace of the questions. Jim needs them to slow down. But they don't know this, so they try harder to find the question that will get him talking. Jim's parents, meanwhile, have decided that Carol prefers not to talk about herself, since she never volunteers information. They make extra efforts not to intrude, to respect what they perceive as her reticence.

See TALK, C2, Col. 1

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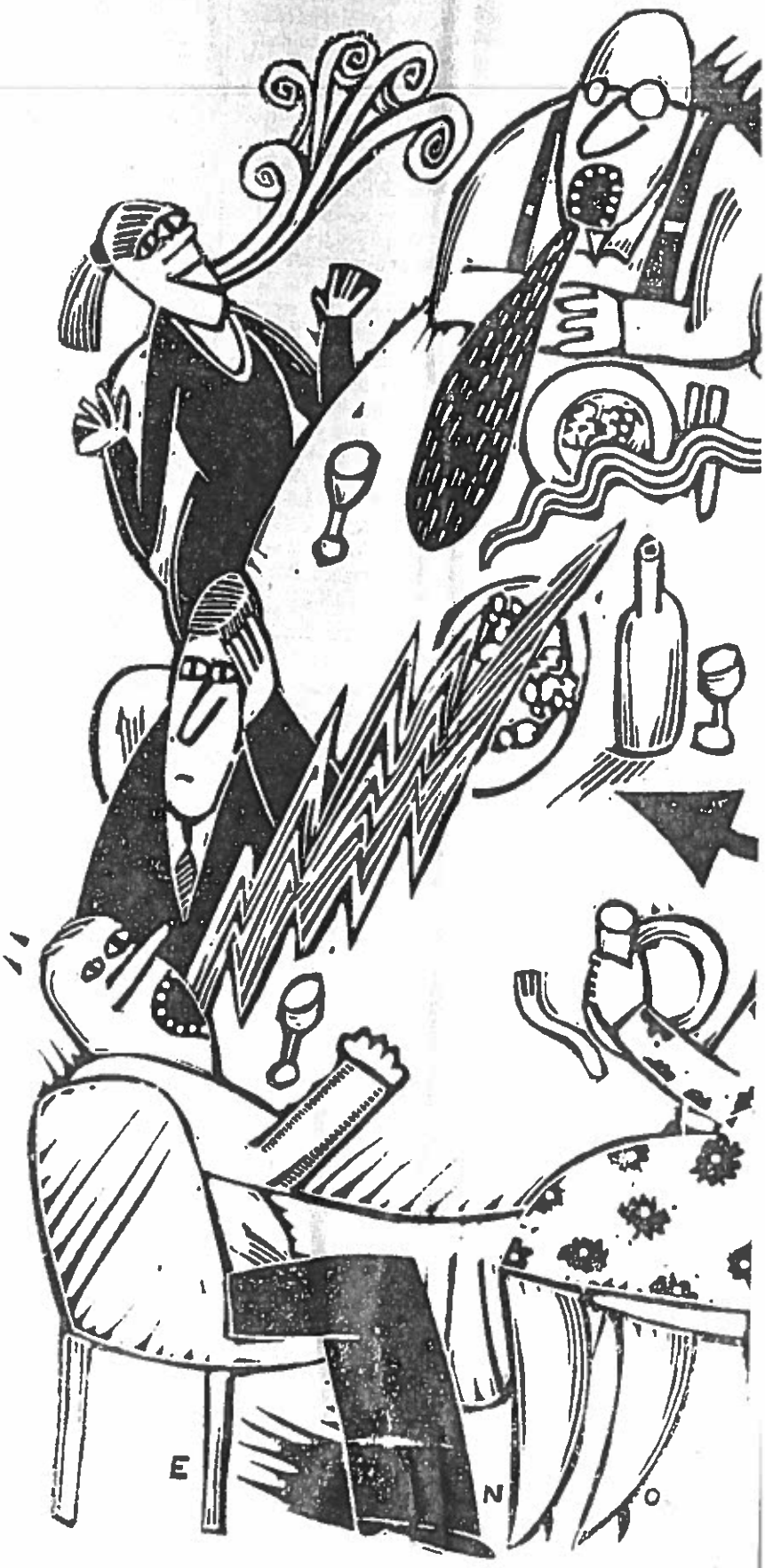

BY RANDALL E

The Gift of Gab Survival

TALK, From C1

The holidays, already a stressful time of year, can be made more so by conversational style differences among people who don't see each other often. And if the coming together of relatives merges families from different regions of the country, or even corners of the globe, the potential for cross-dialectal disaster only increases.

Ethnic and regional backgrounds aren't the only source of contrasting styles—people simply have different personalities that may not always mesh, and obviously those who share the same background don't always have the same style. But the habits for showing interest, being polite, taking the floor and expressing your thoughts—all the ways that seem self-evident to hold conversation—are learned as children are growing up. And growing up in a particular part of the country or among people of a particular ethnic background often results in systematically different conversational styles. If we don't recognize them as such, we can't correct for the differences and are left blaming each other.

For the couple involved, the alloy bonding them together is often strengthened by the mixing of their different metals: Jim's quiet calm, for example, is comforting to Carol, and her outgoing charm is engaging to him. But without the foundation of romantic love, their families react to their styles with puzzled disapproval rather than indulgent fascination.

Sometimes it's our partners who don't understand our parents, or parents who don't understand our partners—or two sets of relatives who don't understand each other. One couple tried for years to get their families together for the holidays, but they found that his garrulous Southern relations overwhelmed her Midwestern kin who backed off, secretly thinking their daughter's in-laws loud and ill-mannered—while the Southerners were finding their son's in-laws cold and withdrawn.

The more the Midwesterners backed off, the more effort the Southerners expended to avoid what they perceived as potential lulls. The result: conversational meltdown, with each side blaming the other.

Encouraging those who need a pause in the conversation to simply jump in doesn't work, because they can't. When I was a guest on a radio talk show, a woman called in to ask me why her husband couldn't take care of himself when the talk got lively and fast-paced. His voice was heard over the airwaves as he called out his own answer: "You need a crowbar to get into those conversations!"

It's not only the pacing of conversation that can cause confusion, but what you talk about and how. Like hors d'oeuvres passed around, conversational openers are offered to whet the interactional appetite, but if it's a cuisine you're not used to, it can have the opposite result.

Take the topic of conversation: Should it be personal or political? For many families the best subject to get a conversation going is politics, and the best way to enjoy this topic is to argue about it. Other families would rather clam up than argue about politics, especially with people they don't know well. So Family "A" thinks Family "B" has no manners while Family "B" thinks Family "A" has no opinions.

The holidays are also a time when old irritations get revived, as happened one year to a couple I know. Maria was happy that her husband Eduardo's mother was coming for Christmas but wanted her to come without her dog, a cute but poorly house-trained little creature whose barking upset Maria's pup. Maria tried to let her mother-in-law know how she felt without being rude: "You shouldn't bring your dog," she hinted, "because it's not fair to him. He gets upset and barks at our dog, and then you have to lock him in the basement and he's not comfortable there." The mother-in-law thanked Maria for her concern but assured her that her dog would be fine. Maria then told her directly that she would rather the dog stay home, which the mother-in-law accepted. But Maria was angry that she was forced to be rude and complained to her husband: "Why do I have to spell everything out for her?"

Maria had to be explicit not because her mother-in-law wanted to be difficult but because she genuinely missed Maria's meaning—not surprising, since Eduardo's family tends to be more direct. And that's why Eduardo responded honestly when Maria's mother said she'd like him to drive her to visit some other relatives on Christmas day.

BY RANDALL ENOS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"There won't be time for that," he explained realistically, to Maria's (and her mother's) horror. Dismissing a request out of hand seemed callous to them; they felt he should have expressed willingness to consider it, perhaps by saying "Well, I'll see if we can manage it," refusing only after a show of having tried.

Unfortunately, it is not just conversation that can cause tension around the holidays. No matter how much you knock yourself out preparing, you can end up knocking heads. Never mind the big differences like whether you observe Christmas, Hanukah or neither. Even if you all celebrate Christmas, do you open gifts Christmas Eve or Christmas morning? Are you expected to pretend that you love whatever gifts you receive? In my family you are initially, but the next day you can admit that you already have three orange sweaters and don't wear any of them—once you've determined that a gift can be returned or passed on to someone who likes it.

And then there's the challenge of getting through the meal. When you sit down to dinner, you have to worry not only about what to eat—must you try the marshmallow-covered yams even if you hate marshmallows?—but also how you talk as you eat. A woman from the Midwest recalls the first time she found herself in the midst of a lively Italian family dinner in Boston: With people shouting all at once and hands flying, she thought she had fallen into a family feud.

When her East Coast Italian friend visited her home, the friend too was in for a surprise. She kept waiting for the conversation to bring everyone together in one big talking hydra-head, but for the entire evening people talked only one-on-one to someone next to them. This made the conversation different in every way: The volume was lower, more information was exchanged and there was less joking and laughter. This not only struck her as less fun but it didn't fit her definition of "family," which, in her mind, was created as a unit by the many voices becoming one.

After dinner, families also have different ideas of how to clean up and what to do next. Sometimes these differences reflect apportionment of men's and women's roles. The modern man who gets up to help the women clear the table may embarrass the older generation in a family where the men stay put—or retreat to the living room. In one family I've come across, the men and boys all troop outside to play baseball while the women gravitate to the kitchen, where the conversation interests them more and they might as well clean up as they talk.

Of course, there are women who would rather play baseball than talk, and men who find the women's conversation more interesting than baseball. When I was writing "You Just Don't Understand," I brought my husband to a family combination Hanukah-Christmas gathering. I also brought a video camera to capture the constellations that women and men got into when they talked. The videotape shows the results: There are my brother-in-law and his father talking, with the father looking steadily out the window. And there are his sister and my sister's friend, meeting for the first time, sitting face to face and looking steadily at each other. The tape also shows the men having moved to the living room, either reading or just sitting and listening to the conversation in the dining room. Around the dinner table, still sitting and talking, were all the women—and one man, my husband.

When families get together, even the most innocent conversational moves can carry weight because families are looking not only for connections but approval. Questions asked by parents run the risk of seeming to imply criticism. "Oh, you put bread crumbs in the stuffing?" is heard as "You shouldn't put bread crumbs in the stuffing." Anything asked by a parent can seem to call into question whether you turned out right, and anything asked by an in-law can be heard as a judgment on whether you're treating your spouse right.

Questions asked by guests run the risk of seeming to make a request. Years ago I had the poor judgment to make conversation in a Greek family I was visiting by remarking, "Gee, I haven't seen any grapes since arriving in Crete. I always associated Greece with grapes." In repayment for my thoughtless remark, I got sour grapes on the table at the end of every meal for the rest of my stay—and I felt I had to eat them, because the reason I hadn't seen them before was that they were out of season and hard to find.

Frustrations caused by style differences can sometimes be solved fairly easily if you realize that different styles are at fault. Carol decided to try Jim's suggestion and just started telling her in-laws about her work, asked or not. To her amazement, they listened attentively, asked follow-up questions, and told Jim how pleased they were that Carol was finally opening up. And Jim pushed himself to jump into conversations while someone else was talking; he was amazed that they sometimes (not always) stopped, attentively giving him the floor.

What about when it's all over, when it's time for bed but the guests keep lingering? I'm told that my mother's father had a handy solution to this dilemma. He would turn to his wife and say, congenially, "Let's go to bed, dear. The guests want to go home."