

Philosophical Café for Spiritual Health How To Start One

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It's Saturday in the town of Warwick, New York, about sixty-five miles northwest of Manhattan's West Side. It's an unusually mild fall evening. About a dozen people have gathered at the Tuscan café for a conversation about friendship. Last week the topic was wisdom, the week before it was fear. And before that I forget except that when we took on the enigma of the self we kept going for several sessions. Last week a rabbi with his young Brazilian wife were having coffee and spontaneously jumped in. Tonight a woman fond of chat rooms on the net strayed into our midst. Marvin a lawyer who works in the Wall Street area and witnessed the Twin Towers attack joined us for the first time tonight. He's eager for the next meeting when we plan to tackle the issue of courage. .

It's been roughly a year now that our lively and ever-changing little group has been meeting bi-monthly for a meeting of minds. For most Americans this may seem an odd way to spend Saturday nights: no movies, dancing, loud music; away from TV, VCR, newspapers, magazines, poker or bridge club, mall, bowling alley, family banter, solitary musings, or whatever else people do in the leisure hours of their weekends. It seems to have started in Berlin, Paris, and Amsterdam in the 1980s and is part of a general awakening of interest in applied philosophy, spreading to North America with "philosophical cafés" springing up in cities and small towns around the USA: a revival from Socratic

days of yore, a love of soulful conversation, a free forum for swapping ideas that touch on the needs of the spirit.

“You know,” says Marilyn a young poet, “this is a refreshing change from my family scene where everybody talks at the same time and tries to out-shout each other. I like being heard.”

“With my family, nobody much talks about anything interesting. It’s a sin to be too interesting,” adds Livia, a school teacher.

“And it’s a crime to be sensitive!” roars Todd, a powerfully built ex-marine and musician.

“This is what philosophy *should* be—not from books, but from your own mind and experience,” observes Rick the owner of the café, as he opens a bottle of wine, in deference to Plato’s Symposium.

“I’ll say,” adds Margo indignantly, “I hated being told what to think and say all my life. It’s not till now that I’m retired, and my husband dead, that I’m finally getting the hang of being myself.”

But Steve, a Tai Chi teacher, questions her dismissal of *all* teachers and tells how his helped him. And so it goes. Ideas fly back and forth, and the idea of friendship is spun like a gem under the flashing lights of different opinions, glinting and bouncing off each other, showing this and that aspect of a great philosophical theme, till ten o’clock rolls around and someone suggests splitting for the pub across the street.

People are drawn to these talks where they can take on the same questions that puzzled and inspired Plato and Pythagoras, Buddha and Laotzu, Vico and Wittgenstein. Dialogue—the art of talking things through—it goes back to the first shamans and poets,

the first wise men and women. Wonder—the origin of philosophy and the birthright of every child—is the only pre-requisite. Is there any spiritual value to it?

Spirituality is a word whose meaning I find hard to pin down, so I ask myself what are the everyday situations where I am most likely to find it. Speaking for myself, I find it in every thoughtful encounter between human beings, every moment we're called to search out elusive truth and listen heart to heart. I feel it always close at hand, and yet one has to carve out the inner space to pick up on such moments, given all the hustle and distractions that crowd our lives.

Starting a philosophical café is one way to do it. The thing to remember is that it's not really a place but a state of mind. The stuff we need is everywhere on tap, the eternal puzzles and provocations of the soul. Wherever there is a free and spontaneous chance to ask questions about the great riddles of life; wherever there is a clearing for doing this in a friendly social context, without disruption of cost, constraint, leader, master, or guru, we have the makings of a philosophical café.

It's easy to start one, and I can't imagine a simpler way to boost the spiritual health of our nation. I'd like to see them sprouting up everywhere: in libraries, bookstores, churches, synagogues, mosques, artist's studios, student dorms, family rooms, backyards, any old place people feel like forgoing. All you need is a dollop of good will, a democratic respect for the other, and your own god-given smarts, curiosity, and spiritual hankerings.

If a trained academic philosopher is at hand to moderate the talk, so much the better. One can emulate Socrates who famously took no fees for his services. If not, we take responsibility for being midwives to our own souls. A philosophical café is not

rambling chitchat, however animated or amiable; it's more than venting and I trust more than ranting: Based on my experience, here are some rules of thumb I would suggest to guide the format.

- No long speeches or monologues
- Try to frame a question or a statement so it triggers a response and keeps the dialogue moving
- Stay focused, don't jump around but go deep into one idea at a time, exploring hidden assumptions
- Tell stories, do your own thinking, be experience-centered
- Listen to the other person and follow the principle of charity: in other words, aim to grasp the intended meaning and give others their due
- Cultivate co-operative intelligence; it's not a debate or a war of egos
- Pause, and leave a little time for thought to sink in