



Some women lose their cool when they miss a 50 percent-off sale at Sak's. Others have a hissy fit on a bad hair day.

Me, I get pissed (or piqued for those delicate souls) whenever I can't hear the rest of an interesting conversation. I don't mean conversations like when you call your best friend and she shares a hot office story, but then she hears call waiting and says, "Gotta run.". I mean conversations we don't intend to hear (but do anyway) in hair salons, airports and other public places.

Here's something to chew on: Why are the boring blabbermouths never more than three inches from you and the more creative communicators several table lengths away?

I know these charismatic conversationalists exist because I catch tantalizing tidbits of their chatter as I glide to and from concession stands, buffet lines and restrooms. Yes, the art of conversation is alive and well. It's just not happening within my auditory range. Over the years I've sat, stood and aerobicized next to a whole army of people whose oral locutions couldn't amuse a parakeet if their life depended on it.

It's hard to say which sex scores highest on the cheesy chit-chat scale. Topping my current list are gal talk on split ends, yeast infections and potty training and guy exchanges on torn hamstrings, baseball stats and, yes, networking. A few bars of these show stoppers and I want to plug my ears with cocoa puffs.

So why haven't I gone cold turkey and stopped eavesdropping? I could do that. Ignore the breezy bantering, the jocular verbiage, the witty exchanges. But I don't—for the simple reason that once in a while when the planets are in perfect alignment, I'll hear some truly amazing and interesting snippets.

I've learned, for instance, about Suzie's mid-life recareering and subsequent six-figure salary, the best veterinarian in town for your champion Schnauzer and the lowest priced designer-clothing discount boutique. If I'm real lucky, I catch a few Letterman jokes and the latest dirt on George Clooney.

Then, of course, the inevitable happens. Someone will be distracting me from my work woes with White House gossip or stories of celebrity bungee jumping, and suddenly I'm sitting next to a cement mixer. I'm talking the invasion of the high-decibel demons: blow dryers, heat pumps, 18-wheelers or the "thunderstorm from hell." Suddenly my conversational bliss is snuffed out, just like that!

But it's not always noise that wrecks my listening encounters. Sometimes it's companions. Just try listening to the next table's Tahiti travelogue on Polynesian headhunters when your dinner companion and best friend has been equivocating about liposuction for the past half-hour. And it's not just friends and family who mess up interesting eavesdropping. Even your hair stylist can.

Many times I've been trapped in one of those revolving chairs, listening to tales of departed lovers and varicose veins, when I'd much rather be plugged into someone else's tete-a-tete—say the foil-wrapped Madonna look-alike in Chair #4, who just happens to moonlight as a Vegas chorus girl.

In a perfect world I could explain my listening preferences and no one would raise a waxed eyebrow, much less threaten to dye my hair green. But of course this is Planet Earth, home of the free and land of the let's-not-be-too-truthful.

To be fair, however, it's not just people or proximity problems that cut short my eavesdropping adventures. It can be conflicting schedules. Did you know that movie theaters will not postpone the start of their baker's-dozen-or-so trailers just so you can hear how Scott and Tammy managed to save a bundle of money on expedia.com? And it's the same thing with doctor's waiting rooms. Start listening to a really good story about doctors who sexually

molest their patients, and you can guarantee that Nursie Dear will bolt from behind her bullet-proof window to inform you that “Doctor’s ready for you.”

Even when I choose whom to sit or stand by, I’m reminded of Murphy’s Law and the old adage, “You can’t tell a book by its cover.” Most of my “talking books” have landed in the “reject pile.” I once sat adjacent to two Hilary Clinton look-alikes at a fast-food restaurant. I figured I’d be treated to 15 minutes of “Desperate Housewives.” Not on your life! Acoustical ceiling tiles never had two more conscientious spokespersons.

But there is one saving grace. All this eavesdropping has made me pay strict attention to the quality of my own conversations. And I must be improving. Lately I’ve been getting some suspiciously snooping looks.

What do they say about Karma and what goes around...?

Janice is a fulltime freelance writer who writes magazine features, profiles and essays for national magazines. She’s had articles published in such venues as NEWSWEEK, NATIONAL WILDLIFE and AMERICAN FITNESS. Janice has also had humor essays published in GOWORLDTRAVEL.COM, STICKYOURNECKOUT.COM, CATS & KITTENS, VERBATIM and other magazines and e-zines. You may check out her website at <http://www.janicearenofsky.com/>.

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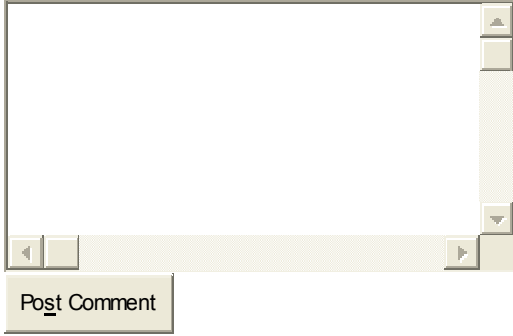
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