

The Smalltalk Question

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One of the minor puzzles of American life is what question to ask people at parties and suchly to get to know them.

“How ya doin’?” is of course mere formality, only the most troubled would answer honestly for anything but the positive.

“What do you do?” is somewhat offensive. First, it really means “what occupation do you hold?” and thus implies you do little outside your occupation. Second, it implies that one’s occupation is the most salient fact about them. Third, it rarely leads to further useful inquiry. For only a handful of occupations, you will be able to say something somewhat relevant, but even this will no doubt be slightly annoying or offensive. (“Oh yeah, I always thought about studying history.”)

“Where are you from?” is even less fruitful.

“What’s your major?” (in the case of college students) turns sour when, as is tragically all too often the case, students feel no real passion for their major.

“What book have you read recently?” will cause the majority of Americans who don’t read to flail, while at best only getting an off-the-cuff garbled summary of a random book.

“What’s something cool you’ve learned recently?” puts the person on the spot and inevitably leads to hemming and hawing and then something not all that cool.

I propose instead that one ask “What have you been thinking about lately?” First, the question is extremely open-ended. The answer could be a book, a movie, a relationship, a class, a job, a hobby, etc. Even better, it will be whichever of these is most interesting at the moment. Second, it sends the message that thinking, and thinking about thinking, is a fundamental human activity, and thus encourages it. Third, it’s easiest to answer, since by its nature its asking about what’s already on the person’s mind. Fourth, it’s likely to lead to productive dialog, as you can discuss the topic together and hopefully make progress. Fifth, the answer is quite likely to be novel. Unlike books and occupations, people’s thoughts seem to be endlessly varied. Sixth, it helps capture a person’s essence. A job can be forced by circumstance and parentage, but our thoughts are all our own. I can think of little better way to quickly gauge what a person is really like.

“What have you been working on lately?” can be seen, in this context, to be clearly inferior, although similar.

So, what *have* you been thinking about lately?