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The Most Common Way To Waste Eight Seconds

"How are you doing? Good, you? Good." How many times in your life do you think you've said, or heard, this very common group of three phrases being vocalized? The whole exchange is almost a cliche... a package of words opened and distributed between any two people. This trivial, eight second conversation has been had since anyone having it can remember, and it's a very integral part of society. The phrases come together like any good group of three things do, and fit precisely like the pieces of a puzzle. But why are they so important? Why are people taken aback when you don't return their question and only deal out one and a half part of the interaction? And more importantly, what would life be like if we didn't have this conversation endlessly?

It would seem as though everyone having this conversation is just making small talk, filling the silence with words so as not to appear awkward. Others genuinely care about your response, but a lot of them really just ask to ask. It would seem as though if this were the case, the “Good” interaction becomes pointless. How many times have you actually replied to the opening question with anything other than "good?" As people already know what your answer is, it seems quite silly to waste your breath asking. Breath is otherwise important. There are many things you could have done with the air needed to vocalize this conversation, such as:

1. Breathing. Inhaling oxygen is a key element of living, and anything that inhibits your ability to obtain the maximum amount from each pump of your lungs isn't worth the effort.

2. Keeping yourself at a comfortable temperature. Is it cold? Well, concentrate the air you didn't sacrifice asking someone how they're doing into a warm stream which you can direct towards your hands or inside of your collar. Is it hot? Well, lucky for you, there's extra breath in your body which you can blow on your arms to keep yourself cool.

3. Whistling. Forget small talk. Utilize your breath for a better purpose: whistling a jaunty tune as you stroll along without a care in the world. You won't have to ask anyone how they're doing, nor will you have to respond to anyone asking you, because it is quite clear to anyone who has ears. You're doing great!

Seriously though, let's talk about the logistics of this conversation. As I've said, most of anyone having it will almost always ask the same questions and answer the same answers. Even if you aren't doing good, how likely are you to tell any random Joe on the street about your troubles? Let’s say you’re having a terrible day, and someone comes up to you and casually asks: "How are you?" And you, without thinking, say: "Good.” Yet, You are having the worst day in history. Your car won't start and requires a $7000 repair, your computer won't turn on so you can turn in all that homework you waited until the last minute to do, and you just got a call saying someone close to you is on life support. You are not having anything close to a good day. But if someone asks, you won't tell them that. You’ll tell them you’re doing “Good.” And in doing so, lie through your teeth. Maybe you aren’t doing it deliberately, but you are, and lying is not a good thing to do.

So what would life be like without such a redundant exchange? Well, let me tell you, it would probably be a lot better. No more would there be small talk. We could get right to the big talk. More important things could be communicated faster and nobody would get offended because you don't return their question of how good they're doing. Seriously, it's ridiculous how much it matters to some folks that you ask them back. It's particularly annoying, to me at least, to have to pose a question that I really care nothing about. For most people who start this conversation with me, I really couldn't give less of a toss about their day, not because I'm a non-sympathetic person, but because:

1. I have a lot of stuff to think about at any given time and even if they did tell me anything other than that their day was good, I'd forget it in fifteen seconds.

2. I'm not an extrovert and generally am not great at communicating pointlessly, and as pointless goes, the "Good." interaction takes the cake.

So, clearly, this three phrase conversation is quite an unnecessary one. It's a vestigial structure, if you will, within the layout of society and really doesn't serve much purpose for any of the parties involved. It’s a waste of breath… words only said to fill awkward silence between two people. And it can even be painful, to some extent. Imagine you’re at a funeral. A relative of the person in the coffin approaches you, and starts the conversation with: “How are you doing?” You, quite automatically, say: “Good. You?” You’ve just made a terrible mistake. It should be quite obvious how they’re doing… heck, a loved one just passed away. But, because you asked them based on the norms of the “Good” interaction, this poor guy now has to spell that out for you. Don’t get me wrong, there are cases in which asking someone how they’re doing can indicate that you do, in fact, care about them. I’m not at all saying nobody should ever question someone about their day like that ever again. I’m just saying that we should greatly minimize the amount of times we pointlessly do it, because most of the time that’s only so we appear more sociable. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's good to talk to people. But this three sentence interaction can barely be called talking. It's more like an automatic action you don’t think much about, like agreeing to the terms and conditions of anything online without reading them.