

# 14 ways to skip shallow small talk and have deep conversations

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April 16, 2019

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You can only discuss the weather for so long. Girl Geek Academy/Flickr

- **Small talk can be awkward and excruciating if it goes on too long.**
- **We listed the best strategies to take your conversations to the next level.**
- **Those strategies include revealing something *slightly* personal and asking for stories, not answers.**
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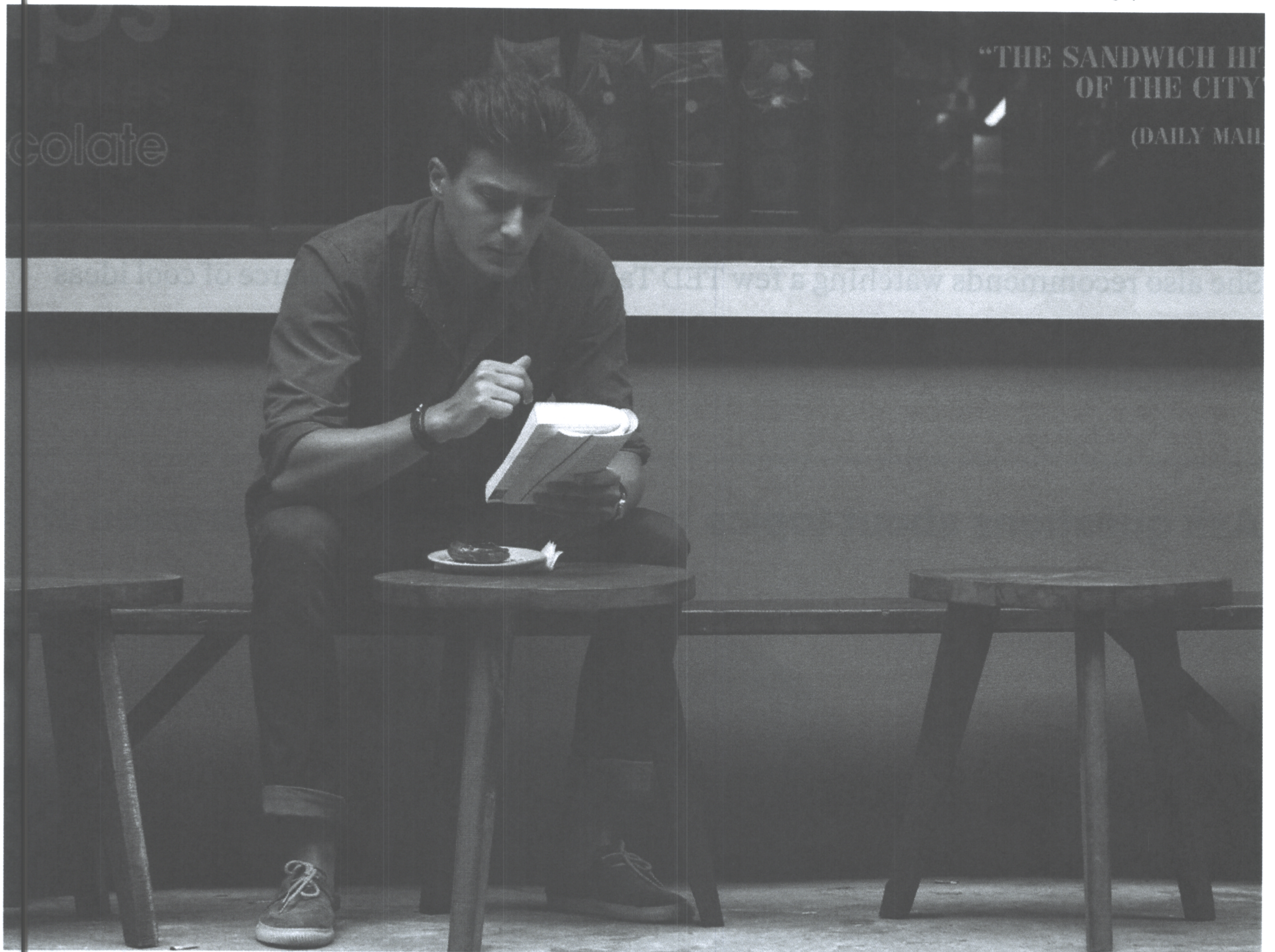
Heading to a networking event or a happy hour with colleagues? It helps to have a few tricks up your sleeve to use as soon as – or even before – a conversation hits a wall.

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We checked out some relevant Quora threads as well as other resources to find strategies for having meaningful conversations with anyone you meet. Read on to see the best of what we uncovered.

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## Have some ‘deep’ conversation starters on hand



Luke MacGregor/Reuters

Don't expect substantive topics to instantly spring to mind. Instead, says Tracy Chou, a former software engineer at Pinterest, you should approach any interaction with a few deep conversation starters ready to go.

Chou suggests reading books on behavioral economics or pop psychology and talking about them, “since those subjects are fundamentally about people – and everyone is a person, has to interact with other people, and has opinions about their own behavior and other people’s behavior.”

She also recommends watching a few TED Talks – “another great source of cool ideas about the world.” We suggest starting with some TED Talks that will make you smarter about business.

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## Ask questions about topics the other person is interested in



John Moore/Getty Images

Multiple Quora users indicated that one of the best ways to start an interesting conversation is to find something the other person is excited about. Show that you want to learn more about the topic by asking a series of questions related to it.

Says Tatiana Esteves: “Try picking a topic that *they* are really interested in and start with a normal ‘shallow conversation.’ Then ask quite probing question[s] even if the subject isn’t that serious.”

For example, Esteves says, “if they like celebrity news, ask them if they think that the ‘celebrity culture’ is making people less happy with their lives.”

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## Find out what makes the other person special



Flickr/cosmoflash

Whatever you say, writes Joshua Evans, “avoid the awful opening phrase, ‘What do you do?’” You’ll put your conversation partner in a box where all he can talk about is his job.

Instead, Evans says you should ask, “What makes you a badass? That will induce a chuckle over drinks.” You might even find out something crazy; perhaps they’re a lawyer by day and a rock musician by night.

In fact, in France, asking someone what they do for a living is considered a faux pas. The French often ask each other about where they like to vacation.

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## Avoid discussing the weather



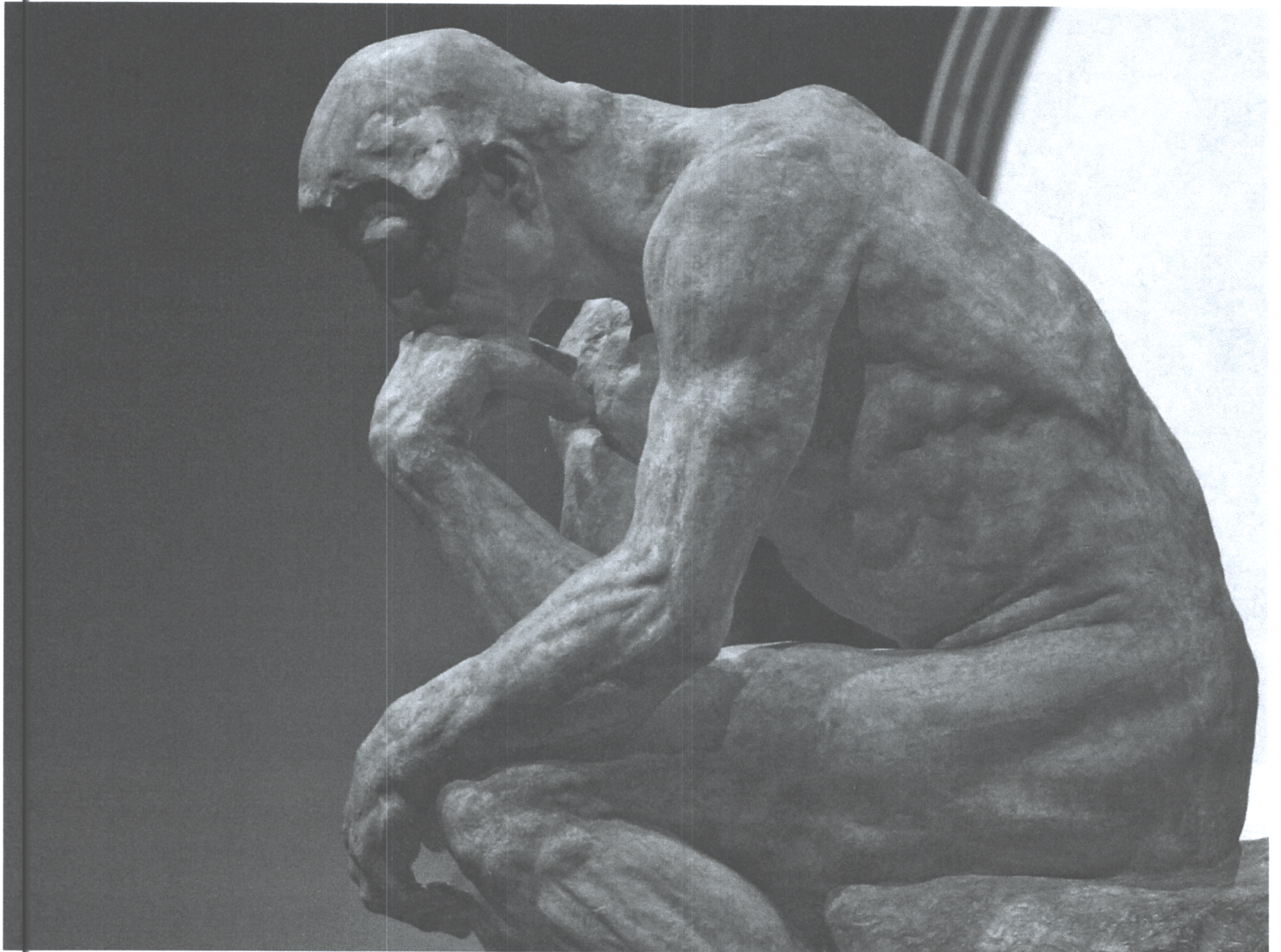
REUTERS/Darren Ornitz

So it's three degrees colder than average for March. Big deal.

"Avoid [talking about the weather] like the plague. It's like the black hole of shallow conversation," says Ambra Benjamin, a recruiting leader at Facebook.

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## Assume the other person has deep thoughts

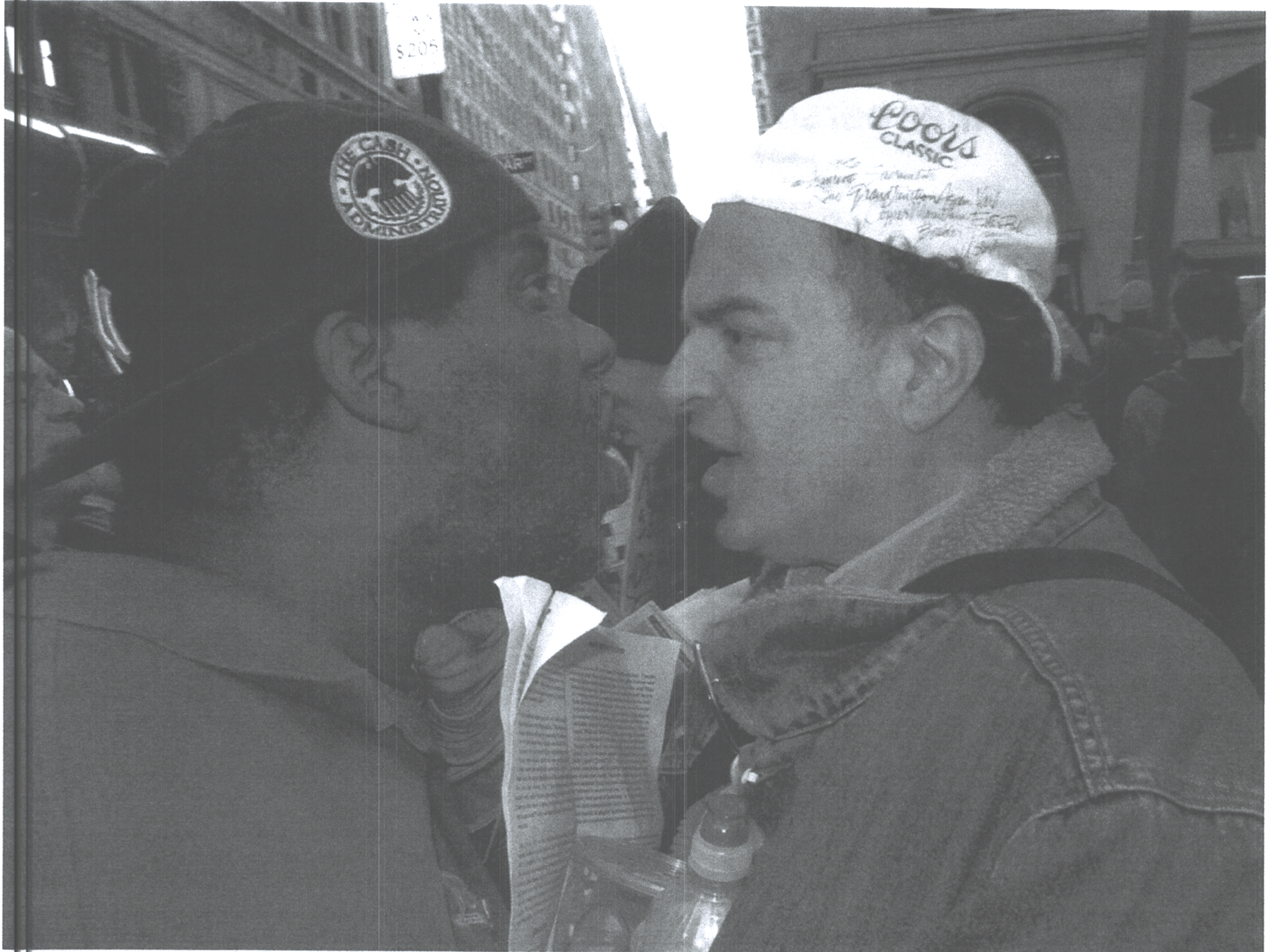


Scott Barbour/Getty Images

"If you assume that there is any possibility that the other person might be dull or will talk stupid, maybe you won't ask things that draw them out in the right way and YOU will ruin the discussion by making it dull," writes Tobias C. Brown.

In other words, assume the other person is just as eager to have meaningful conversations as you are.

## Don't push people to see your perspective



Flickr/David Shankbone

If you approach every conversation as an opportunity to convert people to your values and beliefs, you'll probably have a hard time getting anyone to stick around. After all, no one likes to feel like they're being proselytized.

“Don't have too much of an investment in being right or persuading people to adopt your point of view,” says Joel Postman.



Instead, be open to hearing about your partner's ideas and at least trying to understand her perspective.

## Reveal something slightly personal



Flickr/Erich Ferdinand

“Reveal something about yourself, and discuss how it felt and what you learned from it,” writes Jan Leadbetter. “This invariably leads to disclosures from other people. They don’t have to be massive secrets or anything like that, just something personal.”

Leadbetter’s theory is supported by science: Psychologists say that when you disclose something about yourself, other people feel inclined to do the same.

Just be careful not to get *too* personal. For example, you can mention how you discovered a new favorite musical artist this week – not that you’re having a clandestine affair.

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## Talk about something specific you’re working on



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When someone asks you what you do for a living, don't simply say you're a writer or a doctor. According to Lifehacker, you can liven up the conversation by adding a few details about something you accomplished that week.

Similarly, when you're asked what you do for fun, talk about a recent experience you had doing your hobby, whether that's knitting wool scarves or jogging in the park.

## Ask for stories, not answers



Sean Gallup / Getty Images

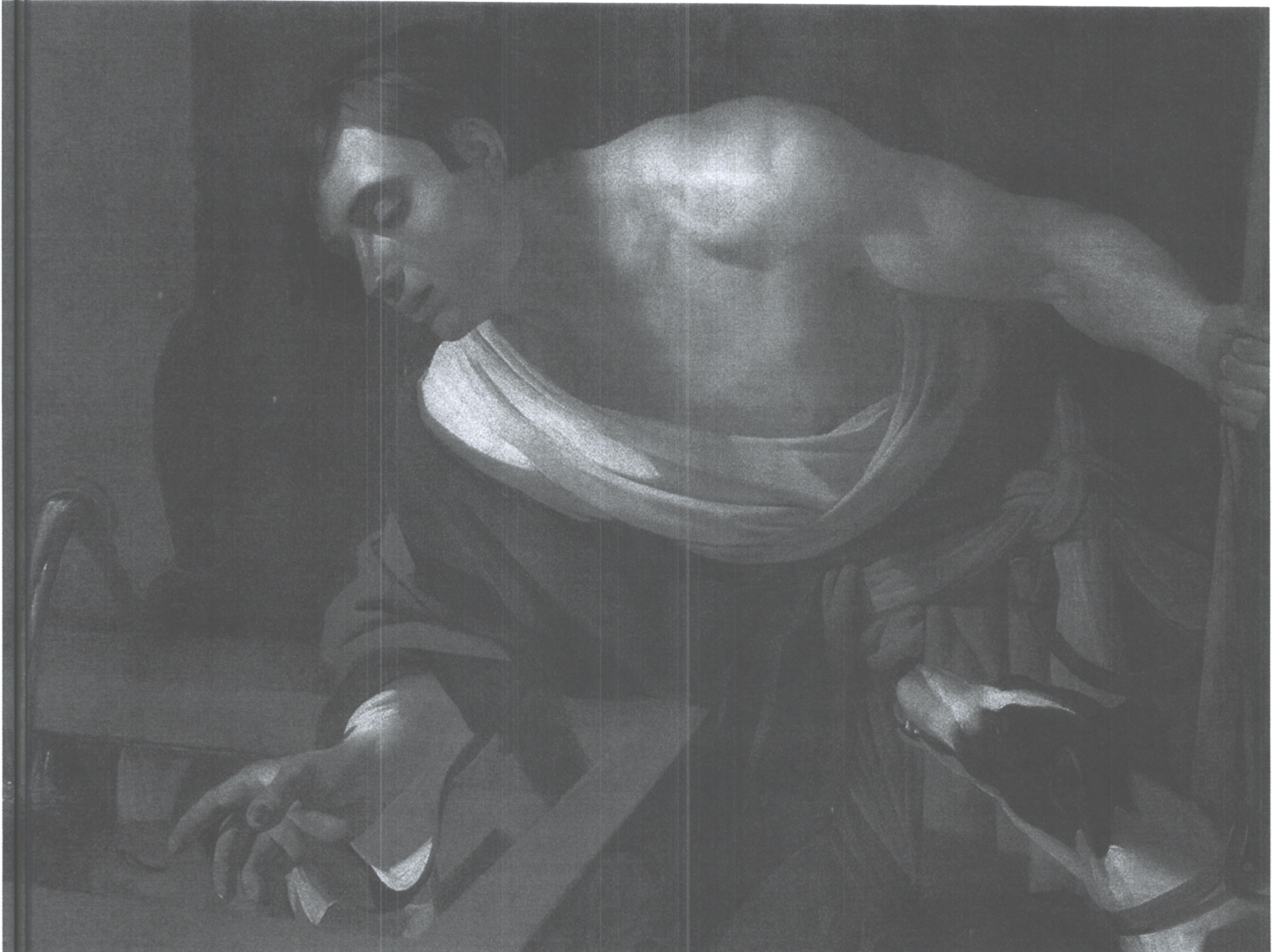
It can be tempting to try breaking the ice with an innocuous question like, “How was your weekend?” or “What’s up?”

But as Chris Colin and Rob Baedeker write on TED.com, you can elicit some more detail by asking, “What was the best part of your weekend?” or “What are you looking forward to this week?”

That way, your conversation partner can tell a story that allows you to learn more about him and what makes him tick.

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## Be less selfish



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If you're consumed with panic about how you're coming off, consider changing your mindset and thinking about how your conversation partner is feeling instead.

Writes Pham Tien Hiep:

“We view people through a selfish lens, thinking ‘What can they do for me?’ while really we should think of how we can be of service to other people.

“When we get out of our own heads and think of others, all of a sudden the right things to say come easy to us. Once we’re available for other people, we’re more available for ourselves and don’t have to think of what to say.”

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## Come up with ‘conversational sparks’



Wikimedia Commons

It's fine to browse the news for potential conversation topics – as long as you take it one step further.

Jeff Callahan suggests: “For each current topic, create one ‘Conversational Spark’ to add at the end of your blurb.” His examples include: “... what do you guys think? Would you rather A or B?” and “... If you got paid \$1,000 would you do XYZ?”

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## Don't stick to a script



Rosmarie Voegtli/flickr.com

Public radio correspondent Celeste Headlee gave a TEDx Talk in which she distilled everything she's learned from interviewing sources into tips for having more productive conversations. One of those tips – applicable to journalists and everyone else – is “go with the flow.”

In other words, it's OK if your conversation doesn't go exactly according to plan, as long as it's interesting.

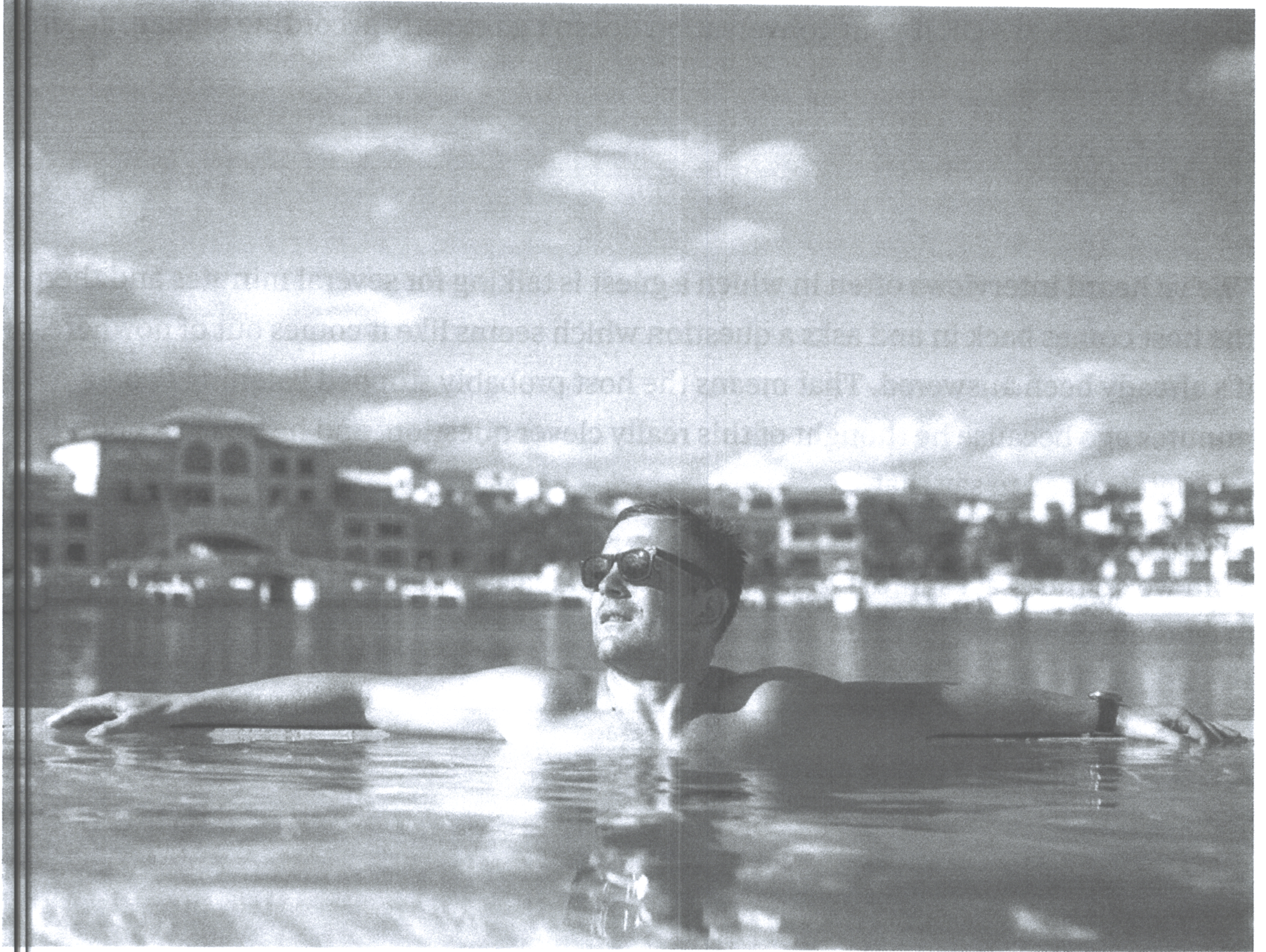
Headlee said:

“We've heard interviews often in which a guest is talking for several minutes and then the host comes back in and asks a question which seems like it comes out of nowhere, or it's already been answered. That means the host probably stopped listening two minutes ago because he thought of this really clever question, and he was just bound and determined to say that.

“And we do the exact same thing. ... Stories and ideas are going to come to you. You need to let them come and let them go.”

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## **Add a serious twist to a light topic**



Kaspars Grinvalds/Shutterstock

Diana Booher, author of “Communicate Like a Leader,” writes on HuffPost about using an otherwise dull comment as a launching point for an interesting conversation.

For example, if the other person says, “I just got back from vacation. I dread looking at my inbox tomorrow,” you might respond with, “For someone like you who travels so much with your job, what do you want in a vacation? What’s new, different, relaxing to you?”

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## Ask for advice





Marco Arment / Flickr

We'll admit it: This technique takes guts. But it'll definitely get you out of a conversational rut.

Research suggests asking for advice can also help you seem more competent and can make the other person feel like your ally.

Plus, you may just get a great tip on what to bring as a housewarming gift or where to find some fashionable new work clothes.

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