

The Naked Eye

The Big Mouth Blues

BY MARK MATOUSEK

Does gossip have its virtues?

I never thought I'd see the day when fellatio caused a national crisis, but opening the *Times* this morning and finding not two but three references to oral sex and the much-maligned intern rumored to have performed it on the President, I marveled again at how far we'd come as a nation of voyeurs and hypocrites. Watching 12 theoretical slips of the tongue turn a superpower on its ear has been enlightening, not to mention historical.

We all know we live in a peepshow culture—that's not news. What interests me about this story is the issue nobody's talking about; not perjury, adultery, coercion, or telltale love gifts, but information and the troublesome fact that nobody owns it. The sorry spectacle of Monica's volubility proves once again that information shared with the wrong people can be the most dangerous thing of all, especially when it's distorted, decontextualized, or downright stolen. Part of what's on trial, I think, is the very nature of gossip itself.

That's all that transpired that day at the Ritz, the same thing most of us do every chance we get—dishing up the dirt, blabbing other people's business, gossiping to our heart's content. Monica, of course, had no idea that she was being framed by a book-deal-seeking fraud with a bug in her bra. She trusted and told her tale, which points to the only moral I can find in this sad affair: If you can't keep your mouth shut, keep your mouth

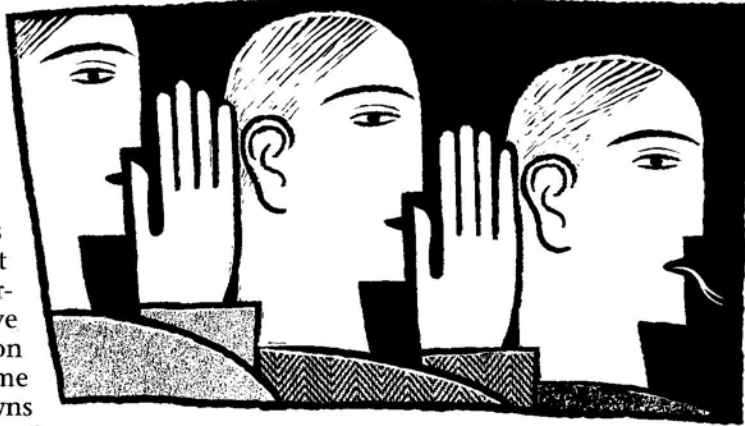
shut, or frisk your friends if they ask too many questions.

Most of the people I know are nosy and so am I. In fact, I've never met anyone interesting who didn't like to gossip, even if they denied it. The only thing better than a good story is a good story that's off the record, preferably about people that you know. Normally this gossip isn't malicious—just idle, con-

computer when a flash session appeared on the screen from a friend who lives on the other coast. I clicked on and found some juicy gossip; in fact, it was just the piece of inside info that someone else we know was holding his breath for, dangling on tenterhooks in a crisis he couldn't resolve. I wasted no time passing it along, feeling like some kind of savior, expecting gratitude. Instead he ran like a rabbit to my source (not thinking of this as gossip, I didn't bother to cover my tracks) and tried to get her involved. Of course she ended up mad at me and he wound up more bitter than ever. The Buddhists have a term for this rubber band effect—*karma vipakka*—and this time my own overactive tongue snapped right in my face.

The question is, what is a big mouth supposed to do? How can we operate in overlapping groups of people and resist the urge to play "telephone," whispering into each other's ears, cross-talking, comparing notes, griping, venting, filling in the blanks? We all know that triangulation is dangerous but it does seem inevitable too, no matter how much we try to fight it. A friend who disagrees with me, partly because she tries to be "good" and partly because she can't stand the idea of anyone talking behind her back, vows periodically not to gossip but breaks the promise every time. The minute she needs to work something out, we're back in

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spiratorial chatter with an aura of naughty indulgence. It's part confession, part espionage, and doubly irresistible.

I've always defended this great vice unequivocally, but considering Monica's big adventure and several recent messes of my own, I'm starting to think that gossip may deserve its bad rep. Maybe gossip is like a car with the muffler torn out, bound to backfire sooner or later. I hate to admit it, but it may not even matter if the gossip means no harm or just feels like spouting off: getting busted with your mouth open can get you into some nasty crosshairs.

Take the dreaded e-mail crisis of this past February. There I was minding my own business at the

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the old cabal, our camaraderie strengthened by breaking the rules.

My old friend Robert, ever the voice of reason, reminds me that gossip can be a way of avoiding confrontation—even though he's the first person out of the gate with a good story. Barbara, my diurnally hip-attached gab sister, says that's exactly why we do it. "We barter confidence for acceptance to enhance our standing," she says. "Try having a conversation for ten minutes without gossiping. What would you talk about? Besides, it's so much easier to talk about other people than it is to be really present in the room with another human being."

That's an interesting point. It is easier to air someone else's dirty laundry than flash your own ragged britches. It's easy to fill a room with intimate-sounding chatter that's really a smoke screen. The other day I was talking about gossip and what to do about it with Stephen Batchelor, a no-nonsense Scotsman, ex-monk, and world-renowned scholar whose most recent book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* was my favorite 1997 read.

"Is it really that bad?" I asked.

He shrugged and bit into a chocolate. "Gossip cuts both ways," he said. "Provided there's no ill intent, it's a social lubricant. On the other hand, if you're using it to fill the gaps with white noise, cover the emptiness with distraction, it's unconstructive. And we *do* get a perverse enjoyment in other people's foibles and failings."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sure you don't," Stephen laughed. "The Tibetans say that gossip is the least negative of the unskilled forms of speech." In descending order of damage, he listed these as lying, calumny, abusive speech, and gossip. "In some ways, gossip can be the most detrimental to the practice of dharma because it's the biggest time waster of all. After all, when a person gossips, he's not meditating."

Oh brother, I thought, if that's the criterion for not wasting time

then my life's one long squirming mess. Even when I am meditating, half of the time is spent gossiping to myself, not to mention the gossip that goes into writing. Henry James described gossip as "the starting point of all literature." Human beings live by stories regardless of where they come from: stolen, eavesdropped, retold, filtered, whispered, written, even tape recorded. This primitive hunger for narration demands its daily pound of flesh. We are, after all, a yenta species, and the idea that gossip will ever stop is about as unlikely as Bill Clinton putting Crazy Glue on his fly.

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As for chatty Monica, time will tell where gossip landed her and her ex-boss. At press-time, it's refreshing to see that the scandal has boosted the White House's popularity among females (as Erica Jong says, women want their President "alive from the waist down," though male pollees have been less generous). Opening my American College Dictionary on a whim, I flip to gossip and find some irony. "A person," it reads, "*especially a woman* [italics mine], given to tattling or idle talk." What this sexist definition has to say about men and their mouths, I can't say for sure. As for gossip, the message seems clear. Stay unzipped.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is working on a sequel to his book *Sex Death Enlightenment*, to be published by Riverhead Books in 1999. He welcomes responses at MMATOUSEK@AOL.COM.

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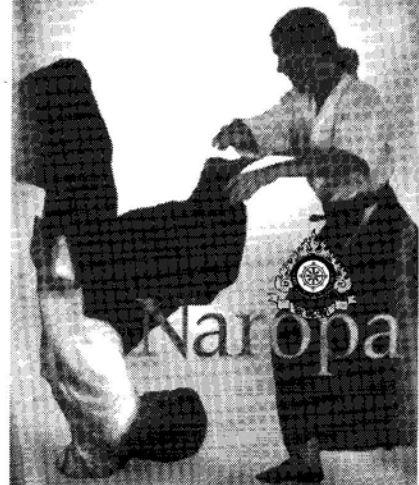
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