

Inquiring Minds Topic – 8 December 2017

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The Dying Art of Disagreement

Bret Stephens - *The New York Times*—from a lecture delivered at the Lowy Institute Media Award dinner, Sydney, Australia, September 23, 2017 (edited)

Thought starters:

- 1. Conviction can come from careful thinking or from not thinking at all. How do we examine our own convictions?**
- 2. We can be so closed-minded that no new idea can enter or so open-minded that our brains have fallen out. What are the problems with each extreme?**
- 3. Some people have their rebuttal ready before the other person finishes speaking. How can we learn to be respectful listeners?**
- 4. Who is more likely to blast the other person not for what he says but for who he is: the person secure in his own thinking or the insecure person?**
- 5. What can I do to change the tenor of dialogue among the people I know best?**

“The Dying Art of Disagreement” is a subject that is dear to me because it is the most vital ingredient of any decent society. To say the words, “I agree,” whether it’s agreeing to join an organization, or submit to a political authority, or subscribe to a religious faith, may be the basis of every community.

But to say, I disagree; I refuse; you’re wrong; are the words that define our individuality, give us our freedom, enjoin our tolerance, enlarge our perspectives, seize our attention, energize our progress, make our democracies real, and give hope and courage to oppressed people everywhere.

The problem is, we are failing at the task. Americans have rarely disagreed more. We disagree about racial issues, bathroom policies, health care laws, and the 45th president. We express our disagreements in radio and cable TV rants in ways that are increasingly virulent; street and campus protests that are increasingly violent; and personal conversations that are increasingly embittering. We judge each other morally depending on where we stand politically.

The polarization is electronic and digital, as Americans increasingly inhabit the filter bubbles of news and social media that correspond to their ideological affinities. We no longer just have our own opinions; we also have our separate “facts.”

It’s usually the case that the more we do something, the better we are at it. Instead, we’re like the Casanovas in reverse: the more we do it, the worse we are at it. Our disagreements may frequently hoarsen our voice, but they rarely sharpen our thinking, much less change our minds.

To listen and understand; to question and disagree; to treat no proposition as sacred and no objection as impious; to be willing to entertain unpopular ideas and cultivate the habits of an open mind is what I was encouraged to do by my university teachers thirty years ago. It's what used to be called a liberal education. We learned that every great idea is really just a spectacular disagreement with some other great idea.

These quarrels are never based on misunderstanding. On the contrary, the disagreements arise from perfect comprehension; from having chewed over the ideas of your intellectual opponent so thoroughly that you can properly spit them out.

In other words, to disagree well, you must first understand well. You have to read deeply, listen carefully and watch closely. You need to grant your adversary moral respect; give him the intellectual benefit of doubt; have sympathy for his motives and participate emphatically with his line of reasoning. And you need to allow for the possibility that you might yet be persuaded of what he has to say.

To sustain liberal democracy you need liberally-educated people. For free societies to function, the idea of open-mindedness can't simply be a catchphrase or a dogma. It needs to be a personal habit.

Today there is a belief that since words can cause stress, and stress can have physiological effects, stressful words are tantamount to a form of violence. This is the age of protected feelings purchased at the cost of permanent infantilization. In recent years, identity politics have become the moated castles from which we safeguard our feelings from hurt and our opinions from challenge. It is our "safe space." But it is a safe space of a uniquely pernicious kind—a safe space from thought, rather than a safe space for thought.

Another consequence of identity politics is that it has made the distance between making an argument and causing offense terrifyingly short. Any argument that can be cast as insensitive or offensive to a given group of people isn't treated as being merely wrong. Instead it is seen as immoral, and therefore unworthy of discussion or rebuttal.

The result is that the disagreements we need to have are banished from the public square before they're settled. People who might otherwise join a conversation to see where it might lead them choose instead to shrink from it lest they say the wrong thing and be accused of some kind of political -ism or phobia. For fear of causing offense, they forego the opportunity to be persuaded.

So here's where we stand. Intelligent disagreement is the lifeblood of any thriving society. Yet we in the United States are raising a younger generation who have never been taught either the how or the why of disagreement and who seem to think that free speech is a one-way right. Namely, their right to disinvite, shout down or abuse anyone they dislike lest they run the risk of listening to that person, or even allowing someone else to listen. The results are evident in the state of our universities and the frayed edges of our democracy.