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Faculty Essay: On Civility

Nicholas Buccola
Linfield College

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FACULTY ESSAY:

Our collective imagination is presently being held captive by a politics of name-calling, bullying and fear-mongering. We seem to be on the precipice of forgetting some elementary things about how to speak and how to listen.



Nicholas Buccola
Professor of political science

On civility

The life of our republic depends upon our ability to speak honestly and our willingness to listen empathetically. As that idea traveled from my head down to my pen, it felt embarrassingly grandiose. But I think it's true. These habits of mind are two crucial ingredients in the moral glue that holds a healthy political culture together. The development of these abilities, at the heart of "civil discourse" properly understood, is no easy task, but it is one we are duty-bound to undertake.

The idea of "civil discourse" is essentially contested and contestable. Its very meaning is contested due to disagreements over what it means to be civil and what qualifies as discourse. The idea is contestable in the sense that while many defend it as a worthwhile norm for a political community, there are others who point out that it can be used to inhibit the ability of marginalized people to state legitimate grievances against the powerful. "Civil" or "civility," this argument goes, are often code words meant to keep discourse within bounds deemed reasonable by those in charge.

Rather than attempting to traverse the treacherous terrain of existing debates over the nature and value of civility as a moral and political virtue, it's worthwhile to take a step back and try to define civil discourse on our own terms. At its core, the phrase is getting at something simultaneously simple and enormously complex: how do we think we ought to communicate with each

other (discourse) as members of a community (civitas)? Put another way: What norms of communication promote our flourishing as individuals and as communities?

These are questions we must answer together as members of the communities we inhabit, but in order to move the conversation forward I would like to expand on a few thoughts introduced at the outset of this essay.

First, I cannot understate the importance of the task before us. Conversation, in the words of the scholar Sherry Turkle, "is the most human – and humanizing – thing we do." If Turkle is right – and I think she is – then we live in times when the forces of inhumanity are ascendant. Our collective imagination is presently being held captive by a politics of name-calling, bullying and fear-mongering. We seem to be at the precipice of forgetting some elementary things about how to speak and how to listen. The fabric of our political culture seems to be unraveling before our eyes. It is incumbent on each of us to do what we can to hold it together and mend what has been torn asunder.

Second, two habits of mind are vital to the task before us: the ability to speak honestly and the willingness to listen empathetically. Consider the example of James Baldwin, the novelist/playwright/essayist/activist who Malcolm X aptly called "the poet" of the civil rights revolution. Baldwin was a master of speaking honestly, even



Nicholas Buccola, professor of political science, stresses the importance of both honest conversation and a willingness to listen in his classes at Linfield College.

when it made others uncomfortable. Baldwin was willing to engage in conversations with just about anybody, including those whose views he found repulsive. But when he engaged in these conversations, he spoke his mind with brutal honesty. There are many legendary moments when Baldwin – in public and private settings – subjected his listeners to withering torrents of words about some moral, artistic or political topic. While it mustn't have been pleasant to be on the receiving end of these torrents, Baldwin was committed to speaking the truth as he saw it, even to those who did not want to hear it.

This brings me to the other habit of mind that is essential to civil discourse: we must be willing to listen with empathy. Baldwin engaged in conversations with some nasty characters, perhaps none nastier than James Jackson Kilpatrick, a man whose biographer aptly dubbed him the country's leading "salesman for segregation." When Baldwin appeared on television with Kilpatrick in 1962, he let the segregationist spout his nonsense and, here's the important part, he listened to what Kilpatrick was saying and tried to understand why he said it. In conversations like this one and in his writing, Baldwin displayed an almost super-human ability to try to put himself in the shoes of "the other" – even segregationist "others" – and to under-

stand what the world might look like through his eyes.

It is important to note that listening to others does not require that you agree with them or concede that their point of view is valid. Indeed, the Baldwin-Kilpatrick example reveals that just the opposite might be true. After Baldwin listened to what Kilpatrick had to say, he spoke honestly about the utter wrongness and vileness of the segregationist's views and he pressed Kilpatrick to come to terms with the psychological insecurities animating his racist politics.

As we reflect in our communities – on campus and in the political culture generally – about what sort of discourse we think might be conducive to our flourishing, we would do well to remember the example of James Baldwin, who spoke honestly, listened with empathy, and expected others to do the same.

– *Nicholas Buccola*

Nicholas Buccola is professor of political science and director of the Frederick Douglass Forum on Law, Rights and Justice. His fourth book, The Radical and the Conservative: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the American Dream, will be published by Princeton University Press later this year.