Faculty Essay: On Civility

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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. As in 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 on 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...
when it made others uncomfortable. Baldwin was willing to engage in conversations with just about anybody, including those whose views he found repugnant. 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 wasn’t always pleasant to be on the receiving end of these torrents, Baldwin was committed to speaking 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 wasn’t always pleasant to be on the receiving end of these torrents, Baldwin was committed to speaking his mind with brutal honesty.

This brings me to the other habit of mind that is essential to civil discourse: we must be willing to listen with empathy, and expected others to do the same. 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 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.

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

Debate students have a lesson for the rest of us

“If you’re going to be good at debate, the single most important skill you have to develop is good listening.”
— Jackson Miller, associate dean of faculty and professor of communication arts

R esolved: That the cow is more useful than the horse.

That, laughs Jackson Miller, Linfield’s associate dean of faculty and a professor of communication arts, is one of the earliest examples he’s been able to find of a topic that was debated at Linfield College. It was argued as part of a speech and debate program on campus in September 1896.

“It wasn’t, however, a critically important issue. “The momentous question,” miffed Roy Mahaffey ’28, pioneer of forensics education and Linfield professor, in a 1956 book commemorating Linfield’s centenary, “clearly showed that college students... were just as inclined to frivolity as those of the present day.”

In addition to teaching debate and forensics at Linfield, Miller has led courses for inmates at the Oregon State Penitentiary and presents debate workshops around the world in places like China, Guatemala, Mexico and Turkey. He believes the listening skills, critical thinking and formulation of arguments required in collegiate debate are increasingly important at a time when the scope of debate motions has widened considerably. Topics now include whether climate change is a greater threat to national security than terrorism; forced child marriage in the United States; and Facebook’s effect on society.

Members of the Linfield debate team in December went to the 2018 World University Debate Championship in Mexico City, where they explored topics as varied as time limits for museums to display works of art, the prohibition of out-of-court settlements for workplace discrimination and whether to support job-security legislation.

Tomeka Robinson, associate professor and the director of forensics at Hofstra University, is also the president of the Pi Kappa Delta National Forensics Honoratory Association. She says it’s important for students to ponder a wide variety of issues, and to research the pros and cons of each.

“One of the things students have to learn is to argue both sides,” she says. “You can have more civil and informed dialogue with this skill set.”

Diana Vazquez Duque ’19, a member of Linfield’s debate team, agrees. “If we want future generations of students to see beyond the haze of 24-hour news pandemonium and to use critical thinking to get to the heart of what’s important, if we want them to go beyond participating in a conversation to actually raising the level of national discourse... we had better start teaching them the means to do so,” he says.

Linfield has long been a place where debate education flourished. In the 86 years the college has held the Mahaffey Memorial Forensics Tournament — one of the nation’s longest continuous “streaks” for hosting an inter-collegiate speech and debate competition — the scope of debate motions has widened considerably.

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