

## CULTURE

# Why You Should Stop Trying To Change People's Minds

*Today on our televisions, radios, and social media the take-all approach dominates. There is very little room for synthesis, a moment that requires intellectual clarity.*

---

Recently I posted the following question on my Facebook page: "Are you actually interested in opinions you disagree with?" The answers began to pop up and, given the bipartisan nature of my Facebook page, they were from a mix of friends on the Left and the Right.

Every answer started with "Yes," but almost all, from both sides, contained caveats. Some said the person they disagree with must accept facts and science, some said he must be open to new ideas, some said he must not offend.

After a few dozen of these responses, my friend Jess chimed in with a very important point. She noticed that what tied these "Yes, but," answers together was a requirement that the person offering the opinion be persuadable. She suggested this is a poor standard upon which to limit one's discourse, and it seems to me she is exactly right.

## An Old Debate

A major problem with valuing discourse on the basis of persuadability is that it makes all of our conversations and consumption of ideas transactional. We are only listening with the intent of finding flaws we can use to prove the truth of our own perspective. But this assumes discourse is a zero-sum game, that eventually one idea will win and one will lose. While sometimes this is true—the earth is round, for example—the vast majority of the time it is not.

In a sense, this demand for efficacy and admission of error from my Facebook buddies stretches back to Plato. Socratic dialogue establishes a dialectic in which the great philosopher does indeed correct and change the minds of his interlocutors. But much more recently, in the late eighteenth century, G.W.F. Hegel discovered a fundamental flaw in Plato's approach. In most discourse, he argued, one idea doesn't banish its opposite, but together they form a new idea.

Hegel described his new dialectic in terms of a thesis (original idea), antithesis (argument against that idea), and finally a synthesis (a new idea that emerges). Today on our televisions, radios, and social media Plato's winner-take-all approach dominates. There is very little room for synthesis, a moment that requires intellectual clarity, rather than emotional bombast.

## Just Listen

For discourse to achieve synthesis, we must listen to the arguments those we disagree with make, not with the intent to knock them down, but to understand them. Too often, the first arrow we pull from our rhetorical quiver targets the reasons the idea is wrong based on our own understanding. A better, though much more difficult, approach is to use our questions to determine if the argument is intellectually consistent, given the worldview of the person we are listening to.

A tremendous example of such a dialogue can be found in our nation's early history. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson founded a country together, became bitter political enemies, and finally for 13 years at the end of their lives wrote each other letters, often with great affection. The purpose of the correspondence was not to change the other's mind, but to understand it. Adams, for example, would never agree that Jefferson's edited Bible was a better foundation for political thought than the traditional Christian text, but he wanted to hear his friend out regarding it.

In an important sense, the synthesis of this correspondence is the correspondence itself, and the immeasurable value it has had to historians and statesmen in the two centuries since. Insisting that discourse and disagreement should only take place when both sides are willing to abandon their own ideas and worldview robs us of the open- and high-mindedness exhibited by our second and third presidents.

Most, if not all, people hold dear and unshakable ideas that other people disagree with. In the vast majority of cases, the pro-life Catholic and the Planned Parenthood pro-choicer will never convince the other to change. But does this mean there is no value in a good-faith, open hearing of why someone thinks so differently from another? No.

A pro-lifer may hear the other side and come to greater understanding about the difficulties of unwanted pregnancies, and her and society's responsibilities should those pregnancies be forced to term. The pro-choicer may come to see abortion can have a

terrible toll, and think more about limiting rather than celebrating it. Nobody wins the argument, but even if no compromise is reached, everyone's understanding of the issue is elevated.

## Assume Good Faith

The key to moving away from persuadability as prerequisite in discourse is to operate in, and assume in others, good faith. Good faith does not mean that people are convincible, it means that each is arguing with the intent of honestly explaining themselves, not picking and choosing what they say in hopes of winning.

Do not assume that the person who wants to tear down the Confederate statue is really using it as a pretext to some broader political goal. Do not assume that the person who wants to protect the statue is really motivated by racism. Allow the person you are talking with to elucidate his or her ideas based on his or her own understanding, not on yours. Often when we do this blinders fall away, and we see all sides as part of a broader universe of phenomenon.

Conditions are not ripe for this kind of change in the nature of our discourse. It doesn't help that all of us walk around with encyclopedias in our pockets. At any moment everyone on every side of every issue can summon statistics, opinions, and quotes. These materials too often take the place of actual dialogue. This is not to say that facts don't matter, but rather that they can stand in the way of expressing our personal ideas to each other. Instead of reaching into our souls for replies, we reach into Google's library of Babel to defend, not explain, our ideas.

## This Will Be Hard

Changing our first impulse toward ideas we disagree with from incredulity and opportunity for attack to a desire to understand the idea as completely as we can will not be easy. As anyone who follows me on Twitter knows, I am not always exactly a paragon of virtue in this regard. But perhaps a start is to realize when we are doing it, instead of just doing it out of habit.

The people we disagree with do not exist for us to foist our opinions upon and change. They are an opportunity for us to better explore our own ideas. We certainly can and

should choose wisely with whom we engage. But the standard should be the amount of understanding they can help bring, not whether one day they might agree with you.

*David Marcus is a senior contributor to the Federalist and the Artistic Director of Blue Box World, a Brooklyn based theater project. Follow him on Twitter, @BlueBoxDave.*

Copyright © 2017 The Federalist, a wholly independent division of FDRLST Media, All Rights Reserved.

---