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Last Word: The Lost Art of Disagreeing

By Allan Carey

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We used to be able to talk to one another, even about politics, and enjoy ourselves. In fact, in the far distant shadows of human history that was 2016, a majority of people found conversations with people they disagreed with ideologically to be “informative and interesting,” according to research from the Pew Research Center. Now? Six in ten describe those conversations as “stressful or irritating,” if they even have them at all.

So, how do we return to those days when civil discourse was the norm and not the exception?

The Cato Institute’s Sphere Education Initiatives, which I have the pleasure of leading, has worked with more than 10,000 teachers in the past five years, building the habits of civil discourse, promoting free speech, and engaging constructively with diverse viewpoints in our nation’s schools. The rampant polarization and tribalism we see in society at large are just as prevalent in our K–12 classrooms—by the time they are 11 years old, children are now just as polarized as adults, according to a recent study by Stanford University researchers. Here are a few tips and tricks we’ve learned about how to have productive conversations with those you disagree with. These might be especially helpful this holiday season.

Begin from a place of curiosity. If you start by assuming good intent on the part of your conversation partner, and show genuine interest in learning from them, you’re a lot more likely to have a civil conversation. The more you wonder about who they are and how they came to believe what they do, the easier it is to show genuine curiosity.

Show that you’ve heard and respect the other person. You need not respect the ideas shared or the arguments being made, but you can and should still respect the person making them. Polarization gets the better

Find points of common ground. Most Americans still agree on a lot more than they disagree on and tend to be wildly mistaken about what those with different ideological perspectives actually believe. Avoid the tendency to begin responses with “no” or “but” and instead highlight where you agree through “yes, and” statements. This shows that you’ve been listening and is a nonconfrontational way to add context or points of disagreement. It’s easy for the temperature of a conversation to get too hot. This helps keep it cool.

We can all benefit from keeping in mind the wise words of John Stuart Mill, who in *On Liberty* wrote, “He who knows only his side of the case knows little of that.” If we take the time to learn the other side of the case as someone else sees it, we’re all the more likely to have civil—perhaps even enjoyable—conversations with those with whom we disagree. And just maybe, we’ll learn something along the way. ♦

“Polarization gets the better of us when we lose sight of the humanity of others.”

of us when we lose sight of the humanity of others. Try stating back a summary of what you’ve heard—something like, “What I hear you saying is _____. Is that right?” Or, before sharing your way of thinking, pick something you want to hear more about and use phrases like, “Tell me more.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allan Carey is the director of Sphere Education Initiatives at the Cato Institute, where he leads the organization’s efforts to engage grade 5–12 educators on civics education, civil discourse, and the institutions of civic culture.