Civil Discourse in a Divided America
By Scott Gelfand | Summer 2013 | Vol. 6, Issue No. 2

For Discussion
1. How would you define “civil discourse”? What atmosphere, ethics, ideals, etc. are necessary to achieve civil discourse?
2. What were your views on affirmative action before reading Scott Gelfand’s article? Did his presentation of arguments change your thinking? Did he convince you that people on both sides of an issue can embrace the same moral principles?
3. Discuss other actions in our country’s history that state and federal government have taken to serve “the common good.” What were the long-term results of those actions?

EXTRA! Reading
• Peter Gilbert, “Doubt and Conviction,” I Was Thinking ... Travels in the World of Ideas (Wind Ridge Publishing, 2012). The author has generously provided free access to this essay [attached below].
• Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg, Eds., Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). Contributors consider whether rationality is the best standard for public discussion and argument, and isolate features that characterize an exemplary, more productive public discourse. Examines why public conversations work when they work well, and why they often fail when we need them the most.
• Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience.” EDSITEment (www.edsitement.neh.gov) has selected excerpts from “Civil Disobedience” and discussion questions to guide readers through Thoreau’s arguments. (http://edsitement.neh.gov/launchpad-henry-david-thoreaus-essay-civil-disobedience)

EXTRA! Links
• Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (http://icdd.k-state.edu/primarytexts): Primary Texts page links to texts from political leaders, authors, and philosophers collected for the Institute’s class entitled Dialogue on Democracy.
• FREEDOM.OU.EDU: website of the Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage at the University of Oklahoma. Freedom 101 is an ongoing series of video explorations into American constitutional law and history. In Episode 4: Equal Protection: Affirmative Action, Dr. Lindsay Roberts explains the recent history of the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause as it applies to affirmative action. (http://freedom.ou.edu/lindsay-robertson-equal-protection-affirmative-action/)
• Teaching Tolerance: “Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond.” Activities, worksheets, and readings explore dissent, discussion, and debate. Teaches students to turn unsubstantiated opinions into reasoned arguments and how to apply these skills in a variety of situations. Meets language arts, social studies, and life skills standards. PDF booklet may be downloaded. (http://www.tolerance.org/publication/civil-discourse-classroom)
• National Issues Forums (http://www.nifi.org/educators/index.aspx): Under the “Educators” tab you’ll find free readings, PowerPoint presentations, discussion questions, and lesson plans. Resources are equally relevant for community adult discussions and classroom use. Topics include: how to convene and moderate forums, and how to frame issues for productive civil discourse. Specific issues include: (1) “Working Through Difficult Decisions”; (2) “God and the Commons: Does Religion Matter,” which discusses the role of religion in public life; and (3) “Slavery or Freedom Forever: An Historical Issue Framing,” which illustrates the deliberative process using the frame of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which determined the fate of slavery in U.S. territories.

• PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization): Links to videos, radio podcasts, and readings on philosophy, ethics, and issues. (http://plato-apa.org/)

EXTRA! FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Doubt and Conviction
By Peter Gilbert

The critical balance between conviction and doubt in today’s volatile world

The intolerance of extremism is running rampant. It’s not just Al Qaeda. It’s murders of doctors at abortion clinics. It’s Timothy McVeigh, who saw himself as a modern-day John Brown and thought his attack on the Federal Building in Oklahoma City would inspire others to do likewise. It’s in the Middle East, and so many other places. You can see it in the total confidence that some people at both extremes of political or ideological spectrums have in the rightness of their views, confidence that can become self-righteousness. Perhaps it was ever thus.

Robert F. Kennedy observed that “[w]hat is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme but that they are intolerant.” That dangerous intolerance comes from their utter confidence in their means and ends.

In May of 1944, in the midst of World War II, New York City celebrated “I am an American Day” with speeches in Central Park. One speaker was Judge Learned Hand, a jurist so eminent that many called him the tenth Supreme Court Justice. He said, “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women … which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias …”

How do we teach our children to have the courage of their convictions on the one hand, and, at the same time, to keep open to the possibility that they may be wrong? That is a difficult, even metaphysical, challenge.

You see that mindset in Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was deeply, profoundly convinced that slavery was wrong and that the Union must be saved, and he gave his all for the cause. And yet he knew that the South, too, saw its cause as right. He does not judge the South. “It may seem strange,” Lincoln observed in his second inaugural address, “that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.”

Despite this uncertainty, Lincoln concludes that the North should pursue the war to a successful conclusion: “[W]ith firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in....” Lincoln was a great president and great man because while wholly dedicated to his cause, he retained his humility.

The real world is not an ivory tower ethics seminar; it requires decisions—actions and reactions—often when there are no good choices. The challenge is to act out of one’s deeply held convictions but not to lose that speck of humility—of doubt—that checks our intolerance, keeps us open to others’ points of view, deters us from dehumanizing our enemies, and guards us against overstepping.


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