Persuasion as the Cure for Incivility

What if, instead of demonizing opponents, we took steps to persuade them?

By JOHN I. JENKINS

Several decades ago, my predecessor as the president of the University of Notre Dame, the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, was presented with a dilemma. A Jewish student, after repeated hazing by some kids in his dorm, had left campus and gone home. After thinking it over, Father Hesburgh summoned the perpetrators. "Pack your bags," he told them. "Go find your friend. Either you persuade him to come back to Notre Dame, or you don't come back."

The approach worked for everyone concerned, and it may offer an idea for easing the incivility that marks much public discourse and leads to political stalemate. We need to try harder to persuade one another—to try to get people to change their minds.

There isn't nearly enough persuasion going on in America today, and there was too little, in the view of many citizens, in the past presidential campaign. A postelection Pew poll found that the 2012 campaign was a "frustrating experience" for many voters: 68% said there was more "negative campaigning and mudslinging," with less discussion of issues.

The recent fiscal-cliff negotiations might have ended in a budget deal, but the rhetoric during the wrangling was hardly of the persuasive variety.

That is likely because much of the election campaigning and much of the budget discussion wasn't designed to change anyone's mind, but instead to encourage people to believe more deeply what they already believed—not about policies, for the most part, but about the villainy of the other side.
In the presidential campaign, the negative ads and speeches may have been unfortunately effective. A Washington Post-ABC News poll from last summer reported that 70% of Republicans saw President Obama in a strongly unfavorable light, and 57% of Democrats had a very unfavorable view of Gov. Romney. These were historically very high numbers for two presidential contenders.

As a country, we seem to have become the factions James Madison warned against in 1787, when he wrote: "A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points . . . have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good." A more earnest effort to persuade one another could help remedy many of the problems we face.

I confess that I am deeply biased. I am a university president with a strong belief in the power and importance of a liberal arts education. I believe that deep and candid dialogue, marked by many acts of courtesy and gestures of respect, is a discipline that brings us nearer the truth about ourselves, about our opponents, about human nature, and about the subject under debate. To shut down this source of wisdom because we are too angry to hear the other side is a tragic setback in our quest for knowledge and our hope for a healthy society.

What if, instead of dealing with opponents by demonizing them and distorting their views, we were to take some steps to persuade them? I don't mean to suggest that one could persuade a stalwart partisan to switch parties, but perhaps one could persuade another that a particular policy or a position is "not as bad as you think."

If I am trying to persuade others, I first have to understand their position, which means I have to listen to them. I have to appeal to their values, which means I have to show them respect. I have to find the best arguments for my position, which means I have to think about my values in the context of their concerns. I have to answer their objections, which means I have to work honestly with their ideas. I have to ask them to listen to me, which means I can't insult them.
If we earnestly try to persuade, civility takes care of itself.

Civility is sometimes derided in the modern world, where bluntness and even coarseness have somehow come to be celebrated in many quarters. But civility is not a minor virtue. It is not an attempt to impose someone's notion of courtesy, and it is certainly not an attempt to suppress speech. Civility is what allows speech to be heard. It is an appeal to citizens never to express or incite hatred, which is more dangerous to the country than any external enemy.

A more sincere effort to persuade one another would remind us why the Founders believed this country could improve on history: We were the first society in many centuries with the chance to use free speech and sound argument to debate our way toward a better future.

That path is still open, and as promising as ever.

*Father Jenkins is president of the University of Notre Dame. His book "Conviction: The Power and Peril of Our Passionate Beliefs" will be published by Random House later this year.*

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