

Our Civil Disagreement



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I'll breeze right past the fact that the heaviest mail day of my career as a newspaper columnist came when I announced the *end* of that career. What I want to think about instead is something that is enormously flattering and still a little mysterious.

The dominant theme of the letter writers was that they appreciate my attempt at balance and fairness and, most of all, thoughtfulness. Listen to one letter I've just opened from a "white, more-or-less conservative Republican":

"You may well imagine that we will at some times differ. But it is because of your clear and cogent explanations of your viewpoints that I am able to understand why some people hold opinions and values different from my own, and how their experiences have produced what seems to them reasonable beliefs.

"Because you do this, and do not simply rant at me . . . I can appreciate and understand and respect those ideas, even when I do not agree with them. And it does happen, rather often actually, that you convince me that I don't know what I am talking about and that yours is the correct understanding."

Well, wow! Scores of readers have told me—not always as eloquently as this—that they like reading my work because I come across as someone they can talk to, even in disagreement, and that they appreciate my rejection of the forced conclusion or (usually) the cheap shot at those who disagree.

And I find myself actually liking the person they describe, while also remembering that I once enjoyed delivering the hard zinger. What happened? Did I grow up? Did age mellow me out? Have I lost a certain zest for combat?

It may have started when I found myself liking less and less the sharp exchanges between political combatants. Remember when James J. Kilpatrick and Shana Alexander used to go at it on "60 Minutes"? I loved it for a time, then found it less and less helpful. So decades before the open warfare that now passes as political debate on cable TV, I was already tiring of commentators who were content to preach only to their choirs.

But something else was happening at the same time. I was becoming more and more convinced that the sharp debates and exaggerated differences were exacerbating the political division I find so dangerous in America, and I was also starting to imagine—conceit?—that talking about issues might actually make a positive difference, might move us an inch or two nearer common ground.

Perhaps it was then that I found myself trying to write in such a way that people who didn't agree with me might at least hear me. Then I found that they were talking back to me in similarly civil tones. And it felt good.

It reminded me of something a wise divinity professor once said. If *you* are having an argument with some "enemy," he advised, try to reword his position in a way that would make it at least palatable to you. Then invite him to do the same thing with *your* position. You won't appreciate the dispute-melting magic in that until you try it a few times.

The trouble, of course, is that such an approach is unlikely to produce winners and losers, and we've come to think that producing winners and losers is the essence not just of politics but also of life.

It isn't. Making this country work for everybody is, and it would be a good thing if all of us—journalists emphatically included—remembered that.

What has made this a little easier for me is a discovery I've mentioned before: that in virtually every public controversy, most thoughtful people secretly believe both sides. I know I do. But the fact that I am unalterably both pro-life and pro-choice keeps me from savaging thoughtful advocates of either view. (I still retain my license to savage anyone who insists on putting horror masks on people whose opinions they don't like.)

Can it be that trying to see the other guy's side simply takes too much of our time and energy? Sometimes I suspect that the desire to savage rather than convince an opponent stems from the nagging suspicion that just maybe we are on the wrong side of the logic. I mean, if you are convinced that your position is the correct one, why wouldn't you want to examine it and explain it in a way that might win a convert or two? Isn't that what this column-writing business is supposed to be about?