

civility

CIVILITY (2015 Essay)

Oscar Wilde called democracy "***the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people.***" I often find it hard to disagree with his appraisal. American politics is not a game for the squeamish or tender-hearted. At best, it can be a punishing marathon, demanding untapped reserves of stamina, the hide density of a rhinoceros and an ego the size of Mount Rushmore. At worst, it becomes a scorched-earth, winner-take-all affair, justifying whatever means necessary to "win."

More often than not, politics brings our basest, primal qualities bubbling to the surface. Campaigns devolve into bare-knuckle, pugilistic contests, fueled by tribal emotions, suspect cash, outright lies and bucket-loads of quid pro quo. Not so long ago (that is, in the vast scheme of things), Abe Lincoln tried to raise the level of our debate, appealing to "***the better angels of our nature.***" Evidently, those angels are on an extended sabbatical. Where have they gone? And, why on earth would anyone willingly choose to enter politics? In answer, I quote another feisty progressive, Theodore Roosevelt:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

A few years ago, some folks in Fountain Hills, Arizona asked me to run for mayor. I thanked them for their votes of confidence and I declined. I don't have the personality for the job, and I wouldn't ask my family to run the gauntlet I've just described. But I wasn't entirely happy with my answer. I felt guilty. I was concerned that our families and children were underserved by our town's government. They were neglected because they were not being heard. Other, more strident voices prevailed because their squeaky wheels were noisier and better aligned than ours. As a local businessman, a family man and an avowed progressive thinker, I felt obligated to act.

At first, I agreed to work as communications director for the fellow who seemed to me the most empathetic and able candidate of that year's crop. Soon after, when the campaign's manager bowed out for reasons of health, I assumed that role. My friends shook their heads and started writing eulogies. My candidate was a Democrat, and I was a progressive Independent in the most staunchly conservative bastion in the county. Why joust at windmills? I answered my friends' concerns, insisting that I didn't care about party affiliation. Naively perhaps, I thought party politics at this level was not a critical concern, just so many stodgy labels and tired old perceptions. I was dead wrong—partisanship was alive and well in our little town, virulently so.

In truth, it became the defining challenge of our campaign. Personal ideologies and private grudges had polarized constituent groups within our community and paralyzed civil discourse. Town Council meetings, letters to the editor in our local newspaper, hundreds of hyperbolic emails, even the sideline banter at our kids' soccer games—all had deteriorated into embarrassing and futile screaming matches. Stereotypes ran rampant. Before they could rehearse their talking points, candidates were automatically labeled as standard bearers for one or more irreconcilable factions. "Experts" and armchair quarterbacks bristled on every street corner and in every Internet blog. The real work of local government was being hamstrung by disruptive, partisan bickering and narrow, litmus-test disputes. I was uninitiated in this nasty pettifoggery and woefully unprepared. It was a daunting challenge. Many would have said "impossible." Still, I made the deliberate choice to act as if it wasn't hopeless at all. I asked my team to do the same.

We decided to believe that grown adults could actually debate the facts of an issue—without recourse to flim-flam, brawling or coercion. We refused to play with stereotypes and we conscientiously changed the debate and focused it on verifiable facts. When slapped down by our detractors, we got back up, turned our rosy cheeks and made our case succinctly and vigorously. When we made mistakes, we apologized, made amends and learned. We had confidence in our cause and our command of the facts. We trusted that government, and even politics, could serve the needs of all the people, not just the privileged few. We risked everything on a fundamental faith in the intelligence of the electorate and the deliberative, methodical power of dialogue. Imagine that . . .

Dialogue. Compromise. Consistency. Integrity. Decency. Truth.

These were the engines of our campaign. For long months, whether our fortunes seemed flush or failing, we stayed on theme and remained equal-opportunity idealists. Everything we did—every article, advertisement and Op-Ed, every town hall debate and coffee with the candidate—had to pass our Gandhi test: ***"Be the change you want to see."*** We didn't proselytize. We let our actions speak. If a strategy passed muster, we went for it whole hog. If not, we regrouped, recalibrated and tried again. We welcomed all supporters, cab drivers and corporate executives, homemakers and hucksters and happy millionaires. We looked for areas of agreement to cement relationships, not points of contention or easy targets to score against. Happily, we found many friends, sometimes when least expected and in the oddest places.

As the campaign came to a close, our "act as if" faith had gone viral. Lots of folks were beginning to believe in new possibilities. I believe we struck a common chord of decency or, at least, objectivity. When all was said and done, we won that election with the largest majority in our town's history. Yes, we were then and still are a small town—a Petri dish just big enough to test such outlandish theories. Still, we surprised everyone. We demonstrated that, not only was civility in politics possible, it was actually advantageous and effective. Nice guys can, in fact, finish first.

(If you followed that campaign years ago, you already know that this narrative is about both victory and defeat. Our record-breaking win was later overturned by a recall election that removed our candidate from office. Ho-hum. So it goes. Is this a cautionary tale? A fable with a muddled moral? Perhaps. I still choose hope over cynicism, still believe that facts matter and that, even in politics, the possibilities for change are limitless. And—for one, brief, shining moment—truth and civility prevailed.)

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