

Educationally Speaking...

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The other day, deciding it was a good idea to waste some of the precious time the Almighty had provided me here on earth, I sat down and clicked on the television. A network moderator was interviewing two commentators on a political controversy by asking each of them highly specific questions, alternating between the two. The first commentator up to bat completely ignored the actual question posed to her and responded apparently to the voices in her head which asked one much friendlier to her position. I wondered: is she suffering from some unknown form of mental illness, political schizophrenia perhaps?

Apparently it was contagious because the second commentator did the very same thing with the question posed to him. Without even a segue like, "Well, Bob, before I get to the subject of your inquiry, let me take just a moment to...", he was off to the races answering the question the disembodied voices populating his cranium had asked. He also threw in any number of logical fallacies, mischaracterizing his opponent's position with a straw man, and launching ad hominem attacks against her and her position's supporters, among others.

Not to be outdone, his opponent, the first commentator, re-responded with a flurry of ad hominem attacks of her own (some sufficiently vile that I found myself preferring the personal attacks Dan Aykroyd used to fling at Jane Curtin on the old *Saturday Night Live* debate parodies), as well as spectacular uses of the reduction ad absurdum and argumentum ad ignorantiam fallacies. In defense of both speakers, though, it is possible both were simply saying whatever they felt might sound persuasive given that in their minds the ends justify the means. It is also quite possible that they were unaware of the levels of deception to which they had stooped. Fish it is said are oblivious to the water in which they are immersed.

Can this really be the level of discourse to which we have descended in our nation? If so, what is the solution? How do we return to a level at which such discussions are actually part of the solution rather than part of the problem?

You could have seen that solution in action just last month in the form of Mitchell High School's McGovern Debate Tournament. If you've never actually witnessed a debate tournament, they are worth a visit for any number of reasons. At them, you can see high school students dressed in entirely professional attire. Three-piece suits and tailored dresses are the order of the day with not a dungaree in sight. Extemporaneous and related speakers monopolize every lineal foot of hallway wall where they project their arguments towards lockers, trophy cases, and bulletin boards, unperturbed by the odd spectacle they present to the uninitiated. Young people who can seemingly manage nothing more than a barely audible 'fine' or 'nothing' in response to the most open-ended questions from parents suddenly burst into oratorical fire at a debate tournament, speaking with precise diction, flawless elocution, and rates of the spoken word which make those legal disavowals at the end of commercials seem positively drawl-ish.

All of which is neither here nor there. But what is very much on point can be found, among other forensic competitions, in the team policy debate sessions. It is in these events where two teams of advocates agree on the terms of a controversial resolution, eschew logical fallacies, launch actual evidence and data to prove their point, give the assumption to the status quo where it properly belongs unless the side advocating for change can demonstrate a

compelling harm in that status quo, and respond through the Q & A sessions to the actual questions asked. A team debate round when peopled by high schoolers well trained in the craft is a thing of beauty, an aggressively pursued fencing match using words rather than weapons, reason instead of rapiers.

But it is more than that. It is a process of rational discourse in which neither appealing to emotions nor raising one's voice nor interrupting your opponent nor sinking more quickly to the lowest level of attack nor brandishing every logical fallacy known to humanity, will win the day. It is a place of logical reasoning, of obeying the once shared rules of civil discourse, of finding the best evidence and utilizing it for precisely the right purpose at precisely the right time. It is a process of sifting out the bad from the good and reaching the best possible solution to the controversy at hand.

And it is an event at the end of which the two debaters from each side reach across the podium that separates the one from the other to shake hands and to recognize not just the time and effort and skill brought to bear by their opponents but also to esteem the fact that the fight just concluded was properly and, thereby, even gallantly, waged.

How much could we learn from a high school debate team.