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Christian Martine: On civility, doubting our own infallibility

By Christian Martine Mar 16, 2019

Today's political environment has become increasingly toxic to progress. More than in the past, you may feel tired of politics and concerned that we're headed in the wrong direction. History comforts us that there have been periods like this before, even during the writing of our nation's Constitution.

The rose-colored lenses of history may give us the false impression that the Constitutional Convention was a place where newly independent Americans locked arms and created a government. In fact, it was a time filled with uncertainty and conflict. On the day the Constitutional Convention drew to a close, Benjamin Franklin feared that division of states may jeopardize the signing of the document. He appealed to his fellow delegates by acknowledging his own faults and asked them to reflect on theirs:

"I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to [the Constitution], would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

Conflict did not end with the signing of the Constitution. Many issues continued to divide us. Most prominently, slavery, defended in the Constitution and outlawed by Congress in 1808, precipitated the Civil War – including the succession of West Virginia from Virginia – and the Civil Rights Era. The right for women to vote, the right for interracial couples to marry and the right for workers to assemble each saw their period of intense debate.

Our internal concession must be to acknowledge that our own opinions may not always be correct. Our responsibility, then, is never to quit seeking the truth – even when doing so requires us to engage with those who hold views in direct opposition to our own, especially when the outcome may be recognizing that we are wrong.

We can do more to engage with one another. Today, the way we handle political conflict reflects many behaviors of an unhealthy relationship.

Psychologist John Gottman identified four behaviors that were predictors of divorce with 93 percent accuracy: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. How many of these behaviors do you see when politics are discussed? We show contempt to one another, we name-call and sometimes we refuse to engage. But what does

that achieve?

No one would consider a spouse who name-calls and bullies their partner to be strong or be surprised if an abused spouse ends a relationship. It's not surprising when these same tactics fail when applied by political rivals.

We can do better. If we were to take up one behavior in this time, let it be civility: a commitment to kindness and humility even in the face opposing ideals. Just as healthy conversation can improve the most fractured of relationships, so too can having difficult discussions in a healthy manner be the greatest virtue of our day.

Practicing this is straightforward. Identify someone (even a friend or family member) with whom you disagree. Then, ask if you can have a discussion with the purpose of understanding each other's views.

Let the resolution of differences be secondary to the goal of having a conversation that ends in compassionate disagreement. Over time, and as your trust with one another builds, consider expanding the discussion to challenge each other's opinions.

The arguments we see in our personal relationships often rest on a solid foundation of love and trust. In political discourse, we simply do not have the time to build bonds as close as life partners do. We can choose, though, to take steps to build trust with those around us – people who aspire to achieve the American dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but may from time to time disagree on how best to carry out this mission.

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