

“The Debate Culture is widespread and running amuck. In classrooms, training seminars, public arenas, editorial pages, talk radio and television shows, and more recently on the Internet, there appears to be a growing unwillingness to grapple with complexity and ambiguity. Instead, people tend to stake out a clear-cut position on one end of a spectrum in stark opposition to the other end. Considering new information that could lead to reexamining one’s initial judgment is seen as a weakness to be avoided at all costs.

As a result too many of our private and public conversations are characterized by knee-jerk judgmentalism, destructive contentiousness, polarized and rigid positions, and an unwillingness to inquire into differences of opinion. We also seem to be at a loss as to how to advocate our own points of view from the standpoint of being partners rather than adversaries. It is not uncommon for discussions to become polarized and deteriorate to name calling and negative labeling. This often leads to an attitude of, ‘You are either for me or against me. If you’re against me, you’re wrong. If you’re wrong, you’re bad. Therefore, you deserve what you get.’ Destructive debate is rampageous.

In such a climate wholesale criticism is confused with intelligence, and cynicism is mistaken for wisdom. The more critical one can be of an idea or a person, the smarter and more incisive one appears. Assuming a stance of wide-spread suspicion and distrust is seen as a kind of enlightened clearheadedness. Furthermore destroying the reputation of those with whom one disagrees apparently entitles the victor to claim the moral high ground. By so doing, one’s position, ‘I am right and good, and you are wrong and bad,’ is reaffirmed and solidified.

In the public arena many TV and radio talk programs do an excellent job of fostering and perpetuating these most destructive aspects of the Debate Culture. A significant number of popular ‘legitimate’ news-related programs as well as afternoon talk shows set up gladiatorial-like formats. People with opposing views are pitted against each other and encouraged to fight it out. The less they listen to one another, the more they interrupt, the louder they shout, and the more polarized their views become, presumably, the more ‘successful’ the program is. Some talk-shows thrive on putting people with controversial lifestyles or opinions on stage to be pilloried. It is only a slight exaggeration to observe that just as the citizens of Rome flocked to the Coliseum to bloody gladiatorial contests the emperors generously staged for their entertainment, so many of us today routinely attend our modern day versions of ‘the games,’ provided for our ‘education’ and entertainment by the media when we tune into our televisions and radios.

It is an understatement to say that this atmosphere squelches dialogue. It also deadens our spirits by breeding cynicism. Opportunities to discover and learn are tragically forfeited, perhaps forever. Our ability to inquire into what is of value is dulled. Our willingness to ‘see the other’ or ‘experience the other side’ is thwarted if not totally extinguished. These conditions certainly do not encourage and reward understanding about what things mean to someone else from their point of view. On the contrary, openly inquiring into how our own opinions and beliefs appear from the standpoint of others is seen as a sign of weakness and vulnerability rather than strength and integrity. Willingly investigating our own deeply held assumptions is considered heretical by those who hold and identify with the same view. In the Debate Culture we come to believe that the only way to be safe and smart is to play our cards very close to our chests, so close that we often can’t see them ourselves.”

-Deborah Flick
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