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COMMENTARY

Cultivating Civility

Can schools play a role?

By Peter Cobb


A year ago at this time, the country was emerging from a hotly contested presidential election. The rhetoric was inflated, passions were inflamed. We made allowance for that, presuming that once the new leadership was in place, folks would all take a deep breath, step back from the posturing partisanship that inevitably accompanies our political theater, and, given the economic, social, and environmental exigencies of the moment, look for common cause and common ground on which to rally.

No such luck. No such rallying. Almost in a seamless and unabated way, the political cauldron has continued to be stirred, and the public discourse has remained fractured and hugely uncivil. We have witnessed the spectacle of town meetings in which expressions of outrage compete with expressions of disrespect in ways that fundamentally disallow reasoned conversation. We have seen sessions of Congress and committee hearings in which even the most elementary protocols of decorum have been patently, if not proudly, disregarded. We have repeatedly seen members of the news media speak in unbridled ways that vilify and denigrate persons simply because they hold countervailing views. Recrimination, not reconciliation, is the political order of the day.

Let me say by way of context that I like it when people declare their passion, when they are willing to state their moral outrage, when they challenge and confront those who would invite complacency in the face of grievous harm and implacable enmity. I am an advocate for the cultivation of maverick sensibilities and the capacity of our students to stand sturdily in places of discomfort. I grew up at a time when a generation found its voice and used it to protest, when it found its legs and used them to march. I would never wish to marginalize the strides and stridency of those days.

Still, I feel as though we now default to intemperate irascibility as the norm, and it is hijacking and handicapping our shared future.

Whether the issue is health care, environmental sustainability, the conundrum of immigration policy, or economic recovery, we seem almost at a point of terminal deadlock. Compromise is seen as abdication; conciliation as weakness. Any effort made to reach across genuine and legitimate divides of perspective and points of view is simply submerged in the seas and seasons of our

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discontent.

In schools, we have the chance to practice something different, whether the forum for such is a classroom, a faculty meeting, a school assembly, or a meeting of the school board. We need to safeguard a culture of civility. We need to offer instruction in vigorous and reasoned debate and defense of point of view, but we also need to offer instruction on how to carry on such debate in ways that allow for all to be heard. It is illiberal and, I would argue, unethical to be pre-emptively or presumptively dismissive of what another hopes for, cares about, and believes in—however apparently antithetical to one's own hopes, cares, and beliefs.

The stakes are high for getting this right. We are educating the next generation of citizens and leaders. They are going to have to be able to reach across all kinds of divides, be those ideological, racial, gender-based, generational, national, ethnic, religious, or economic. They are going to have to find ways of listening even when one is disposed not to. They are going to have to find ways of creating new and common ground. They are going to have to be able to put common interest above self-interest, the greater good above parochial good.

Let us be deliberate in this coming year about providing public squares and public times for such to be practiced, moderated by moderation, facilitated by empathy, and guided by reason.

Peter Cobb taught religion and held leadership positions in independent schools for 24 years before serving as the executive director of the Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education from 1997 to 2003. He is the president of Cobb & Associates, an Atlanta-based consulting firm, and the editor of Gateways to Spirituality: Preschool Through Grade Twelve (Peter Lang, 2005).