

Civil Discourse? – Radio version

Conservative Bridgebuilder

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Disclosure: Pinsky, whom I’ve known since our university days, is a personal friend. His *Duke Chronicle* column was titled “The Readable Radical.” He was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn’t always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy, and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

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Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding. {7}

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Confronting Our Liberal Bias

Religious and political conservatives often complain about bias in secular universities. Here's how two university professors faced that issue in their own teaching

Elizabeth Kiss is president of Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Before that, she was a Duke political science professor and director of Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics.[\[8\]](#) With public policy lecturer Alma Blount, she wrote an intriguing 2005 article, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias."[\[9\]](#) They note:

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They cite two seminal experiences. In one, "colleagues tried to block an invitation to a conservative faculty member to speak in a class." In another, comments about "how liberal bias threatens open inquiry" met anger and disbelief.

Kiss and Blount considered how their own liberal assumptions subtly influenced their teaching. "Creating a culture of open inquiry on campus," they write, "means we first must face our everyday temptation toward political bias." They continue:

Political bias, from either the left or the right, is corrosive of open inquiry. It is the "in" joke or flippant comment suggesting that all rational people are on your side. It portrays opponents in the worst possible light, suggesting they are ignorant, self-righteous, or evil. Bias breeds an enclave mentality that encourages smug and lazy thinking. It blinds us to the complexity of public issues.

Blount and Kiss are arguing not for academic neutrality, but rather for conviction with disclosure, appreciating dissent as part of the learning process. They advocate political diversity in assigned readings, welcoming differing student viewpoints in class, inviting guest speakers of various perspectives, plus modeling dialogue and debate. “Confronting liberal bias won’t be easy,” they conclude. “But it’s the right thing to do.”

Their refreshing candor is all too rare. An excellent example for all sides in making civil discourse more “civil.”

“Gotcha” Politics

President Bill Clinton’s Special Counsel and scandal spokesperson was Lanny Davis, a prominent attorney and now-ubiquitous television figure.

Now, some of my readers may consider Bill and Hillary Clinton to be Mr. and Mrs. Antichrist. But I ask you to please segment your emotions about the Clintons momentarily to consider their former coworker’s passionate appeal for civility in public discourse.

Davis, a liberal Democrat, has authored an important book, *Scandal: How “Gotcha” Politics is Destroying America*.[{10}](#) He says, “The politics of healthy debate have been replaced by the politics of personal destruction, and the media, politicians, lawyers, and the Internet revolution are all complicit,” as are the American people who reward the politicians and consume the media.[{11}](#) With admirable transparency, he admits concerning parts of his past, “I am ashamed to say all this today—but I was just as much caught up in the gotcha culture as partisans on the Republican right.”[{12}](#) He regrets having jumped into “food fight” TV on occasion,[{13}](#) and admits to some past blindness to “politically expedient hypocrisy.”[{14}](#)

Davis often seeks to build bridges. During the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey “had been barred from delivering an anti-abortion, ‘pro-life’ speech to the convention.” Davis, who is pro-choice, asked some of his fellow liberal delegates to join him in a resolution to allow Casey to speak, in the name of freedom of expression and tolerance of dissent. Alas, he was shouted down.{15}

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May his tribe increase.

Bridgebuilding: From Food Fights to Finding Common Ground

How can we cultivate respect and learn to disagree without being disagreeable? Maybe you’ll enjoy this story.

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permeated our lives. The fraternity I joined was quite diverse. We had political liberals and conservatives; athletes and scholars; atheists, agnostics, Christians, and Jews. Late night bull sessions kept us engaged and learning from each other.

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Our diversity taught me lots about tolerance and civility. We lived, worked, studied, and played together and forged friendships that have endured despite time and distance. Many of us still gather for reunions and still enjoy each others' company. That environment was a crucible that helped me develop communication and relationship skills.

How can you cultivate civility? Consider three suggestions:

- 1. Learn about views different from your own. Read what others believe and ascertain why they feel and think as they do. Ask yourself how you might feel in their situation.*
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Conservatives, take a liberal to lunch, and vice versa.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, had good advice on how to deal with those who differ. It applies in many contexts. He wrote:

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