



## Being a Civil Voice in Uncivil Times

While public discussion of political issues has the potential to bring out the best in us – by surfacing creative new ideas or developing effective problem-solving strategies – more often than not in our public dialogue about the issues of the day, the opposite seems to be happening. From the national dialogue about health care to the passionate discussion of immigration reform this year, it is all too easy for anger and frustration to get the best of us. Whether around the office water cooler or the extended family dinner table, reasoned conversation is taking a back seat to personal attacks and replayed sound bites. Because we avoid these conversations, we miss out on deeper understanding.

As people of faith participating in the public square, we are called to a higher standard of engagement and interaction with our neighbors – even and perhaps especially those with whom we may disagree on an issue. Our faith provides us with spiritual resources to take the conversation to a different level. We can choose respect and hope over animosity and bitterness. We can choose to listen and learn rather than attack and insult. We can choose to have civic discussions in civil tones.

We do not have to avoid the hard issues. We can prepare ourselves for a better conversation by thinking about some of the following ideas to shape your conversation on difficult and emotion-filled issues of the day.

**Show Respect:** Rather than trying to “win” a debate with your arguments, judge your success by how well you demonstrate respect for other people and for what insights or interesting challenges arise for you. Stay away from insults and personal attacks, and keep trying to return to the substance of the issue. The more respect you show for someone else’s opinions, the more reason they have to respect yours.

**Listen:** One of the best ways to show respect is to listen. Focus on what the other person is saying, rather than focusing on what you are going to say next. Ask yourself, “What are they trying to express?” “What is important to them?” “Where do we agree?”

**Seek Understanding:** Try to understand the context from which other people are speaking – ask yourself why they see things the way they do. Ask open-ended questions that invite others to say more about why they believe what they believe.

**Share Your Own Views Well:** Put thought and energy into articulating your own views clearly and concisely. What do you believe and why? Statistics can be helpful, but often sharing your personal stories is most effective. Claim your own opinions by using “I” statements, such as “I believe...” and “In my experience...” Try to avoid exaggeration or the use of sound bites or slogans – use your own words.

**Keep Your Head:** Talking about public policy issues often taps into strong emotions and passions in all of us. Remember to pause, take a deep breath from time to time, and give yourself time to respond. Few people benefit or learn anything from a shouting match. You can help set the tone of the conversation by continuing to act with civility even when others are not. If someone is not showing respect – for instance, by interrupting or not listening to your comments – calmly ask that they do so. “You just shared your opinion and I listened without interrupting, could you please listen to mine?”

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