

Keywords

civil conversations | democratic flourishing | intellectual and moral virtue | hospitality

“I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” Lincoln’s immemorial words surely strike a chord amidst the dissonance we are experiencing in our democracy today. It seems clear at this moment that passions are straining the bonds of our affection, as we grow increasingly less capable of cultivating civil conversations amidst our differences. Democracy requires that we strive to live from “the better angels of our nature” lest the bonds of our affection break. Rather than engage with one another respectfully and civilly, our public engagement can take the following polarized forms:

1. When passions rule, *our engagement is characterized by hostility, not hospitality*. Primarily orienting our attention toward *the ideologies persons hold*, we no longer *behold the persons* who could help us imagine different perspectives.
2. Steeped in a cultural milieu that can fear the appearance of offending another, we may avoid healthy disagreement that characterizes more carefully nuanced engagement. We slowly lull ourselves into an intellectual and moral apathy characterized by detachment or disengagement from civil conversations altogether.

Both extremes are different reactions to fear and avoid the more challenging (and rewarding) work of true dialogue, with all of its contours. In light of this, education is ever more crucial. As educators, we play a critical role in promoting genuine civil conversation through our example and pedagogy in our classrooms. Though education is largely viewed as imparting knowledge and skills for competition in a global economy, its role in civic formation for democratic flourishing is ever more important.

In this paper I draw ancient and contemporary philosophers of education into dialogue to envision *democratic education characterized by robust civil conversation rooted in the stable and generous virtues of intellectual and moral hospitality*. I will engage three main sources: Plato, for his depiction of Socrates as exemplar of robust conversation (vis-à-vis the Sophists), Michael Oakeshott’s views of conversation as the very heart of liberal education (2001), and Megan Laverty’s work on teaching philosophy and its practice in the classroom (2004; 2008), and how the texts we read and the concepts we use in dialogue (2015; 2009) can promote meaningful, productive, and joyful civil conversation — in spite of difference. I draw out how each cultivates intellectual and moral virtue necessary to sustain meaningful civil conversation. In order to prevent passions and fears from subverting our efforts, we must call forth “the better angels of our natures” through renewed vision whereby we see our interlocutors as persons, deserving respect, and with whom we reimagine how to join hearts and minds in intellectual and moral hospitality around the hearthstones of our classrooms.

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