

The Argument

By Thomas R. Cuba

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A friend of mine recently asked, "How can I get my brother to have a normal conversation?"

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"No matter what we talk about, it always ends up being about Trump! He's not our president any more and I don't understand how he can be responsible for what's going on today. But my brother can't..." his voice tailed off. I could tell that he was very concerned. Of course, I was wondering if he was the kind of person who blamed everything on our current President, Mr. Biden.

I told him that I didn't know the answer and forgot about it. Or so I thought. His question lived just beneath the surface of my consciousness for weeks. Every exchange I had, every exchange I overheard, every acerbic post on social media, every group of on-air pundits became a clue to the answer.

The first thing I noted was that when certain people discussed a situation, they usually ended up in an argument. I had noted that decades ago, and dubbed it third-grade schoolyard politics. But it's worse now. The question was, "How did two people get from 'hello' to name-calling?"

The first thing I did was to concede two points. One was that each person cared about the situation and cared enough to want to talk about it and perhaps find a way out of it. The second concession was that each person, save the people on television, respected the other enough to want to get their thoughts.

Then things fell apart.

The first to go was what was perceived as fact and what was a lie, or fake news. One person would relate that this politician did something and caused situation "A." The other would reply with, "No, that's not right. Situation "A" was the result of a different politician who did something else."

The two people in the discussion came to the discussion with different "facts." Each of them had full faith in the reliability of the source of their facts. Very few times did I observe an exchange in which one person was an eyewitness, but it didn't matter much. They still had different facts. Many years earlier, I had a friend who was a reporter and had asked him why an event that I had attended seldom seemed to match the writeup in the newspaper. His answer was elegantly simple: "A reporter sees

about ten percent of what happens. He writes a story about ten percent of what he saw. The editor prints about ten percent of what the reporter wrote.”

As the tussle over what was a fact and what was fake news progressed, each party entered into a stage of denial of what the other was saying. “That’s not true” or “You’re wrong,” replaced the point: counterpoint of the engagement. Emotions, born of the frustration of not being able to convince the other person to change their mind, soon exceeded the forces of logic and the aforementioned respect. Suddenly, the two people were once again engaged in schoolyard politics.

The question continued to stew, albeit on simmer, for at least two months. It was an old memory from my Grandmother that provided me with what I hope is a key to answering the question.

Her advice? “Listen. Job one is to listen.” From the time of Sun Tzu to my football coach to my instructors in tactical school, this had been translated to “Know your enemy.” The words were different but the message is the same. By listening, we can know what the driving facts in the discussion are, and, adding back in the advice of my Grandmother mixed with an attitude derived from Mr. Spock, I conclude that by listening we not only know what is on the other person’s mind, but we can, at times, concede a point that we recognize as being inaccurate or incorrect. Saying, “Gosh. I guess I was wrong (or misinformed) about that,” is a great way to prevent the discussion from getting emotional. It re-establishes the respect and the mutual emotion of caring about the situation.

Some useful phrases might be, “How do you know that?” or “What’s your source? Do you trust them?” or “Gee, I wonder why my news outlet has different numbers on that. Well, neither of us were there, so we’re just not sure about.....”

The best one might be, “Let’s research this together.”

When that happens, the oppositional forces combine into a joint inquiry seeking the truth. It may never be found, but it will change the dynamics and avoid the name-calling.

Joining forces has another benefit. Instead of looking back over who did what the wrong way, the engagement can become one of looking ahead in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

When I saw my friend again, he accepted my observations and bemoaned, “Why can’t people just do the right thing in the first place.”

I smiled. "That's a completely different topic, but in a nutshell, most of them probably think that they are; the truth is that different people have different definitions for what the right thing to do is."

"Just remember," I said. "Don't look back in order to place blame – look forward in order to make a better future." As he thought about it, I thought, *Oh, hell. I could have just told him to go read up on Socrates.*

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