



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

Are We Losing It?

Or did we ever have it - the ability to engage in civil discourse, that is? For me, Justice Sotomayor's recent Supreme Court confirmation hearings and our ongoing healthcare debate are but the latest reminders of how poorly we do that. I seldom get the impression in these kinds of forums that there is any real attempt at listening, learning, reasoning together or discovering the best path forward; instead what quickly becomes apparent is that it's about "I'm right and you're wrong," or who "wins" and who "loses." Political representatives can appear hopelessly sidetracked making the other side look bad and tipping the balance of power - or, perhaps they're not really sidetracked and actually believe that is their purpose. Citizens and special interest groups attend town hall meetings sure of their opinions in advance and determined to accomplish their agendas. People talk past each other, opposing views are shouted down, and not once have I heard a question asked like a real question with the intent to learn something new. Of course we don't have to just watch the news or monitor controversial national debates to know that something is amiss; we have only to witness some discussions where we work, attend a local school board meeting or attempt participating in some family reunion conversations.

As they say, "if we keep doing what we're doing, we'll keep getting what we're getting" - "winners" (who think they are,) "losers," deteriorating relationships and loss of community, along with decisions, policies and courses of action that fall far short of what they could be. We need to do three things:

- First we need to cultivate civility in our politics, institutions, communities and relationships - described by Stephen Carter as "disciplining our passions for the sake of living a common life with others." (Carter, Stephen L. *Civility*; Basic Books, New York, NY. 1996 – highly recommended.) Fundamentally civility is about respect - respect for others whether or not we see things as they do, and recognition that they too have a right to their perceptions, opinions, needs and wants. Home, schools, churches and other early formative experiences clearly play important roles here; our work and community organizations can too - by clearly stating and modeling basic norms or rules for how to operate.
- We need to develop our capacities for dialogue - a very different form of conversation than the typical discussions, debates or arguments that we're used to. True dialogue is characterized by letting go of agendas and pre-ordained "solutions," examining assumptions, deep listening, learning and vigorous efforts to expand boundaries and solution space. (One excellent resource on this topic is *Dialogue* by William Isaacs (Currency / Doubleday - Random House, NY, 1999.) I can honestly say that clients who succeeded breaking through their traditional communication patterns and engaged in true dialogue have been amazed at the

positive outcomes - chiefly superior solutions and improved relationships.

- We need to develop our personal and collective capacities for discernment - the ability to cut through fog, hype and falsities to determine what's true and the best courses of action. Discernment requires extra effort paying attention to additional and more diverse sources of information than we typically might - including sources in disagreement with what we believe to be true. Discernment also involves a "weighing" process - careful examination of all that we've learned to arrive at the best conclusions and course of action. This weighing process might involve thinking through second, third and fourth-order implications of a decision; perhaps it requires thoughtful evaluation of alternatives and consultation with our "moral compass" to determine which of several options is most right or which is the least wrong. Good news today is that thanks chiefly to technology we have many more and more diverse sources of information to inform our decisions; bad news is that quantity of information sources does not equate with quality. We may in fact need superior capacities for discernment to work around the many self-proclaimed experts, commentators with axes to grind and misguided denizens of the internet who are less informed or more misinformed than we are.

If we hope to raise the standards for important discussions in our community and institutions, we need to develop these capacities ourselves and demand more of our leaders. We need to model civility and expect the same and more from our leaders; we need to engage in true dialogue and expect the same and more from our leaders; we need to become more discerning and expect the same and more from our leaders.

- *What concrete steps will you take, and with whom, to model more civility?*
- *In what conversations, and in what ways - for example relaxing agendas or assumptions, really listening or stretching time or solution boundaries - will you raise the level of dialogue?*
- *Think of a problem you're trying to solve or a decision to make. How might you exercise more discernment? (consulting more or different sources, taking more time or examining implications more closely, for example.)*

Seeking to understand takes consideration; seeking to be understood takes courage. Effectiveness lies in balancing the two.

Stephen R. Carter

If two people on the same job agree all the time, then one is useless. If they disagree all the time, then both are useless.

Darryl F. Zanuck

The ability of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

** You can preview and order copies of Stephen Carter's Civility and William Isaacs' Dialogue at inTEgro's new [Bookstore](#).

Select from hundreds of quotations for use in your next presentation at <http://www.integro-inc.com/quotes.htm>.

To learn more about how inTEgro can develop your leaders' and organization's capacity for dialogue, go to <http://www.integro-inc.com>.

AI

AI Watts
inTEgro, Inc.
www.integro-inc.com
ph: (612) 827-2363