

The disrespectful nation

Watching the Congressional Intelligence Committee impeachment hearings of Wednesday and today reminded me of my worst political fear...that Americans would begin to treat respect for one another as some expendable part of life, like the appendix that we all carry - a sac of tissue that serves no explicit purpose other than to collect bacteria. Members of the Committee showed utter disdain for their opposite numbers, their President and even the witnesses.

I hasten to add that we have been losing respect for one another for decades, and I don't just mean politicians for other politicians. I mean everybody. Tolerance for the other guy's point of view is something that demands too much of us, takes too much time and puts us at a competitive disadvantage. Better to try to demean and destroy than to listen and learn. This goes for the young that have no patience for the old, for the old that think the young are spoiled and stupid, the haves that think the have-nots are just a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings and the elites that believe they are destined to lead the rest of us.

We cut each other off in mid-sentence. After all, our opinion matters more than theirs' and our right to speak also supersedes theirs'. Those who have the power need not acknowledge the lack of it in others. We have no qualms about limiting other people's free speech especially if we feel it will lead to an unnecessary debate. Better to stop them before they start. That way there's no uncomfortable moments of disagreement or conflict. Used to be that we would preface verbal criticism with a tug of our rhetorical forelock by saying 'with all due respect.'

No more. Now we go straight for the jugular and wait for the opportunity to deliver the 'kill shot.' This is especially true of the Congress. It was plain to see this play out today as the Republicans attempted to introduce 'a point of order' time and time again, only to be rebuffed with a "the gentleman will suspend" by Chairman Adam 'take-no-prisoners' Schiff. When power resides in the hands of the uncompassionate and is forcefully exercised without consideration of others, an environment of extreme hostility is bound to ensue, and that can only lead to a desire to strike back. And the first casualty in that war is always respect.

The dictionary's definition of respect is, "a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements" or "due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others." THAT is what I learned at the knee of my grandparents and parents. "Respect your elders" was one admonition. "Respect the other person's rights" was another. Finally, there was a disembodied respect I had to learn..."respect the situation." These forms for respect have all but disappeared from our daily lives.

Like tolerance and civility, they've been replaced by the desire to win at all costs, by the 'competitive spirit' (no matter that spirit may condone or celebrate injuring others). And the tools we use to win? Talking louder, interrupting more, personally attacking and demeaning the opposition. It's no wonder that many people who would be great candidates for political office are saying, "no thanks, I'd rather not play in a game where the only rule is, 'anything goes.' We've lost a whole generation or two of our young people to the ideology of destruction, and we wonder why they don't respect us? Why they laugh at our elderly instead of venerating them? Why they see principled people as 'suckers' who've chosen the wrong path or don't have the 'right stuff' to play in the big leagues?

Respect is just another word for showing deference. Unfortunately, many people feel that by showing deference (which is really acknowledging the other person's right to exist on equal footing and to be fairly heard) is somehow akin to submission or capitulation. By not tackling that problem head-on with our young, we have greased the skids for an even greater problem than the loss of respect. We have allowed a class of people to develop who are egotistical, self-righteous and who feel entitled and they have chosen hegemony instead of harmony as their mantra.

These people are convinced that theirs' is a manifest destiny to govern, akin to the 19th-century doctrine that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continent was both justified and inevitable. To my way of thinking, hegemony of thought or practice is neither justifiable nor inevitable. It is, however, on full display in our current Congressional impeachment hearings, and you don't need a program to know the players.

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