

TAFT

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PARENTS' DAY ADDRESS
FEBRUARY 19, 2011

*On the Need for a Civil Discourse:
The Ancients, Founding Fathers and Teenagers in a Digital Age
Winter Parents' Day 2011*

After the Tucson shootings, a lot of people asked, "Is there anything that can be done to change and improve the quality of the civil discourse in our nation?"

I had an answer, which was this, "Yes, but it will take a lot of work, and schools like Taft might be a small part of the answer." After all, Taft falls nicely in the American educational tradition of training for democracy. And there's another reason: we have had a year where we have faced challenges in our own civil discourse, and if that makes us like every other school, it doesn't mean that we can't find lessons here if we are rigorously self-analytic.

So, here's what I am interested in exploring today: how the intersection of our nation's civil discourse with the digital world of today's teenagers leads to challenges and opportunities for parents and schools interested in how they prepare graduates to be leaders skilled in creating a productive discourse in the future. It's not a small task!

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There is no question that as a nation, we seem almost completely incapable of sustaining a productive civil discourse, and this you hear from observers of every stripe. Look at the number of think tanks, lecture series, endowed professorships and university centers with descriptions like "A Digest of Civil Discourse," or "Project Civil Discourse," or "Civility in a Fractured Society." The Tucson shootings meant the questions were no longer merely intellectual; a lot of smart people wrote editorials asking what was wrong with our national dialogue. I'm just a headmaster, so I was wondering what the effect was on the teenagers who were observing the ugly discourse—and let's be clear, they *are* observing it. It seemed to me that if rhetoric is a civic art that not only shapes democratic community but also forms character, we ought to be thinking about students.

But there are actually really good models of public discourse, and we can learn from them, and take inspiration that we can create something better. The first is where our democracy has its inception, with the Greek and Romans; and the second is our nation's birth, with our founding fathers. So let's look back 2000 years, and then 200 or so, and end where we should: at Taft.

There is a lot we could learn from the ancients. I turned to a distinguished Roman historian, and in the spirit of full disclosure, I'll confess that he happens to be my father, retired Dunham Professor of History and Classics at Yale: "Dad, a number of writers have made allusions to the need for a civic discourse that

is modeled on the ancients. Can you tell me how the Greeks and Romans conducted their respective discussions of civic life, and is there anything we can learn from it today?”

His response, of course, surprised me. We should not kid ourselves, he suggested, that the political discourse was, as we would understand it, particularly elevated. We know something of Cicero’s speeches, for example. True, he said, some of these were wonderfully lofty and elegant in tone, but the most popular, which are known as “the Catilinarian,” after his favorite target, were not. These were, as my father wrote, “as violent and vulgar as you wish.”

Now why is this? Not because politics is a contact sport, though that is true. It is because the age demanded such rhetoric; and more importantly, all participants were equally knowledgeable and informed about the conventions of rhetoric, especially a particular curriculum known as the progymnasmata. In other words, civil discourse began with practice, with schooling; and that’s an important lesson to remember.

Were your child at the equivalent of Taft, let’s say, in the first century BC, his tutor would no doubt have offered the progymnasmata, a series of exercises to introduce students to rhetorical strategies, ultimately in preparation for oratory. The progymnasmata were the ABCs of the persuasion, a kind of Kaplan prep, and they were comprised of well-known assignments including the use of fable, narrative, refutation, description and comparison. Basically, you learned the skills to argue. In her fine work entitled *Toward a Civil Discourse*, Sharon Crowley writes, “Ancient rhetoricians taught students how to find and use arguments made available by the cultural contexts that give rise to disagreement, firmly grounding their instruction in issues arising within the [political] arena.” Instruction entailed the art of encountering arguments and of means of persuasion, and that’s what those students would have been doing, building toward sophisticated oration. Students would have argued about the hottest and most divisive topics of the day—I imagine their versions of immigration, affirmative action and so on; and they did so employing specific rhetorical strategies and conventions familiar to all. And could you have better training for civic discourse than that? There were fourteen distinct exercises, and Cicero would have mastered them all before he ever gave a speech.

And what were some of Cicero’s best-known speeches? They were exercises in the 9th of the listed strategies: *Vituperation*, or *Invective*, and if they were given today, in an era where there is no shared understanding of rhetoric, no education into how to have a dispute, and where they could be disseminated instantly to millions, they would be seen as past the dial of even the most nutty blogger.

But that would not have been the case for Cicero’s contemporaries. They knew and even expected certain forms of rhetoric. Invective—whose goal was public denigration and isolation—was as a vital piece of political discourse. The techniques were familiar to all audiences: shaming for birth, physical attributes, qualities of character, sex life and so on. So you heard some very nasty speeches.

Cicero's 63 BC (A.G. Noorani, *The Invective of Junius*) invective denouncing Catilina reads essentially this way: "In the whole of Italy, there is not a single pioneer, gladiator, robber, assassin, parricide, cheat, glutton, wastrel, adulterer, prostitute or corrupter of youth...who would not be obligated to admit he was Catilina's intimate." That's quite a catalogue! Cicero's invective against Piso in 55 BC paints him as a fat, debauched, depraved pig. My favorite is his invective against Sallust: "For even if your father never committed a sin in all his life, he could not have inflicted a greater injury upon his country than in begetting such a son." Imagine a presidential campaign where candidates traded words like that!

So it's not as if the discourse of the ancients were warm and fuzzy: quite the reverse. But the leaders shared, through a common education, a framework of well-known rhetorical strategies that shaped conflict. Piso wouldn't have liked Cicero's speech, but he would immediately have recognized it for what it was; he would have had access to the same training and strategies. The strategies gave shape and parameters to disagreement; they provided the ways in which opponents found and employed arguments. Crowley observes of the power of rhetoric in this way: "[It] lies in its discrimination of a conceptual vocabulary and a set of discursive strategies that allow those who are familiar with it to intervene fruitfully in disputes and disagreements." What she means is this: the use of a commonly shared rhetorical understanding is essential in creating a productive discourse. The problem we have today is that we hear Cicero-like invectives shouted into an echo chamber that is peopled by the untutored—and that's what this young generation is hearing.

In Greece and Rome, you ended up with a rough and tumble discourse, but they all knew and played by the rules. And where did they learn these rules and practice them? In school.

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The second model we should look to we find in our nation's birth. As you would guess, given our British ties, in the American colonial and revolutionary periods, rhetoric was taught to everyone who entered a school or college, and its study was required at Harvard. So, those who shaped the discourse of 1776 were close rhetorical kin to the ancients, even closer than to us today. And I am not sure you will ever find more successful persuasion than that of the writings of our founding fathers. Here, at a time of extraordinary volatility, with politics far more explosively partisan than today, you saw a civil discourse (and note that I do not call it a gentle discourse) that should serve as our model.

Consider, for instance, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in January of 1776, and perhaps the most important and influential essay of the time. Note that Paine emigrated to the colonies in the 1770s, but he was schooled in England, at Thetford Grammar, established in the 12th century, and my guess is that its curriculum owed a lot to the ancients. I think it is safe to say that he learned something of rhetoric there. It is a catalytic work and one that reads like a catalogue of rhetorical strategies. It sold an astonishing 150,000 copies—think of him as a Malcolm Gladwell of the time—precisely because it was an exercise in successful persuasion and argument.

Consider the Declaration of Independence. Was there ever a more effective argumentative essay? Thomas Jefferson, the principal author, had been tutored by a minister and then studied Latin, Greek and philosophy at William and Mary. The work clearly is indebted to centuries of rhetorical practice. I have taught that document in English class solely to marvel at the strategies. Here is our nation's painful birthing: surely we can examine how a body makes an argument against an opponent. There is nothing like it in the discourse today.

Consider the Federalist Papers, a series of 85 essays arguing for the ratification of the Constitution and published from 1787–1788 in newspapers under the name “Publius,” written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay. It is a magnificent collection. No one—no politician, no citizen—will find a better example of what a civic discourse can and should look like, this all the more remarkable given they came at a time of palpable tension, where the stakes are unimaginably high, and where the validity of a nation was very much in doubt.

Look at Hamilton's concluding remarks: “I have addressed myself purely to your judgments, and have studiously avoided those asperities which are too apt to disgrace political disputants of all parties, and which have been not a little provoked by the language and conduct of the opponents of the Constitution.... It is not impossible that these circumstances may have occasionally betrayed me into intemperances of expression which I did not intend; it is certain that I have frequently felt a struggle between sensibility and moderation; and if the former has in some instances prevailed, it must be my excuse that it has neither been often nor much.” Can you imagine an elected official today speaking with such combination of temperance, forcefulness and logic?

That is what a civil discourse might look like.

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Here's the point where you say, “But this is not first century BC Greece, or late 18th century colonial America,” and you would be right. They had it a lot easier when it came to developing the skills in students to one day conduct the civil discourse.

Think of today's challenges.

One is obvious. If you are an adolescent today and you look for models of civil discourse in our nation, as I suggested, you will find few ancients and founding fathers. Instead, adolescents have lots of evidence that our most visible public leaders have a lot of difficulty employing appropriate strategies to negotiate disagreement. They hear a pretty shrill dialogue, if we can call it that; and the loudest voices, hurled from the edges and amplified by the media, are the most destructive. Now, teenagers have always needed to learn how manage their own disputes and conduct themselves civilly—that's part of growing up;

but the difference today is that they have more models for uncivil behavior in politics, music, athletics and entertainment than ever, and these voices are louder, coarser and more pervasive than at any time in our history. It is impossible that today's students have not been affected.

And consider how the pervasiveness and perils of technology and social networking have outstripped our social conventions and mores and created big challenges in interpersonal communication. The Greek tutor or colonial professor didn't have these worries, and nor even did our own parents some thirty or forty years ago. In April 2010, the Pew Research Center published results of a study on teen use of media, observing that text messaging has become the primary way teens reach out to friends, 50 percent sending more than 50 texts a day, and one in three sending over 100 a day. If the benefits are obvious, so too are the dangers. Typed words are stripped free of the many clues we rely on to understand intent in face-to-face interaction, and the potential to cause personal conflict is great. Authors Reynol Junco and Arthur Chickering observe just this in an essay "Civil Discourse in the Age of Social Media": "As blocks of communication get shorter, and there are fewer contextual clues, the ability to correctly perceive tone diminishes.... Many [university] professionals, especially those working in residence life, are well aware of examples where disagreements, gossip and slander have either begun or been escalated through online communication and then have real world conduct issues." It is a familiar refrain to any school head or college president. The rules of digital conduct are constantly changing. There are few guardrails on the internet highways, and communication races at warp speed. It is only natural that the patterns of conduct in this universe will shape "real" interpersonal communication. Given that so much communication occurs in the digital world, learning how to dispute interpersonally is harder for this generation than it was for us, or obviously, Cicero or Hamilton.

Further, as adults—and here I mean you, me, as well as the 120 Taft faculty—we are learning and are trying to manage a world that requires navigational skills with which we may not be fully equipped, leaves us feeling more tourists than citizens, and changes at dizzying speed. It's pretty tough to feel we know the all the right answers. I doubt that is a feeling Cicero's tutor or Hamilton's Latin professor felt. Their students were entering a world their teachers knew well and were still shaping. Their authority was complete. But that's not the case today. How many of us have ever found it hard to understand or manage the way our teenagers operate in, communicate and live in the networked world? How many of us worry that the way teenagers communicate online contributes in some way to the way they communicate and resolve conflicts interpersonally? These are challenges we all face. Over the Long Weekend I attended two different gatherings of heads of schools, and every one could tell some story of trying, with mixed success, to manage the interactions of our students. We shared our stories, our successes and failures; I added mine. And all shared the sense that parents and teachers, indeed their very *schools*, were struggling to understand this intersection of digital and personal conduct, to manage teenage behavior, and to teach effectively. Put simply, we adults are still learning, all of us as parents, we faculty here at Taft.

Finally, there is a high level of *anxiety* among adults about the experience of teenagers today, in part because we experience their charged and complex world so intimately. True, to some extent that has always been the case; it's the job of adolescents to worry us. In the '50s, rock and roll was terrifying, and educators and parents had apocalyptic visions caused by Elvis's hips; a decade later, long hair and drugs had the same effect. This is what adolescence does: we find ourselves drawn into the unfamiliar world

of our teenage sons and daughters, our students, and it can be unsettling, especially when we don't have all the answers. Sue Porter, an educational psychologist, sees adolescence as a virus, the experience contagious. There lies the joy, of course, and why we teach—it is so fun to be close to teens!—but also the dangers. “Teenagers,” she writes, “affect each other’s mood and attitudes in feverish ways...often collectively and negatively. When adults are around teenagers all day, *they* become susceptible, too. The virus of adolescence is robust, so it has a profound effect on everyone in the teenage world. Nevertheless, in the midst of this teenage hot zone, teachers [and parents!] are expected to behave as if they have immunity. This is easier said than done.” I will say this: immunity was probably a lot easier when our founding fathers were teenagers in 1760, and easier even just a generation ago when we were teenagers with bad haircuts and our parents’ greatest worry came when we got our driver’s license. Porter’s metaphor is brilliant: haven’t you ever felt you had caught “adolescent-itis”? I can attest to that, especially in my more tired moments, as a father, teacher, coach and headmaster. That’s where we all live, you as parents and we as faculty; and it is important we realize this, recognize when we are susceptible, acknowledge how hard that position is and work to maintain some immunity even as we live in their lives.

So, the challenges for this generation, for parents and for schools are a greater and more complicated one than in the past.

Can our children one day reshape the national discourse?

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They can. They will. They are walking these halls today.

We will never turn back the clock a generation, shut off the internet with all its benefits, or install a curriculum based on the Greek progymnastmata. But we are positioned to do something important if we are to train the next Hamilton or Jefferson. This is where some of our best teaching has got to be.

Here is what I suggest schools must do and what we are trying to do:

First, in order to shape the discourse and train students, schools have to set clear policies on communication and conduct, online and in all school arenas; they must perpetually articulate and amplify those policies; and they must provide opportunities for students to practice in multiple venues. You cannot do this too much, and a boarding school is a very good place to do this. Think of the countless lessons! Meetings in the dormitory about how a floor of very different students with radically diverse experiences have to communicate and manage conflicts, fiery debates in history class about public policy, a lecture to a team on the ethics of fair play, a heated conversation at sit-down dinner about the controversial visiting speaker, a battle of perspectives on a red hot political issue among school leaders, the advisor talking to the advisee about an inappropriate e-mail, the teacher in the Main Hall speaking to a

student about a demeaning remark—these places are where the policies are affirmed and skills developed. Junco and Chickering write that schools need to “encourage a civil institutional culture that values and respects differences and learns from them. The institution can be a counterforce responding to the larger cultural dynamics that threaten our democracy...” Put simply: students who graduate from Taft must be able to say, “I had a lot of rehearsal in productive dispute, and I am ready to shape civil discourse now.”

Second, it is critical to listen to and empower students to help faculty understand their perspectives as they commit to a civil discourse. Students can lead, and it is important to listen. Schools have to look to create new and effective ways to converse about cultural issues, especially speech, disagreement and conduct. We have tried many models this year; a few were homeruns; some were singles. We have learned most from students. The kind of moments I mentioned above—meetings by dorm, with school leaders, with teams, in informal gatherings in offices—these have been really helpful in understanding how we can better model, teach and guide students. One effective exercise came when we gathered the entire school in the three dining halls and asked students to reflect on community. Students sat around tables with markers and cards and guiding questions, and it was a fun and upbeat exercise. In turn, I shared their observations at a School Meeting in December, and we are now using those ideas in a lot of places and will continue to do so. Students can share their experience, the things that are hard, and help shape responses.

Third, and most important, schools have to recognize their own limitations, train themselves in diverse ways, and be rigorously self-analytic. There are many things we do very well, but I also recognize that we make mistakes and must constantly grow and learn as teachers and as a school. Good schools look hard in the mirror, just not the rear-view mirror. Sometimes you realize you need outside perspectives. For instance, bringing in the Anti-Defamation League to moderate a full school exercise on hate speech was enormously provocative and beneficial in equipping faculty with useful skills and strategies. Having the faculty meet as a whole and in small groups with diversity consultant John Amaechi to examine our school and explore ways we as teachers could better speak about complex community issues was tremendously educational. We have eight teachers attending the National Association of Independent Schools conference next week; six attended the People of Color Conference in the fall; ten days ago several went to a conference of psychologists entitled “The 21st Century Teen”; others attended The Association of Boarding Schools symposium and took part in residential life discussions—and each of these national organizations has scores of lectures and workshops on best practices. Sharing our experience with each other, learning from other schools, seeking expertise from outside professionals, reflecting hard on our own beliefs and actions, identifying where we struggled and insisting on correction—all of this is vital and all of this we have done this year. No different than a competitive company, schools have to be able to learn from themselves, acknowledge failings and continually get better. I am proud to say we are a good school and not ashamed to say we are an imperfect one; and I know that sometimes the best institutions fail forward. I want us always to improve, and at Taft, we can never stop learning. This is a faculty of 120 life-long learners; I can guarantee you won’t find another more determined, passionate, reflective, self-critical group of teachers who are committed to doing this work better every day.

These are a few of the things—articulate clear expectations; empower students; educate and train the faculty and remain vigorously self-critical—which schools need to do if they are to grow stronger and

educate in a moment of enormous complexity. To believe that this work is necessary if our nation is to be able to have a different kind of discourse in the future is heady stuff. It would be a lot easier to define a school's mission in narrower terms, but I am not willing to do that. This work will have to begin in our schools, and it will be difficult, take time, and require real commitment, because this is not Cicero's or Hamilton's or even our own adolescent world. These are the challenges of *this* century.

To view a school like this is not for the faint of heart. After all, what I am saying is this: *the future of our nation's public discourse is in the hands of the boys and girls who are walking this campus*. Can you imagine a burden more heavy, and yet more inspiring as well?

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Let me close.

Not long ago I was reading some letters that Horace Taft wrote to his friend and headmaster Sherman Thacher. In February of 1899, he penned, "New problems keep coming up constantly, and I suppose that until I die I shall have a feeling of unrest and be trying to reach the next notch above." It was comforting to hear his words, to think of this great educator stretching and grasping and even missing. A year later he felt about the same. Maybe it has something to do with Watertown winters: "Dear Sherm, School begins tomorrow—the long winter term—and I have a bushel of good resolutions as of yore. I keep wishing for more strength and more sense and more everything. I make so many blunders and fall short of a very moderate ideal in so many ways that I wonder what I was meant for. But then I know that some of my work is good, and I regain my conceit again in as great measure as is good for me."

There's wisdom there, and his voice would sound familiar to every teacher, certainly to me, perhaps to you. He speaks to the essence of our work, and it is hard and glorious, exhausting and energizing, marked by trial and triumph, error and answer. I do not know specifically why he wrote what he did, but I do know that the challenges today—given the national culture, the power of technology, and the confusions of adolescence—are enormous. I have the same humility that Horace Taft did, the same recognition that in our mission of the education of the whole student, if we might sometimes blunder, our goodness will always prevail, and we will reach some moderate ideal.

The opportunity we have is an incredible one. We have a chance in a very special school to help and guide students, to give them an education, formed on every corner of campus, that they will carry with them forever, and I have this unshakeable faith that they will one day better our world as a result. After the Tucson shooting, and the editorials rang out, "How can our discourse change?" I was quite sure of the answer: that our nation was better than this, that history gave us models, and our best hope was in our children and their schools. We—you parents, the teachers here, I—will have to guide this generation on the journey through their trembling and uncertain landscape, and like all odysseys, both our stumbles and steps will change all of us.