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# ENGAGING THE MIND AND THE SPIRIT

By Rodney A. Smolla



JEREMY FLEMING

In the very last paragraph of Mark Twain's classic, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck tells us that he is planning to light out for the Western Territory because his aunt is out to "civilize" him. As Huck laments, "I can't stand it. I been there before."

Throughout the book Huck has his issues with both Aunt Sally and Aunt Polly. At the risk of you thinking me a bit Pollyanna-ish myself, my opening theme is Huck's closing theme: this problem he has with being "civilized."

I invite you to join me in reflection on the state of our contemporary civility and its discontents.

As a nation we are once again poised on the eve of an important election. Whatever your politics, whether you are liberal or conservative, Democrat, Republican or independent, you cannot help but notice that in many political races throughout the country this year, as in so many of our elections in recent years, the discourse has often been highly partisan, highly personal and highly polarized.

What is true of our politics extends more broadly across our culture, in this nation and around the world. At times it seems as if the whole planet is determined to work a cruel twist on the words of Abraham Lincoln, proceeding with malice toward all, and charity for none.

There is a curiosity to this. We might well expect that the health of our public discourse should be at an all-time high. Never have so many channels been open to so many voices. From the new media of Facebook, Twitter and texting to such old-fangled modes of communication as e-mail,

telephone, television, radio or cable, today we express and exchange views with such breathtaking speed and ease that we ought to be living in a "golden age" of public discourse, world-wide.

Yet many of us feel a nagging disquiet. Quantity does not equate with quality. Yes, we may talk more than ever before. But when we talk, particularly about issues that really matter — in politics, in religion, in science or the arts — we have, as a culture, become more strident, more shrill, more angry. Our discussions are increasingly laced with personal attacks, increasingly prone to caricature and superficial slogans and sarcastic sound-bites. Perhaps most fundamentally, we may be talking more, but we are listening less.

And when we do listen, we may not be listening with genuinely open hearts and open minds. We may instead simply be listening tactically, listening for our cues, listening for our chance to pounce, our opening to launch a counter-attack.

No one political party, no one religious viewpoint, no one space on the cultural spectrum has a monopoly on these bad habits. We are equal opportunity employers when it comes to the employment of devices that diminish the civility of our debates and in turn sap the strength of our democracy.

I urge you, however, to not despair!

We have it in our power to effectuate a rescue. It can begin right now, and right here.

*We cannot plausibly claim that we educate both the mind and the spirit,  
that we graduate students with an academic degree and a degree in character,  
unless we intentionally seek out students who yearn for engagement in both.*

To all of us at Furman University and in the world of higher education, I issue this challenge: Let us take on as an assignment the constructive improvement of the civility of our public discourse. And let that effort begin right here, at Furman.

What society sorely needs, and what we are uniquely well-suited to contribute, are the habits of engaging minds and spirits to the service of civilized and constructive debate and deliberation. Let us be leaders in encouraging such habits as a genuine willingness to listen, an avoidance of gratuitous personal attacks and cheap shots, a commitment to factual accuracy and intellectual honesty in our own advocacy, a de-emphasis on caricature, and a re-emphasis on character.

I know, and I appreciate, that many of our students and faculty members, our alumni and fellow citizens, have passionate feelings about the issues of our day. And in our passions we are often deeply and intensely engaged.

Trust me, I am not against that. I am not asking you to curb your enthusiasm. This is not a crusade for superficial politeness or political correctness. This is not a crusade for blandness, for a discourse that is sanitized and laundered so that it loses all its color, humor, bite and zip. Your passions are admirable. They are the stuff of a vibrant democracy and a vital marketplace of ideas.

There is a critical difference, however, between being engaged and being enraged. Furman is a university of engaged learning, not enraged learning, and we owe it to the nation — and to the world — to stand up and demonstrate the difference.

And so my challenge is for us to unite to build a culture at Furman that is a model for higher education, and by extension for society itself. I challenge you to rise above the coarse and the common, and by your leadership advance the common good.

As we rise to meet that challenge, we might constructively begin right here, right now, with reflection on this university's proud history and defining values.

On a formal level, of course, we are gathered to mark the installation of the 11th president of Furman. On a deeper and more resonant level, however, it is not the persona of the president that matters, but the identity of the university over which the president presides.

Furman was founded in 1826 by Richard Furman. It strikes me as significant, in both substance and symbol, that he was both a preacher and a patriot who called on South Carolinians to join the American Revolution for the good of the American whole. Richard Furman must have seen that a spiritual life was consistent with earnest participation in civil society, and that the purposes of a university were consistent with both.

His leadership would be followed by the leadership of presidents

James Clement Furman, Charles Manly, Andrew Montague, Edwin Poteat, William McGlothlin and Bennette E. Geer. And as we approached more modern times, by the leadership of Furman's more recent presidents: John Plyler, who had the vision to move the university from downtown to this current location, which was once an expanse of flat cotton fields nestled in this valley, and to imagine this campus as we know it today, resplendent with magnificent trees, ebullient fountains and graceful academic buildings; Gordon Blackwell, who had the moral courage to insist that Furman should not be racially segregated; John Johns, who through indomitable spirit and humane warmth expanded the size of the endowment and ensured the future of academic freedom at Furman; and David Shi, who guided Furman over the past 16 years with his commitment to engaged learning and passion for sustainability.

Yet while we may be tempted to mark the epochs of the university's history by the names of its presidents, what really matters is our resolve to rededicate ourselves to drawing from the abiding values of our past as we recommit ourselves to shaping the guiding principles of our future.

To that end, let me now speak directly to our students.

My hope is that every single student at Furman will pursue and will receive a dual degree — one in an academic discipline, and a second in the development of character. My hope is that all of you choose to major in the life of your mind and the growth of your spirit.

As you have heard me say before, and as you may expect to hear me repeat again and again, this experience is all about you. That is to say, it is all about you learning that life is *not* all about you.

The purpose of your education here, like the purpose of life itself, is not simply to acquire a credential. The point of life is not for you to enroll in the proper preschool so that you may enroll in an exemplary elementary school and move up to the right middle school, and then the right high school, and then the right college, and then the right graduate or professional school, and then the right job, and then the right promotion, and on and on and on, reducing life to something like an amusement park in which you traverse from ride to ride, or a video game in which you spend all your energy amassing points and powers and advancing from level to level — but in the end have nothing to show for the effort beyond the points themselves.

This is not to say that achievement has no place. It is to say that the meaning to be drawn from achievement must represent values deeper and causes greater than the achievement itself.

And so, at Furman, we would all deeply cherish the award of another Nobel Prize to one of our graduates — not for the sake of the bragging

rights attached to the Nobel Prize, but for the underlying betterment of humankind, the scientific discovery, the literary masterpiece, or the promotion of peace for which the prize was awarded. So, too, at Furman we would take deep pride in another national championship in any of our intercollegiate sports — not for the banner we hang in the arena or the trophy we place in the trophy case, but for the sacrifice, discipline, striving and character that the banner or trophy represents.

To our students I thus say: For Furman to really matter to you, its meaning must extend beyond what appears on your transcript, beyond the recitation of a major, a degree or a grade point average. For Furman to really matter to you, it must touch both your mind and your spirit, shape both your intellect and your character.

This effort must be a partnership. Furman cannot implore you to be engaged in mind and spirit if Furman is not engaged in mind and spirit. We cannot implore you, our students, to refrain from thinking of your education as a compilation of numbers — as the acquisition of credentials — unless we refrain from defining you as numbers or credentials.

This must begin even before our students arrive. It must begin with the values we profess and the messages we send when inviting students to apply to this university. It must continue through the processes we employ and the decisions we make in deciding whom to admit to this university. It must extend to all the classes we engage and the experiences we embrace once students are enrolled at this university.

We cannot plausibly claim that we educate both the mind and the spirit, that we graduate students with an academic degree and a degree in character, unless we intentionally seek out students who yearn for engagement in both. We cannot ask our students, once they have joined us, to think of themselves as more than numbers unless we first think of applicants as more than numbers when we invite them to join us.

And if, as a university, we are serious about attracting a more diverse student body — a student body enriched by peoples of all cultures and by members of all the great religions of the world, a student body that transcends lines of nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, sex, disability, politics and poverty, a student body representative of all parts of our country and all countries of the world, a student body truly engaged in mind and spirit — then we must fulfill the promise of that diversity and that engagement once our students arrive.

Diversity is a shallow and hollow achievement if those who comprise the community do not genuinely engage, interact and experience one another once here. Diversity becomes for the university itself a mere credential, a mere statistic, if as a university community we do not encourage



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our students, our faculty, our staff and our alumni to cross divides of generations and geography, of faith and politics, and to listen to one another with authentically open minds and hearts.

Let us be a community that moves beyond mere grudging tolerance or forced politeness into the realm of generous and genuine respect. As the great and soulful Aretha Franklin spelled it out: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me!”

Respect is at the heart of the liberal arts tradition. Respect is at the heart of American democracy. For all our differences and divisions, what we in America may most proudly and with unalloyed unity proclaim is our collective passion for democracy, for equality, for freedom of speech, for freedom of religion, for respect for human dignity.

Let all of us in higher education be keepers of that flame. As we participate in the global marketplace — in the global community — let us be a beacon of civility, compassion and respect.

Let that respect come from our deepest beliefs in the essential dignity and the essential worth of every human being.

And lastly, let us not forget the joy.

Let us take joy in one another, and remember to count each day the blessings of liberty, the beauty of this lovely campus, the memories of our bright college years, the gift of our families and our friendships.

As you, our students, become our future, as you grow in mind and spirit to assume positions of leadership and service, may you never surrender the joy, the sweet innocence of childhood, the delight that you and your parents and teachers felt as you first experienced the magic of discovery, from the electric charge of the lightning bolt to the enchanting charm of the lightning bug.

May all who have been touched by the Furman experience, from those Furman graduates now in their 90s to those future Furman graduates born in the '90s, be emboldened by the words of two Dylans. By the poetry of Dylan Thomas, who urged that we not go gentle into that good night, and of the songwriter Bob Dylan, who expressed in song what I express for you as my closing prayer:

*May God Bless and Keep You Always  
 May your wishes all come true  
 May you always do for others  
 And let others do for you  
 May you build a ladder to the stars  
 And climb on every rung  
 May you stay  
 Forever young. |F|*