

The lost art of discourse

by BROCK WEIR

What do you do in your day-to-day life when you're having a conversation with someone and then, unexpectedly, the chat takes a weird turn and you find yourself vehemently disagreeing with the views they are presenting?

Do you take it all in your stride, smiling with some degree of benevolence, waiting for them to wind up whatever claptrappy monologue they've committed to, before deftly steering the direction into calmer, hopefully more pleasant waters?

Do you bring out the facts and figures to bolster your side, or do you just glare at the person hoping they get the message? Maybe you just get up from the table and walk away thinking, 'Not today!' or simply just brush it aside, knowing that this is the person you've engaged with, know where they stand, and just let it wash over you like water off a duck's back?

There's no real wrong answer in this scenario, unless, perhaps, throwing your drink in the other person's face or dramatically flipping over the table as you exit the coffee shop.

But these are all in-person scenarios; all bets seem to be off if the only thing separating you from your conversation partner is a screen.

If you've ever made the mistake of wandering into an online comments section, whatever the platform, it's clear that the screen in-between can sometimes make people behave in ways that would be unthinkable in person.

This isn't a new phenomenon when it comes to political posts ? the temperature in this particular kitchen has been way too high for far too long ? but it's becoming pervasive in almost every realm of online discussion these days.

In recent months, I've seen debates rage over the most unlikely things.

An acquaintance recently posted that he and his wife went out on what they hoped would be a romantic date night. They hadn't had one in a while and were excited to try out a new place?only to have their experience mired by a couple of kids running wild through the place as their oblivious parents enjoyed their meal.

Granted, only one perspective of this scene was offered and there might have been a few exaggerations here and there, but their post struck a chord with the masses and people piled in the comments, acting like they'd seen the whole thing.

Comments ranged from sympathy with their experience to a nod in the direction of the other parents who might have been wanting to get a night out themselves, and perhaps couldn't find a babysitter.

That last comment was fair enough, but it quickly devolved into criticisms of the original poster for lacking empathy for the other parents, that they were commenting from a 'place of privilege,' as it was assumed this childless couple were lucky enough to secure a sitter, and others reacting as if they tripped one of the kids as they whizzed by the table out of nothing but sport and spite.

Outside of people I know, we only need to look as far as the online 'debate' regarding the accuracy of Christopher Nolan's new record-busting film adaptation of The Odyssey, which opened in theatres a couple of weeks ago to widespread acclaim.

Widespread, yes, but certainly not universal as people have chimed in about everything from its historical accuracy to the casting of Oscar-winning actress Lupita Nyong'o as Helen of Troy and Oscar-nominee Elliott Page as Sinon.

The 'discourse' surrounding the film ? and I use quotes here because I simply can't believe it's actual discourse ? has been truly

bonkers.

People apparently are content to rip each other to shreds online about the accuracy of different plot points in Homer's epic poem and how it has been translated to screen. How historically accurate they think a work involving a cyclops, men being turned into swine, and the wrath of mythical gods, can be is a matter of debate ? but, at this point, I don't think it's a debate worth having, at least to the level of heat it's being exposed to.

As for the feigned outrage at two acclaimed actors playing two minor, fictional roles in the three-hour epic ? well, I can only imagine these were the same people who were spitting venom at Cynthia Erivo's casting as Elphaba in the two Wicked pictures ? apparently outraged that the director had the audacity to cast a Black woman to play a Green woman? thus depriving all the real Green actresses out there a chance to finally grasp a rung on the Hollywood ladder?

There's really only one reason for the outrage, however ridiculous, but we'll leave it at that for now.

Nearly every time I venture into the comments, I'm met with instant regret, and not a small amount of nostalgia.

Growing up, my personal interests and hobbies didn't necessarily lend themselves to friend-making. That's not to say I received a lot of flack for preferring black-and-white sitcoms to cartoons and NBC's Thursday Night Comedy Lineup, to pick just one example, but it didn't make for a lot of common ground as far as conversation was concerned.

The first time I ever logged onto what was still dubbed the ?information superhighway,? I felt I had finally found my people, entered into easy, respectful conversations, and forged true friendships that have lasted almost 30 years now.

I sure count myself as lucky because I don't think building those bonds through a screen is necessarily conducive in the online climate we now find ourselves in, where more and more people confuse their opinion with fact, seek validation of their views rather than the truth, and consider meeting any debate with vehemence less than your conversation partner as complacency with their views.

Maybe the proverbial genie is too far out of the bottle at this point, but couldn't we at least attempt to carry on an online discussion in the same respect we would expect with face-to-face discourse?

Call me old fashioned, but these tips from 1875's A Gentleman's Guide to Etiquette, as presented in a blog by The Art of Manliness (a title which undoubtedly spurred its own heated debate at some point) are pretty darn refreshing:

?Even if convinced that your opponent is utterly wrong, yield gracefully, decline further discussion, or dextrously turn the conversation, but do not obstinately defend your own opinion until you become angry? Many there are who, giving their opinion, not as opinion, but as a law, will defend their position by such phrases as, 'Well, if I were president or governor, I would,' ? and while by the warmth of their argument they prove that they are utterly unable to govern their own temper, they will endeavour to persuade you that they are perfectly competent to take charge of the government of the nation.

?Retain, if you will, a fixed political opinion, yet do not parade it upon all occasions, and, above all, do not endeavour to force others to agree with you. Listen calmly to their ideas upon the same subjects, and if you cannot agree, differ politely, and while your opponent may set you down as a bad politician, let him be obliged to admit that you are a gentleman??

What do you say, ladies and gentlemen?