“Spirited Disagreements: How To Emerge Enlightened”

Double RULE Alumni Spotlight
by Dr. Danielle C. Rhubart & Bill Zeiders, RULE XVI

It seems we step warily over suspected land mines of disagreement rather than engage in the fervency of another’s perspective. This article, miraculously unsolicited from two RULE alums, captures how they created a community within their class. They get to the grit of synthesis like balm to a burn. ~jd

Danielle Rhubart—My favorite memories from RULE are the ones sitting around a table with others - over a meal or drink - and talking about things we disagreed about. With equal measures of respect and curiosity, we approached those debates in hopes of not only sharing our perspective, but also excited to have our own personal Q&A with the “other” perspective.

For example, Bill Zeiders and I - with others from our class - once had a deep discussion about genetically modified crops. As some know, this can become a very heated topic, but it didn’t for us. Instead, I left that energy-filled discussion having gained more than I would have if I had had that same conversation with people who thought exactly like I do. For example:

• I learned how to better articulate “my side.”
• I learned where the holes were in “my side,” the parts of my argument that deserved rightful critique.
• I better understood the other perspective, including its underlying values.
• I learned how to tailor my perspective to build on those underlying values and on our commonalities.
• I became hopeful that a polarized topic might actually have room for shared goals.

These difficult discussions didn’t separate us, in fact, they built us up as a network of trusted professionals. Bill, for example, went so far as to connect me with a professional contact when I moved to a new city and also offered constructive feedback on presentations I later gave in RULE.

While RULE is a unique space for building these types of relationships, I would argue that with concerted effort, there are spaces in our homes, communities and workplaces to do this same good work as colleagues, neighbors, citizens and as humans. To give it a try, consider the following.

• See the “other” person as a human with many gifts and skills within and beyond the topic at hand.
• Start from a place of trying to establish commonality and shared goals.
• Use phrases like: “that’s interesting,” “I hadn’t thought about that,” “can you say more about that?”
• Use probing questions to better understand the roots and values of the “other” perspective.
• Remember that everyone is much more willing to hear your perspective if you have first shown a genuine interest in their perspective.

Always close a difficult conversation with appreciation, reassuring the “other” side and yourself that there was value in what was just shared; let them know what you learned from the conversation.

Danielle Rhubart, Lerner Postdoctoral Fellow, Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University

Bill Zeiders, Co-Director of Communications and Wildlife & Domestic Animal Issue Specialist, PA Farm Bureau
**Bill Zeiders**—RULE presents a unique environment to interact with people from many walks of life. The opportunity to respectfully disagree is something that is seemingly becoming harder to find in our current times. The simple act of actively listening to someone who sees things differently than you can seem difficult.

When I came to RULE, I was grateful for my classmates’ wide diversity of views. I think it is too easy today to shut out any voice you disagree with and surround yourself in the false security of an echo-chamber. Leadership requires more than that. A willingness to listen, a spirit of learning, and an examination of your own opinions are essential.

Conversation with someone you disagree with is a skill that requires practice. In conversations with Danielle, and others in the class, about ideas on which we were often opposed, the ability to respectfully convey my own point of view in the face of scrutiny only helped bring my own beliefs into sharper focus. I think we often fear to examine our own opinions and why we believe them. But doing so can make your convictions stronger, or make you realize that you might not be seeing the whole picture. It is essential to be able to have a conversation of disagreement that does not devolve into argument.

Danielle and my conversations were always respectful, even though we often disagreed. But I know that we both often came away from our disagreements with a better understanding of the other’s point of view.

My experience at RULE reinforced in me that it is actually good to be open to other points of view. Through the wisdom of people I would probably not have had the opportunity to speak to without being in the class, I not only made lifelong friends and professional connections, but I like to think that I also gained a greater understanding of how the world works.

If you approach a conversation in the spirit of learning, by having a genuine curiosity of other people, their opinions, and why they hold those opinions, it can help you to connect with them. It can also help you understand something that perhaps you didn’t before.

We shouldn’t be afraid of new ideas, and we shouldn’t be afraid to have our own ideas challenged. The process of defending our own ideas and opinions can only be beneficial. We must be able to gain a greater understanding of ourselves, and be able to admit to ourselves when we’re wrong.

“If you must take care that your opinions do not differ in the least from those of the person with whom you are talking, you might just as well be alone.”

Japanese Poet Yoshida Kensko (Lapham’s Quarterly)

RULE and its predecessor sibling PALP program have yielded over 700 alumni. Whether a recent alum, or one that attended RULE decades ago, RULE experiences stay relevant and resonant.

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