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We sorely need the give-and-take of civil discourse

By Sarah McIntosh

How many discussions have you had about J. Lo's twins? What about the latest blockbuster film? Now, how many recent conversations have you had about public policy? The proper role of government? Philosophy? Economics?

Kudos if you can recall the last conversation you had about the latter items. But for most of us, we are more likely to know the latest celebrity gossip than what's going on in the rest of the world.

I can't say that "back when I was a kid" we talked about the more important stuff, either, because my generation is especially guilty of failing to discuss the more important things. And it's unfortunate.

What have we lost when we would rather sit with friends and watch hours of reality TV instead of discussing the latest book we read or what we heard about on the news that day? We might shrug it off and say it's not that important, but it is that important.

We've lost civil discourse. The problem is that it doesn't just hurt us individually; it hurts us as a society. Civil discourse and debate are integral to preserving representative democracy and to progress. In discussions we are challenged to think critically of our views, to consider alternatives, and to come up with solutions.

So why are we losing this aspect of our culture? There are probably several reasons, and it is important to identify them so that they can be overcome or at least considered.

One reason might be fear. It is much harder to be an expert on international politics than to follow what's going on in the life of the stars. Because of this, many people start out not knowing much about the important things to discuss and they let that hold them back. That's a mistake. It's better to ask questions and jump into the debate than to ignore the discussion altogether. The truth is that most of us aren't experts and none of us are experts on everything. That doesn't mean that our opinions are unimportant, and it doesn't warrant neglecting the subjects altogether. We must overcome this fear and jump in somewhere.

Secondly, perhaps we are wary of arguing. We don't want to cause discord at the dinner party or at the cocktail hour. But why not? The trick is not to take things personally. We must reclaim the enjoyment of a little intelligent good-faith jesting.

Yet another barrier could be the fast-paced environment in which we live. On one hand, this means there is an abundant amount of information at our fingertips. On the other, it means that

information is constantly changing. But that's one reason that discussion is important. Maybe one person missed the latest news on a subject that someone else can catch him or her up on.

Furthermore, too often we seem too busy to stop and talk. It may take longer to discuss a local political issue than it does to mention the latest film we saw. Few of us sit at the kitchen table and discuss things with our families, and even less often do we invite friends over for discussion.

Whatever the reasons might be for losing the culture of discussing ideas, it must be remedied. The cost is too high.

First, it costs us socially. Discussions allow us to connect with other people and to think through ideas. What are we robbing our children of when we don't set an example of open discourse of ideas? Debating with each other helps develop critical-thinking skills and the ability to articulate ideas and messages. This, in turn, enables people to come up with solutions and innovations. By sharing ideas and knowledge, we help society to progress.

Second, it costs us politically. Representative democracy depends on active citizens who monitor the issues and hold politicians accountable. But if people stop paying attention to public policy issues and instead defer to others, that accountability is lost.

We all must challenge ourselves to go beyond discussions on pop culture and to delve into the more complex, but very important, issues of the day. If we fail to do so, it will be a loss for each of us and for society as a whole.

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