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Elevating Civic Discourse

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Life is complicated. TV talking heads, radio hosts, and op-ed writers might say they have the answers. But there are few simple answers to be had.

Take stimulus spending. Is it wise to spend money to stimulate the economy? If we don’t, we’ll go further into recession. If we do, we’ll increase our record-breaking deficit. So which is better?

How about health care? Surely we would like everyone to have the best care possible. But we don’t have unlimited resources. So how do we decide which care gets funded? And who should make this decision?

Or how about striking the right balance between civil liberties and fighting terrorism? If we compromise our civil liberties for security, aren’t we sacrificing the principles we cherish most about our country? Yet another 9/11 attack would cause tragic loss of life and likely result in an even greater curtailment of our rights. So why not let the government do whatever it takes to prevent an attack?

This complexity is confusing, even scary. Most of us would rather have simple answers. And there are plenty of pundits and politicians who will tell us they’ve got them.

But anyone who is the least bit thoughtful knows there are no pat answers for our society’s most challenging problems. There are tough choices with winners and losers. There are principles that inevitably have to be compromised.

If we are to thrive as a society, we cannot be afraid to wrestle with this complexity. We may not get factual certainty, but we can still get the best information available. We may have to make tough choices, but we can argue about which choices are fairest. We may sometimes bend our principles, but we can vigorously debate how to stay as true to them as possible.

All of this makes me think of my colleague Robert Justin Lipkin who died two weeks ago. Bobby, as he liked to be called, was trained as a lawyer but he also had a Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton.

If there was a theme to Bobby’s scholarship, it was the importance of healthy civic discourse. Maybe it was the philosopher in him, but Bobby was always searching for the best answers. Admittedly, he had strong opinions of his own, and as his colleagues could tell you, he certainly expressed them. But he never dismissed those who disagreed with him.

He wanted his ideas tested. He knew, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously observed, that “the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.”

If we are going to conquer our country’s many challenges, we need to be more like Bobby. We need to stop attacking anyone who disagrees with us and be open to considering our opponents’ arguments. We need to accept that there is always more to know, and embrace the opportunity to keep learning. We need to recognize that our problems do not have simple answers, but that we can strive for more informed answers, more thoughtful answers, and more just answers.

In his last few years of life, Bobby began writing a blog called “Essentially Contested America.” At the heart of his blog was the recognition that concepts like “truth,” “justice” and “the American way” will always be contested. We may all embrace these ideals, but we will forever debate their meaning in practice.

Such disagreements are inevitable in a pluralist society. But Bobby’s response was to keep searching for common ground. He wanted us to commit ourselves to a never-ending civic discourse in which we are always learning, debating, and striving for consensus.

Bobby asked in his first blog entry how we should deal with the essential contestability of our most basic concepts. Here’s what he said: “Deliberatively! Pragmatically! We need to provide reasons for our conclusions, vigilantly check and recheck these reasons, take seriously the opposing conclusions of others, and with humility try to formulate the most comprehensive perspectives possible. At that time we will either have achieved consensus, or what is so much more likely, we will have refined our conflicts so that we understand just what is at stake.”

This is a recipe for a healthy democracy. It is a far cry from what our democracy currently does.

Rest in peace, Bobby.

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