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Irreconcilable Differences

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Dear Faithful Colleagues,

Although my wife Kelly and I dated for seven years before “tying the knot,” the first few years of marriage were more challenging than we expected. In retrospect, it wasn’t the fact that we moved across the country just weeks after marrying, nor was it the fact that our first home was a residence hall of 600 first-year students on the corner of the notorious High Street bordering The Ohio State University.

What kept subtly tripping us up was an unconscious narrative that we had to see the world the same way. Whether it was politics, family traditions, or the correct way to load the dishwasher, it troubled us when we didn’t come down on the same page. In the election year in 1992, for example, we had different reactions to candidates. Our conversations at times were uncomfortable. Why didn’t she see them the way I did? For whatever reason, we thought the goal for a solid relationship was consensus. One night, Kelly said something I have never forgotten. “If you want me to always agree,” she said, “you should have married YOU. Instead, you married ME.”

Twenty-five years later, I see the gift of abiding in dissonance. It has been quite different from learning to “agree to disagree.” That adage implies that disagreement means done—it is the period at the end of the sentence, if you will. What we’ve stumbled on in marriage is what can happen when two parties agree to keep on disagreeing. Simply put, it’s the value of staying in it with each other, without the goal of consensus. This small tweak has allowed us to grow, adapt, and pivot. Learning to trust the value of some differences, instead of solving them, has opened us to beauty, and change, and new perspectives.

Of course, the need to embrace difference is not unique to marriage—nor is the hesitation to engage in ongoing dialogue with those who see the world differently. It seems that everywhere you look—on our campuses, statehouses, and social-media feeds—folks are talking at one another about their own beliefs, values, and perceptions of the world. These kinds of conversations seem to be exactly the type that could benefit from a little “abiding in dissonance” strategy, where listening takes the driver’s seat. It’s for this reason that the editorial team of About Campus was especially intrigued by John Inazu’s work and advocacy for embracing a perspective of “confident pluralism,” which he explored with me in a compelling interview. I suspect you’ll be motivated by John’s articulation of the three civic practices (tolerance, humility, and patience) for “staying in it” with others in spite of deep differences.

Yes, there are differences in many of our worldviews that are irreconcilable. They are not going away. So the question really does become, what are we going to do with our dissonance? The usual options include suppress, resent, regress, digress. Or, we could learn to trust them. In doing so, I wonder if we would find in our differences some of our best teachers, necessary champions that keep us from ideological calcification, making our world and ourselves more malleable and strong.

With hope,

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