

We the Students Essay Contest Winning Essay

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By Derek Jiang

On a hot summer Indian day in 1994, the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg rode an elephant together, smiling as they approached their quarters.¹ Ginsburg, a Clinton appointee, championed gender equality in her majority opinion in *U.S. v. Virginia*. The Reagan-appointed Scalia, on the other hand, fiercely opposed the ruling, arguing it created new Constitutional interpretations.² Scalia called for the repeal of certain sections of the Voting Rights Act, under the premise that they violated the equal sovereignty of the states. When the courts finally did so in *Shelby County v. Holder*, Ginsburg dissented ferociously.³ Despite their vastly different interpretations of the law, the two justices were, in Ginsburg's own words, "best buddies," frequently attending operas together.⁴ Their views could not have been more apart, but they were one and the same in their respect for the Constitution and for each other.

I often pondered how Scalia and Ginsburg got along so well. After all, the two must have argued incessantly, and up until recently, I always thought the presence of two conflicting viewpoints in a conversation meant the inevitable clashing of two armies, a ruthless battle of chaos and confrontation to force the other to concede. This view of "discourse" likely originated in a 12-year-old me sitting on the couch, watching the war for dominance during the 2016 presidential election.

As citizens, we are all obligated to participate in democracy. This sense of duty compelled me, a young boy who could not even vote, to watch the 2016 presidential debate. Much to my dismay, the debate was full of hurling insults; Clinton denounced Trump as a dangerous and lying sexist, while Trump vilified Clinton as hateful and shamefully corrupt.⁵ I learned little about what policies each would implement and how their leadership would address the crises plaguing our nation. Even after scouring online comments for answers, the only thing I grasped was that Republicans and Democrats hated each other more, but neither side understood each other any better. In this polarized and toxic political environment where both sides fought viciously to be the winner, everybody was a loser, and I, a child merely seeking clarity as he stepped into the real world, was left confused and even angry. I knew that something was wrong, something was missing...

After that appalling exposure, my scared and lost self vowed to steer clear of politics. Then one day, my English teacher said something that still resonates with me to this day: argument is a discussion. Armed with that knowledge in mind, I decided to talk to my close friend about a topic we fundamentally disagreed on: student debt. According to the Harvard Business Review, student loan debt crushes the financial independence and mental health of millions and has a "chilling effect" on the entire economy; at nearly \$1.6 trillion, the staggering figure eclipses even "accumulated car loans and credit card debt."⁶ Such a crisis, in my opinion, warranted immediate government action to relieve the heavy burden. My

friend, on the other hand, disagreed, citing his belief in limited government as well as the unfairness of proposed solutions. This could have turned out like the 2016 presidential debate, full of hostile bickering, but for the first time in my life, I truly listened. I dropped my ego and desire to “win,” stepped into his shoes, and constantly reevaluated my perspective with his ideas, and he did the same. There were no insults or shouting matches to be traded, only insightful discussion. After three hours, while I still did not agree with my friend’s position, I understood and respected it, and the empathy and friendship between us grew stronger. The experience was so gratifying and rewarding because prior to this conversation, I did not know civil discourse was possible. To finally be part of a “true argument” was enlightening, even exciting.

When asked on *60 Minutes* how he and Ginsburg got along so well, Justice Antonin Scalia replied, “I attack ideas. I don’t attack people.”⁷ That is the cornerstone of proper civil discourse—the exchange of ideas without personal attacks. It is building bridges between people to understand each other, not burning them down. It is neither side actively trying to “win” yet both sides coming out as winners. It is exercising our freedom of thought and speech to educate others. It is listening, respecting, and caring for our fellow citizens. It is creating a more diverse and inclusive democracy where every citizen’s voice is heard. It is making sure our government institutions work for all Americans through a system of separation of powers and checks and balances that facilitates cooperation and compromise, regardless of how polarized we are. It is Scalia and Ginsburg becoming best friends, not in spite of their differences, but because of them.

Works Cited

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