The Art of Disagreeing Well

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How Debate Teaches Us to Listen and Be Heard

'Electrifying … A user manual for our polarised world' Adam Grant

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INTRODUCTION

Before my ninth birthday, I lost the ability to disagree. I experienced the loss as a kind of erosion: there was no disabling moment, only a slow and steady fade. In the beginning, I resisted. Though the words caught in my throat, I found ways to spit out my objections. But then I tired of the effort, risk, and self-disclosure that arguments entail. So I began to linger in the silences between speech and, once there, told myself I could find a way to live in this safe and hidden place.

It was July 2003 and my parents and I had just moved to Australia from South Korea. The decision to immigrate—in pursuit of fresh opportunities in life, work, and education—had excited me in the beginning, but now in Wahroonga, this quiet, wealthy suburb in the north of Sydney, I could see that it was a folly. We had left behind good friends, food made with actual spices, and 48 million people who spoke our language. And for what? The alienation I felt—in the refrigerated aisles of Woolworths or atop the jungle gym at the local park—had the irritating quality of being boldly chosen.

In response to my complaints, Mum and Dad were sympathetic but unmoved. I got the sense from how they repeated the word *transition* that discomfort and confusion had been accounted for in some grand arithmetic.

My parents were somewhat dissimilar to each other. Dad grew up as part of a sprawling, conservative family in a country town on the easternmost point of the Korean Peninsula. Mum was

raised by urbane progressives in Seoul. He eschewed material comforts; she had an instinct for glamour. He loved people; she prized ideas. However, the stages of immigration brought to the fore qualities they shared: a fierce independence and a determination to realize their dreams.

I spent these early weeks in Sydney in the back seat of a rental car as my parents zipped around town working through a list of tasks. Furniture purchases, tax file number registration, an apartment lease—each tied us more closely to this city but none inspired a sense of attachment. When I asked if there was anything I could do, my parents said I had only one job: "Find your feet at school, okay?"

The locals in Wahroonga knew the elementary school in their suburb as the Bush School. Surrounded by a wildlife reserve, the school campus was always on the verge of being overrun by plant life. Thickets of bush clawed against classroom windows and earsized mushrooms bloomed on the seats of the abandoned amphitheater. In the summer, the place was lush and green. But on this wintry Monday morning in August, my first day of third grade, the leaves shimmered pale silver and the boundaries of the campus were covered in shadows.

At the blackboard in class 3H, Miss Hall, a young woman dressed in powder blue, wore an expression so soft that it seemed to dissolve every edge on her face. She gestured for me to come through the door and, as I shuffled to the front of the room, wrote on the board in perfect cursive: "Bo Seo, South Korea." In front of me, some thirty pairs of eyes widened at this unlikely combination of words.

For the rest of the week, I found myself at the center of the class's attention. On the playground, I learned that the shtick that played for the most laughs was mock argument. One of my classmates would praise some achievement of Western civilization—"How good is white bread?"—and I would respond,

using the dozens of English words within my reach, "No, rice is better!" The other kids shook their heads but could not disguise their exhilaration at the hint of conflict.

However, over the course of the month, as the novelty of my presence subsided, disagreements between me and my peers took on a different tone. When conflict arose on the sports field or in a group project, my halting attempts to express myself caused exasperation and flashes of anger. In these zero-sum situations, I learned that the distance between being odd and being at odds was short, and a gesture or some words, misinterpreted or misconstrued, could push one over the line.

The worst part of crossing language lines is adjusting to live conversation—to its rapid, layered rhythms and many about-faces. In an argument, these difficulties compound. Language becomes less precise, and the pressure squeezes one's faculties. Tripping over loose words and broken sentences—the detritus of broken speech—I never got far.

Some kids, inspired less by malice than by a savage instinct for power, pressed their advantage. They scrunched up their faces and asked whether anyone could understand what I was saying. Others strained to make accommodations, then faltered in their goodness and walked away with a sheepish "Never mind." For months, I tried to hold my own. The fighting self, the bargaining self, the pleading self—each one attempted his work.

Then, sometime before the end of the school year in November 2003, I found myself unwilling to keep arguing. No issue or principle could seem to justify the costs of disagreement. If I tried to override that judgment, some combination of my legs, stomach, and throat would revolt.

So I learned to wear a distant smile. In the classroom, I rushed to admit ignorance, while on the playground, I conceded fault. Even as my language skills improved, the range of words on which I relied most narrowed to *yes* and *okay*. In the early days of

my compromise, I committed to memory the disagreements that I did not voice but might one day wish to revisit. Then, in time, even these memories faded away.

By the time I entered the fifth grade in January 2005, I had found ways to make the most of my agreeableness. School reports praised my sunny disposition and ability to follow instructions. Among friends, I mediated conflicts and steered conversations toward consensus. My parents reported to family back in South Korea that I was adjusting magnificently.

And I was. Whereas I had once been embarrassed by my inability to hold my own in an argument, I could now see that the real embarrassment lay in choosing to argue at all—in the red faces, in the flying spittle, in the uselessness of the exercise. I felt I had found the groove in which I could ride out my childhood.

Then on a spring afternoon in March 2005, something changed and a habit of life almost two years in the making came undone.

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Walking into the assembly hall after lunchtime, I cursed myself for the act of self-betrayal. Three days earlier, my fifth grade teacher, Ms. Wright, had called for volunteers to join a new activity at the school: "Debate is a structured argument in which two teams vie for the hearts and minds of the audience; a battle of the wits!" Almost everyone declined the offer, but when the teacher flagged me down on my way out of the classroom, I found myself nodding at her request. To avoid an argument, I opted into debate.

The rules were simple. A neutral third party assigned a topic ("That we should ban all zoos") and assigned one team of three people to argue in favor and another team to argue against, without regard to the speakers' actual beliefs. The first

affirmative speaker opened the debate, which then toggled back and forth between the two sides until all the speakers had spoken for their allotted time (in our case, four minutes).

At the end of the round, the adjudicator—another neutral party, often experienced in debate—delivered a judgment on which side had won. They evaluated individual debaters on three measures: the *manner* of speech, the *matter* of their arguments, and the *method* or strategy behind their contributions. Yet for their ultimate adjudication they needed only to consult their consciences on one question: Which side had convinced them?

I had not slept well the previous night. Though in a regular debate teams had limited time to prepare their cases (anywhere between fifteen minutes and one hour), we had been given several days. This felt like a mercy. The difficulty of everyday disagreements lay for me in their immediacy. How I had wished in these altercations to be able to pause time, if only for a moment, to gather my thoughts and summon the right language. Now, as the first affirmative speaker, I could plan most everything in advance, and so I had, researching and writing into the wee hours.

The assembly hall had been simply arranged. Onstage were two tables, each with three seats, that looked out from a modest height into the crowd of sixty-odd kids seated in snaking rows. Avoiding the gaze of the audience members, I walked behind my two teammates: Isabella, an athlete with a striding gait, and Tim, a neurotic kid whose legs squirmed to their destination. Overhead, the rain drummed on the metal roof an ominous percussion.

Our opponents from 5J, the other fifth-grade class, had already taken their seats, and as we climbed the stairs to meet their level, they flashed us looks of derision. The two girls on their team soon resumed chatting between themselves and

waving at friends in the audience. But the third member, Arthur, a model student in wire-rimmed glasses, kept staring in our direction. I had had trouble with Arthur on the playground, where he used his smarts to demonstrate his superior command of subjects ranging from botany to World War II and left opponents speechless with rapid-fire arguments and constant interruptions.

However, on this stage, where we had been promised equal time and consideration, Arthur somehow seemed less untouchable. Whereas before I had noticed only his arched eyebrows and perfectly shined shoes, I now spied the small stain on his shirt and the mole on his right cheek.

At the center of the stage, Ms. Wright pulled back her mane of hair and opened the debate in a roaring voice: "Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome! What you are about to watch is a debate. In a debate, when someone—anyone—is delivering a speech, everyone else has to listen in silence." She placed one finger across her lips and led the group in a twenty-second-long "shhhhhhh."

Then with her other hand, Ms. Wright picked up a notebook. "Turn your book sideways and draw six columns down the page, one for each speaker. I want you to write in the columns all the points raised by each person. The rule in debate is that every argument requires a response, simply for having been raised." The audience rushed to follow her instructions. Some kids used rulers to draw perfect, measured lines; others went freehand. "When the round is done, this is how we will decide who has won: not on the basis of which position we hold or who the speakers are, but on the quality of the arguments. Any questions?"

The next thing I heard was the topic—"That we should ban all zoos"—followed by my name. I felt the weight of the room's

attention shift toward me. To scattered applause, I gathered my index cards and approached the center of the stage.

What I saw from the edge of the platform was unlike anything I had seen before. Every pair of eyes in the audience stared at me, blinking. Every mouth hung open but silent. The adjudicator, a sixth-grade teacher, held his pen against a blank notepad, ready to write down my ideas. For the first time since I moved to Australia, I felt that I might be heard.

I had spent years avoiding arguments. Had my mistake been not to run toward them?

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Some seventeen years after that fateful day in 2005, I am still running toward good disagreements. On this path, I have reached several milestones but no finish line. I have twice won the world championships for competitive debate, and I have coached two of the most successful debate teams in the world: the Australian Schools Debating Team and the Harvard College Debating Union. I have moved around the world—from South Korea to Australia, to the United States and China—and searched in each place for better ways to disagree.

This book, the sum of a short lifetime's reflection, is about two forms of debate.

One is competitive debate, a formal game in which rival sides argue their case on an assigned topic before an impartial adjudicator. The origins of this contest stretch back to antiquity—to ancient Greek rhetorical education, to early Buddhist religious practice—and its evolution is intertwined with the development of parliamentary democracy. Today, competitive debate thrives in high schools and universities across the world and counts a disproportionate number of former presidents and prime ministers, Supreme Court justices, captains of industry,

prize-winning journalists, prominent artists, and civil society leaders as alums. The activity is dead easy to learn but impossible to master. For this reason, it makes room for children and presidential candidates. (What does this say about each?)

The other form of debate is the everyday disagreements we encounter in our lives. Few people join a debate team, but everyone argues, in some form, most days. Since we disagree not only about the way things ought to be but also about the way things are, the mere act of perceiving can spark conflict. In the resulting arguments, we seek to persuade others, find solutions, test our beliefs, and defend our pride. We judge, correctly, that our personal, professional, and political interests rest on our ability not only to win these arguments but also to prevail in the right way.

My argument is that competitive debate can teach us how to disagree better in our everyday lives. Disagreeing well can mean many things—getting one's way, reducing future conflict, preserving the relationship with one's opponent—and this book will have something to say about each of these. However, I define the aim in more modest terms: we should disagree in such a way that the outcome of having the disagreement is better than not having it at all.

To this end, I offer in this book a tool kit and a testament.

In the first half of the book, I present five basic pieces of competitive debate—topic, argument, rebuttal, rhetoric, quiet—as well as the skills and strategies needed to wield them. I believe that these elements reveal a physics that underlies our everyday arguments and, in sum, form a body of knowledge that is more accessible than formal logic and more broadly applicable than negotiation.

The second half of the book applies the lessons of competitive debate to four areas of life—bad disagreements, relationships, education, technology—and builds the case for how good

arguments can improve our private and public lives. Here, I suggest that the millennia-old tradition of competitive debate provides a testament for how a community built *around*, not *despite*, arguments might work. As with any true testament, the conclusions are not always clear-cut. The history of debate is replete with instances of domination, manipulation, glibness, and exclusion. However, I argue that debate *also* creates the possibility for something altogether more wonderful: lives and societies enriched by exciting, loving, revelatory disagreement.

I admit this is a weird time to be writing a book about good arguments. These days, few of us are shipping off to fight a war against our political opponents, but the suspicion, contempt, and hatred that disagreements stir in us seem as vast as they have ever been. In the resulting arguments, we assume bad intentions and talk past one another. Precisely at a time when the will to debate seems ascendant, the values and skills required to sustain such conversations have sunk to a nadir. This is what we mean by the term *polarization*—not that we disagree, or even that we disagree too much or too often, but that we disagree badly: our arguments are painful and useless.

Amid all the shouting, some people have abandoned hope for disagreements. In 2012, the Republican candidate for the U.S. presidency, Mitt Romney, told a private gathering that some 47 percent of people would always side with the Democrats and that these people were chronic dependents who paid no income tax. Four years later, the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, described half of her opponent's supporters as "deplorables." Both politicians apologized, but the notion that some people are beyond the pale of persuasion and rational argument is a taboo that is nonetheless built into the prevailing logic of electoral politics.

However, the worst consequences of such loss of faith may land closer to home—in the silences that emerge between lovers,

friends, and family. University of California researchers found that, weeks after the U.S. presidential election in 2016, Thanksgiving dinners attended by people from precincts with opposing politics were curtailed by thirty to fifty minutes. "Nationwide, 34 million hours of cross-partisan Thanksgiving dinner discourse were lost."

The tragedy is that there has never been a better time to debate. Ours is a period of unprecedented personal freedom, political suffrage, and global connection. The public square is more diverse, and the public conversation more contested, than ever before. Acknowledging the ways in which our disagreements are deficient need not detract from these important achievements. Nor does it mean we should romanticize the past. Never have we embraced such pluralism and better managed our disagreements. So we need to forge a new path.

In such unsettled times, we may be tempted to pine for consensus—to dwell on our commonalities at the exclusion of our differences. As a naturally shy person, I feel the pull of this instinct most days. But I also know firsthand the bitter fruits of this aspiration.

For several years of my childhood in Sydney, I purged arguments from my days and structured them, instead, around the pursuit of agreement. The experience left me with the conviction that there is a paucity about an agreeable life. Sustaining one requires too many compromises and self-betrayals. It saps one's relationships of their most worthwhile qualities—among them candor, challenge, and vulnerability.

My travels around the world have convinced me that a political life without disagreement is also impoverished. Nations are, at their best, evolving arguments. No other view of community affords so much respect to human diversity and the open-endedness of our future. Meanwhile, its opposite, a

singular insistence on unity, has tended in history toward despotism and crude majoritarianism. In a liberal democracy, good arguments are not what societies should *do* but also what they should *be.*

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In those early and unhappy years in Australia, I knew the origin of my troubles. I had learned in Sunday school that the existence of multiple languages owed to an altercation in a city named Babel. At one time, the people of the world spoke one language, and in their arrogance they resolved to build a tower tall enough to reach the heavens. But as the edifice pierced the sky, an enraged God intervened. He confounded people's speech so that they could no longer understand one another. Then he dispersed them around the world.

It took me many years to see the story in a different light. The collapse of the edifice unleashed chaos into the world in the form of new cultures and dialects—a point eloquently made by writer Toni Morrison in her Nobel lecture. Banished from the tower, we took up residence in the square and began the hard work of travel and translation.

The destruction of the tower made it necessary for us to debate, but it gave us a bigger life.

People often ask me how I managed to find my voice in argument—not in the company of friends but, rather, in the heat of competition. I puzzled over the answer for many years. These days, I wonder how it could have been any other way. Disagreement is not always the best response to conflict, but it may be the most revealing one. Arguments require us to disclose ourselves in a way that physical brawls or simple forbearance do not. In conflict with the world, we discover the boundaries of who we are and what we believe.

Now we are used to seeing arguments either as the symptom of some malaise in our society or as a cause of our discontent. Indeed, they are both. However, my ultimate hope is to convince readers that arguments can also be a cure—an instrument to remake the world.

I knew none of these things and had none of these words on that spring afternoon in March 2005 when I first discovered debate. But I had a feeling that I had been given a life raft, one that might not only save me but also take me to a brighter future, if only I could hold on. Staring out into the crowd from the edge of the stage, I felt something else sprout inside me: ambition, green and insistent.

My breath slowed. As I recalled the first few lines of my speech, I felt the ground beneath my feet regain its solidity. I guessed that once I began, I might never again stop. For that's the thing about unleashing a voice: you never know what it might say next.