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Thoughts for the week

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Several weeks ago there was an interesting piece in the New York Times about the nature of discourse and debate. In this op editorial piece, Nicholas Kristof explored the concept of how debate has changed in the modern world. Traditionally the idea of debating an issue required careful research, presentation of one's arguments, listening to the opposing view and then answering those arguments with reformulated arguments of your own.

Mr. Kristof's main point focused on how the skill of listening to the opposing view has all but disappeared from both public and private discourse. Debate as practiced in our world consists of repeating the same argument over and over again without any incorporation of what the opposition says even if those counterarguments have genuine validity. Debate has become a matter of taking a position rather than exploring an idea.

I think that there is some real validity in Mr. Kristof's argument, especially in the area of private discourse. Schools encourage debate more as an exchange of ideas rather than supporting a position. For students to engage in a genuine exploration of an idea requires profound listening skills as well as verbal skills. Listening is not a passive activity; in fact, it should and can be a very dynamic activity. Listening to an oral argument resembles what we do during the process of reading. In reading, we actively evaluate what we encounter; in listening, genuine listening, we actively evaluate what we encounter. There is really no difference.

A genuine conversation shares the characteristic of good acting. One actor listens intently to what the other says and responds with an engaged response. Whenever we witness a terrible acting performance, it usually means that the actors are not listening actively but merely waiting for the other to finish his or her lines. Reciting is not acting. Position taking is not thinking.

For students and adults to master the art of problem solving means that each individual needs to cultivate the ability to hear the other arguments before formulating the response. Then the response and, indeed, the entire process of discourse, emerge as an authentic and profound exchange of ideas. Understanding the problem, the issue or the idea is a prerequisite to genuine and authentic thinking.