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Civility: Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

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October 08, 2020

"Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."

There is roughly a 20-year age gap between us – Lydia is Generation Z and Tessa is a Millennial – yet, the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has profoundly impacted us both. Of her long list of admirable and endearing traits, the one we remain most in awe of is her ability to show civility in disagreement. Justice Ginsburg's ideal of civility in disagreement is multi-generational and, with the current climate in our country, is more important today than ever before.

Throughout her life, Justice Ginsburg faced great opposition and what must have felt like an impenetrable glass ceiling. Often this resistance was uncivil, yet she met it with an ease that projected respect toward individuals even when she disagreed with their positions. As she broke through glass ceilings time and time again, she did so without leaving a trail of enemies along the trail of shattered glass. In so doing, Justice Ginsburg blazed a new path, which allowed future generations of women to pursue our passions without having to choose between having a family or a career.

Justice Ginsburg lived a life exemplifying her words, "You can disagree without being disagreeable." She understood how to look for the good in people and respected her opposition. As a result, even those with whom she disagreed respected her and found friendship in the safety she provided.

Lydia Crider (Freshman, Tulane University):



I attended a predominantly white and conservative elementary school. As I progressed from a young child to a pre-teen, I noticed my views were diverging from those of many of my peers. As elementary school and early-middle school students, civility in disagreement were skills we were just beginning to learn. And, as those disagreements matured from being about who took the colored pencils to what our parents had told us about politics, it too often turned into blanket statements and radical speech that hurt one another. Slowly but surely people began to learn more about this idea of civility in disagreement, but it is a difficult trait to grasp.

For high school, I attended an all-girls college preparatory school and it was during this time when most of my peers began to form their own opinions; some of which began to diverge from those of our parents and social circle. These women had similar political and social opinions to me. At the time, I intellectually understood the idea of civility in disagreement, but I didn't have to actively implement the practice. When I did try to practice civility in disagreement, I couldn't help but notice my blood would boil a little. Some of the time, this impatience grew from the individual with opposing views using blanket-statement and radical speech-type arguments that I associate with middle school. But sometimes, this impatience came from the fact that I couldn't help but think that this person's views didn't deserve the effort it would require of me to listen and try to understand them. That is a very blunt and quite juvenile way of thinking, but one that too many carry for the rest of their lives.

I am now a freshman in college and I am surrounded by a lot of people who come from different backgrounds and share very different views. I have kept Justice Ginsburg in the back of my mind with every conversation I have about politics as well as the current climate of our nation. I think about Justice Ginsburg and her friendship with Justice Scalia. Despite their divergent opinions on the law, they showed each other respect. They looked past their differences to their mutual passions for the law and the arts, particularly opera. And, despite their vastly different views, they found more than common ground; they found friendship. That friendship was based on civility and mutual respect, a lesson that rings true at any age.

Tessa P. Vorhaben:

When I met Lydia, who is nearly 20 years my junior, she reminded me so much of myself – our experiences, background, personalities – and it caused me to reflect on the relationship I want to develop with my daughter and sons. Now, with the passing of Justice Ginsburg, I keep thinking of the life lessons that I have learned from her that I want to pass on to my kids. Justice Ginsburg is quoted as saying, "My mother told me to be a lady. And for her, that meant be your own person, be independent." This necessarily includes having your own opinions, which may differ from your peers.

Like Lydia, I went to an all-girls high school and grew up in a bubble where most of the people around me held the same political views. Due to certain life events, my political views began to (and still) differ from many in my social circle. My 11-year-old son, Griffin, is learning about the election in his sixth grade social studies class and has become acutely aware that the political views held by his peers' parents differ from those held by my husband and me. In the context of the upcoming election, Griffin asked me about the passing of Justice Ginsburg, the various political affiliations of the remaining Justices, the nominee and the implications moving forward. I explained to Griffin how Justice Scalia and Justice Ginsburg disagreed on their interpretation of the law but remained respectful to one another and were friends. I also explained to him that while many of my views differ from those of my friends (and my parents), like Justice Ginsburg, I choose to disagree in a civil, respectful way. This is not always easy – it is certainly easier to hurl insults than to control your emotions – and despite years of practicing civil disagreement, I am still a work in progress. But, as Justice Ginsburg exemplified, you will make more of an impact on the world if you can learn to "disagree without being disagreeable."

Justice Ginsburg's life and legacy has and will inspire multiple generations of women. She reasoned with powerful intellect and lived with humility and grace. As we continue the journey of life, may we continuously strive to exemplify the lady that Justice Ginsburg encapsulated.