

Overcoming Your Lesser Angels: 10 Ways to Improve Our Culture

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Most of us have noticed recent stress cracks in American discourse and culture. Although apocalyptic warnings of a coming civil war are over-caffeinated, it is true that we have become rather shrill these days, more likely to speak at or about our opponents than with them. Whatever the advantages of a hyperconnected world of social media and televised everything, that world abets the shrillness. What might we do to improve this incivility? It may seem naïve to say so, but we might rededicate ourselves to the moral and intellectual virtues of a liberal education.

When I reflect on my own rare triumphs over the lesser angels of my nature, I almost always remember a moment or two from class when, in the presence of spirited debate over a text, I find myself better than usual — more reasonable, more patient, more humane — and I rediscover something I value about UD more than anything else: Our students make us better. Or, to put it more precisely, our students during liberal educational moments make us better. In the disciplined leisure of pursuing wisdom, truth and virtue together, we find ourselves guided by our better angels.

How might we be guided by them in public life after and beyond that wonderful season of disciplined leisure that characterizes the UD education? Allow me to offer 10 ways to put one's UD liberal education to public service, a Decalogue of Civil Society. Every one of these laws might arouse an educational memory of your time at UD — in a Core class, in Rome, in your major — a memory of your better angel.

1. Thou shalt determine the issue at hand. During undisciplined arguments, it is often easy to miss the issue at hand, that precise question that must be addressed to make progress, so we flail about and confuse issues, often talking at cross-purposes about innumerable, undetermined issues.

2. Thou shalt study the issue. In our post-fact world, we often allow ourselves to assume things about a determined issue without having studied it sufficiently. Although we all must rely on experts, there is a general level of study required of each of us to support our opinions about the issue, sifting evidence and reasons — not by whether they agree or disagree with us, but by whether they are strong or weak. This requires a varied intellectual diet of reading and viewing.

3. Thou shalt define terms. A determined issue requires defined terms — consistent words or phrases for understanding and judging arguments about the issue — terms we and our opponents can hew to for progress.

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4. Thou shalt decide what the best position on the issue is. That decision is reflective: One needs to think before arguing, giving oneself the leisure to weigh and decide what the best decision is.

5. Thou shalt make arguments to defend that position. It is not enough to assert a position on a placard, a bumper sticker or a tweet; one must defend it by offering arguments in its defense.

6. Thou shalt listen to people who disagree with you. Smart, honorable people do disagree, and we need to listen to one another, not for hasty dismissal, but for the possibility that the other is right about something we have missed.

7. Thou shalt distinguish between being mistaken and being evil. Too often we assume people on the other side of an issue from us are not simply wrong in an opinion, but immoral in holding it. Our opponent may simply have failed in the difficult act of sifting good and evil — and so may we have.

8. Thou shalt remember a time when you changed your mind. When in heated dispute, we often presume that there is no possibility of conversion — that we are who we are and they are who they are — but people change their minds all the time.

9. Thou shalt treat your opponents as you would have them treat you. Think of your own frustration when someone ignores or misrepresents your argument — or even dismisses you as beneath recognition or respect. If you want them to attend to and respect your argument and your person, then attend to and respect them and theirs.

10. Thou shalt love your enemy. Don't take my word for it. The double command of love of God and neighbor is arguably *the* Christian mandate, and although it is difficult to see your opponents as your neighbors, they are and must be treated accordingly.

Of course, every UDer remembers Aristotle's point that one can know the good without doing the good; that is, we might nod in agreement at the above list — remembering moments in our UD education — then ignore it and rejoin one of the ignorant armies clashing by night. And, granted, it is easier to be dialectically lawful in class. Even so, we are free to remember and act upon what we know how to do — to behave like Socrates and Jesus. That is, after all, the freedom of a liberal education.



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