Most of us grew up being told to avoid talking about politics and religion with those with whom we disagree, especially loved ones and members of our family. While no doubt there are individual cases where this adage still holds in 2020, as a totalizing principle applicable to everyone it no longer makes sense and arguably perpetuates obstacles to needed change.

Perhaps instead we should learn how to conduct civil and less inflammatory conversations on difficult and controversial topics. Otherwise transcending the current polarization paralyzing the nation
and inhibiting genuine democratic deliberation will never occur—something no one really desires.

Call me naive but, as a teacher and scholar of rhetoric for more than 40 years, I believe productive dialogue, though difficult, is possible. The challenge is how to engage in civil discourse. I hope members of my academic discipline (which includes public, interpersonal and organizational communication) will conduct research about how to do this, then teaching what they learn to students and the public at-large.

Maybe I am guilty of being overly optimistic; however, finding common ground, the hallmark of communication dating back to the writings of ancient Greek rhetoricians, is both possible and a key part of meeting the challenge. A colleague and friend of mine suggested that finding common ground requires that we approach discussion as having “positions” rather than “sides,” that we talk about “we” and “our” and not “us” and “them” and that we avoid associating vitriol with disagreement.

For example, while we may not share truths about the larger issue of President Trump’s performance and whether he should be re-elected, certainly there are other matters about which we do agree and share values. Using those sources of common ground affords the potential to create reflection, cognitive dissonance and compromise—whether we are Democrats, Republicans, liberals or conservatives.
That in turn might yield productive outcomes on many important political issues demanding immediate attention and expedient action on problems that aren’t an all or nothing referendum on the current White House occupant. Creating safe schools, making health care available to more people, adopting measures to help address the economic and health suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic and improving the environment are just a few examples where common ground can be found.

To suggest this is impossible and never will occur is tantamount to claiming that all of us are inherently and always dogmatic, never changing our opinions on any personal and public issues—something that totally defies our experience. Research in rhetoric, for instance, offers the concept of “self-risk.” This concept suggests that when individuals genuinely argue with another, which often occurs, they enter the exchange admitting the possibility that their worldviews will change as a result of the encounter.

In essence, “self-risk” is the opposite of dogma; it documents a willingness to argue and be constructively responsive rather than just repeating our view over and over. Research shows that “self-risk” is more than an academic platitude; as I am claiming here, it is principle developed precisely because it not only can be invoked but frequently is. I challenge readers to suggest they never “self-risk.”

So perhaps each of us should reconsider the adage about avoiding conversations about politics and religion with those who disagree with us.
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