

Win, Lose, or Draw Another Conclusion

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – February 17, 2013

As someone who exchanges ideas and discusses opinions through social media, writing a printed newspaper column feels a bit odd. I'm used to the back and forth interaction I experience online or in person. Dialog is a vital exercise where I learn from different perspectives. Forced to explain myself, it sharpens, clarifies, and sometimes causes me to challenge my own thinking.

For this weekly column, I receive compliments from friends, acquaintances, and sometimes strangers, which are always welcome. Occasionally, I also get emails from readers or come across comments posted to the online version of my column. In an age where civility is vanishing in many places, I've found readers of the Covington News to be respectful, more often than not. And, I enjoy respectful disagreement.

In my recent column "Time to Put Away Childish Things," I shared the story of Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy and gay rights activist Shane Windmeyer. I suggested the dialog, mutual respect, and genuine caring these two men displayed while exploring the issue of same-sex marriage was a good model for how we might all approach other major issues of our day – such as the debate over Second Amendment rights and gun laws.

One reader responded: "This is true when there has to be no winners or losers. Cathy was not going to lose anything if he hadn't reached out to Windmeyer. On issues such as gun control there are winners and losers. On such a fundamental issue there can be no mutual respect and understanding because somebody definitively wins and loses."

I don't bring this up to debate this reader, who shared a thoughtful comment. I am thankful to him or her for reading my column and contributing to the discussion. I do, however, want to explore this further.

I'm not responding solely to that comment, for it would be unfair to put words in someone's mouth. But, I believe the "winners and losers" mentality is a pervasive problem holding us back as a society.

Let's accept for now gun control is an issue where one side must win and one must lose. We'll come back to that. But first let's consider the possibility mutual respect and understanding can exist between parties locked in a winner-take-all contest.

The easiest example would be sports, where competitors frequently show respect for the opposition. We call it sportsmanship, and it's on display in pre and post-game handshakes, prayers for an injured opponent, and the smiling nod or handclap for an opponent's scoring shot in tennis or a long putt made in golf. Among coaches and players, respect is an integral part of being a professional.

But, those are games; the stakes pale in comparison to the implications of real world issues. Nowhere are the consequences graver than on the battlefields of actual war. But, even there, mutual respect and understanding prevail.

I read recently an account of General Robert E. Lee's surrender to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. Included were eyewitness accounts and notes passed between the two men in the days leading to the inevitable surrender. Considering the carnage both Generals had witnessed, the civility of the written exchanges is striking. Despite years locked in mortal combat, their tone is one of mutual respect and shared yearning for peace. I think also of President Lincoln visiting wounded Union and Confederate soldiers following the bloodbath at Antietam. He understood the bond he shared with each man, regardless of the tattered uniform colors.

This gun debate is not war – though some have told you so.

One can staunchly defend the constitutional right to bear arms while also sharing compassion and a deep sense of loss with those dismayed by the deaths of innocent children in Newtown. A person can openly question the legitimate need for high capacity gun magazines and civilian possession of military assault rifles, while also empathizing with the distrust and suspicion of those who fear an undermining of constitutional rights. Freedom and public safety are not special interests, they are everyone's interest. We win or lose together.

By locking so tightly into our views that any movement away from our position is defeat, we all lose.

On the field of play, the voice of the sportsman is often drowned out by the trash talking taunts of the showboat. On the battlefields and at the negotiating table, the statesman is replaced by the politician. When someone tells you what you stand to lose if you compromise, make sure it's really you they're worried about.

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