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All will & no reason

Anthony Cunningham

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, tcunningham@csbsju.edu

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills



Tony Cunningham on “All Will & No Reason”

SEPTEMBER 17, 2018



As a boy growing up in New York City, I loved baseball debates. I was a Red Sox fan, and all my friends liked the Yankees. There were some unspoken rules to our debates. We had our vested interests. I certainly wanted Jim Rice to top Reggie Jackson, just as my friends wanted Thurman Munson to prevail over Carlton Fisk. We were anything but disinterested. However, we understood that there was no sense debating unless we considered reasonable arguments. I loved Carl Yastrzemski, but by the 70s, I couldn't depict him as the baseball god he was in 1967. If you were going to engage in baseball debates, you had to consider evidence seriously. You couldn't just make silly stuff up.

Every so often, somebody would break the rules. Usually, it was some boy beyond my circle of friends, someone new to the debate routine. Sometimes an adversary so loved a player that it was psychologically impossible for him to give an inch in a debate. No matter what statistics you brought to bear, he was not going to admit that his favorite player was the lesser. In such a case, the debate was really a test of loyalty, akin to arguing about whose mother was better. You could say whatever you pleased, but this boy wasn't going to throw his favorite player (or his mother)

under the bus. End of story. Such love could be understood, tiresome as it surely was for debate purposes.

On rare occasions, I'd run across a different adversary, a far more exasperating one, someone who made a complete mockery of debate. This opponent was determined to concede nothing about anything. The point wasn't just to stand up for a beloved player, but rather, to “win” at all costs. Such a boy could take two and two to make five without blinking an eye. His player might hit four homers to my player's forty, but in his eyes, this fact wouldn't make any difference whatsoever. Such boys transformed the exercise into a test of pure will, one where reason had no place. The real point—the only point—was victory. It didn't matter how it was won. Good evidence and sound arguments? Any willful boy determined to win at all costs had to be careful not to let appeals to evidence and reason find a way inside the walls of his indomitable will. After all, give an inch, and you might find yourself giving a foot. And then you might lose, nightmare of nightmares.

Effectively, Donald Trump is this willful boy, so I feel like I've known him all my life. His **stubborn refusal** to accept the revised death toll from Hurricane Maria and his claim that Democrats cooked up false numbers to make him “look as bad as possible” are nothing other than childish attempts to shout the loudest and bang his fist boldly on the table. The man is all will, and no reason. Concessions, retractions, apologies, and admissions of mistakes are all indisputable signs of constitutional weakness in Donald Trump's book. Why would a winner ever admit to being wrong? When people ask you to put two and two together, give them five if it suits your interests, and once given, never take it back. If tomorrow you feel like six instead of five, just change your answer. An iron will rules.

In my childhood, I never knew what to do with such boys. But having learned my “lesson,” one of the first things I impress upon my students these days is that any good inquiry aims at figuring out what is the case, not at corroborating what you'd like to be so. As I tell them, if you are to be a serious inquirer—the only kind worth being—you must be willing to accept bad news. The world, for all your fervent desires, may not turn out as you'd like, and if not, you must beware of fudging things to produce the answer you desire. For instance, anyone familiar with the empirical evidence of climate change knows that humanity's prospects look bleak, especially if we continue with our current path. Responsible scientists and citizens hate this answer, but their preferences are beside the point. After all, I didn't like it when I finally came around as a child to the judgment that I would never fly under my own power, but my disappointment didn't make the conclusion any less true.

Another thing I impress upon my students is that I no longer care much for debates. Of course, the adversarial system can serve a useful purpose in collecting support for conflicting points of view. In the ideal, the best evidence and arguments rise to the top, just like cream. However, debates suffer for the truth when willful people want to win more than they wish to see the truth rise. There are many ways of “winning” a debate. You can lie. You can entertain. You can appeal to prejudices. You can intimidate. You can confuse people. You can change the subject. Basically, you can alter the enterprise from an honest attempt to figure out what is the case by making it into a winner-take-all contest of sheer will. This is the embodiment of Trump, and his triumph of will over reason is a terminal cancer for any democracy worth its salt.

One last thing I like to tell my students is that we are all wrong, most of the time. Try as we may, we’re destined to get all sorts of things wrong, even if just a little bit wrong. So long as we pursue complex questions, our reach will always exceed our grasp. But if we come to the task with the requisite humility, duly cognizant that we might just be wrong, we are far likelier to get things right in the end. On the other hand, if we substitute sheer will for reason, like Donald Trump, then we’re just making silly stuff up.

Tony Cunningham

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