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Forward: Balancing Consensus and Difference

John Aber

Professor of Environmental Sciences and Provost

I had agreed to be part of a small conversation between a noted climate change scientist and a pure skeptic from the corporate world because I thought the encounter offered the opportunity to “find the common ground.” I had enjoyed some success in bringing climate change data and doubts to general audiences, but was still intrigued by many of the concerns expressed in the essays that are part of this year’s dialog about finding consensus. I had hoped to play a moderator’s role; helping each of the other two find points of agreement, and identify the basis for whatever disagreements remained. It didn’t work. The “true believer” and the “disbeliever” assumed adversarial roles and neither budged. Neither the unassailable measurements, nor the rationale for rejecting them, were examined. The conversation quickly became heated and defensive. I left before it was over. It was clear nothing positive would result.

On a small and individual scale, this encounter presents the heart of the matter addressed by the essays that follow. How can we foster productive dialog on contentious issues, and bring information and critical thinking to bear on decision-making, while understanding alternative points of view? How do we support civil discourse and find the common ground?

In this country in this century, it’s an uphill battle. Psychologists will tell us that fear and anger are two of our most primal and compelling emotions, and much of the media world has put that knowledge into practice. Hence all the talking-head shows that boost ratings by featuring angry, vituperative and demeaning “dialogues” and the reality shows featuring contrived social

conflicts and dangerous “adventures” (always followed by the qualifier not to try this at home).

In addition, we are all constantly exposed to a barrage of images and words intended to convince and compel, rather than to educate. I routinely ask students in my classes what fraction of the rapidly accelerating data flow they experience is intended to convince, and what fraction is intended to inform or educate. The answer is usual about 95 percent for the former, so there is an understanding of the distinction and the intent of most of what is received. A hopeful sign.

Most of the undergraduates reading these essays will have the opportunity to do substantive research and scholarship during their time here. Undergraduate research is a hallmark of a UNH education, and I urge you all to aim for that goal. A simple distinction between seeking to understand and arguing from an unchangeable position will be seen in the way you phrase the purpose of your research. When a student opens with, “We undertook this research in order to prove that...”; we have a problem. We do research in order to answer a question. A hypothesis provides a framework, not the first line in the conclusion.

Universities are unique institutions in many ways. The one I find most defining is that, at our best, our first priority is helping each person, faculty, staff, or student, to understand their gifts, values, and passions, and help each to make the most of their potential. Another is, again, at our best, a dedication to truth; to seeking, understanding, and applying what we see to be true to improving the human condition and the world in which we live.

A complementary requisite for a community based on these simple, some would say naive claims, is openness to new ideas, and a willingness to treat every "truth" as conditional. Our worldview needs to change when confronted by compelling, substantiated evidence, regardless of source.

Here again, human nature may be against us. We are social creatures and we tend to form groups, including the definition of "others" or those not in the group. The tendency to demonize the others is mentioned in more than one of our essays. A brief review of each essay concludes my part of this project, and one of the statements I found most compelling and challenging is from the final essay by David Richman. I will quote it here again: "It requires unusual courage to recognize the perfidy in those with whom we agree, those we love, or in ourselves." Short of perfidy, it is hard enough to disagree with our friends in pursuit of something as abstract as "truth."

Some of the urgency expressed in these essays regarding the pursuit of common ground, then needs to be tempered with David Richman's urge for courage, as well as with Sheila McNamee's warning that consensus can come at the price of diversity of thought and experience. Our undergraduates will have been lectured about "peer-group pressure" all through their K-12 experience. The concept has equal application for all age groups.

So this is what makes the pursuit of a university education so hard, and so important. While we advance the world by discovering measurable truths in the natural world, the interaction of data with values, and the application of even generally accepted concepts and realities with human nature and social groupings quickly moves us to judgment and uncertainty. Most antithetical to the ethic of university life is to accept without questioning a single simple set of values proclaimed by

any group or party.

I have a frame in my office that contains just a few words in plain black-and-white lettering: "perception is not reality." New visitors usually give a double-take when reading it, as they assume the "not" is not part of the message. The difference from the more usual phrase that perception is reality is an intentional contradiction to an understanding of the world generally offered by the savvy masters of the public relations technologies; that to control perception is to control reality. I offer this corollary: The farther our perceptions are from reality, the more trouble we are in (witness the last several business bubbles and certain of our international adventures).

Self-examination, the balancing of strongly held principle with the realization that one can be wrong, the idea that we can learn from "others," and an acceptance that there may not be a single, final answer for our most complex questions, is a hallmark of university life. These characteristics may also provide a valuable framework for finding the common ground.



Though presented from a number of different disciplinary contexts, and with different examples, all of this year's dialog essays deal with the search for consensus and agreement, and the relationship between consensus and "truth" in complex settings. In a sense, many deal with the kinds of inherent human frailties that constrain that search, or the realization that multiple answers will always exist.

David Hiley compares three types of disagreements, and the relative difficulty in resolving each, moving from the fact of the matter (the height of a tower), to disagreements about what we call or how we classify something (did genocide occur in Darfur?), to disagreement relating to religious,

moral, or ethical values. The first is easily resolved by a better measurement, and many questions in the worlds of science and technology can be answered in this way (but see Art Greenberg's essay for a presentation of complexities and uncertainties even in this relatively straightforward world). Legal issues can be resolved given the current legal framework, although interpretation by judges is an inherent part of the process. The most challenging issues are in that third category. Here, Professor Hiley makes the first call for "diversity of opinion and reasoned disagreement [that] allow us to exchange error for truth or arrive at a more considered judgment when we can, but as important, to agree to disagree when we must."

Mary Fran T. Malone offers three hopeful examples of countries defined as "post-conflict"; ones that have moved from autocratic, dictatorial, and racist histories to functional democracies. Common threads that she finds in these examples include recognition, often after years of repression and denial, that the power held by elites needs to be shared and/or exercised for the common good. Resulting social characteristics include de-emphasizing the military and enhancing education and healthcare, as well as more inclusive decision-making. Costa Rica's disbanding of their army and support for an "army of teachers" captures the essence of the shift in culture that has propelled this small country to a stable and democratic future.

Cesar Rebellon opens with a simple observation on human nature: that we are "rather good at interpreting the social world in biased ways but are rather bad at recognizing [our] biases." He links, in particular, "hostile-attribution bias," or the tendency to assume the worst in others and to demonize the opposition, as an inherent human trait that limits our ability to think "behind the enemy lines," and see the other's point of view (see also David Richman's discussion of the value of theater in this regard). He brings this analysis close to home by using a recent example of con-

flict (perhaps unnecessary?) on campus. Calling for a limit to distortions and demonizing, he urges that we "[get] the best from our passions" rather than "let[ting] our passions get the best of us."

Bruce Mallory sets the context for our freshman readers by noting the transition to full citizenship that occurs in our culture on the 18th birthday. Citizenship brings both rights and responsibilities, which he encapsulates in three principles: "...participatory citizenship, community change, and social identity and context." He urges us to participate deeply, recognize social and economic forces, and be inclusive of the diversity of opinion, origin, and experience in any political, community setting. Individual dedication and effort are at the heart of the movement toward the common ground.

Sheila McNamee offers an insightful differentiation between "consensus" and an effort to "coordinate complexity." Movement toward consensus in open discussions and processes tends to be dominated by those in a more powerful social position, or, as most of us have experienced, by the loudest voices. Consensus is seen as a way to suppress minority opinions and hide diversity of thought. Professor McNamee calls rather for "respectful attempts to understand differences. Our respectful attempts to understand might foster community. From community common ground might emerge."

Art Greenberg offers a complex example in which even direct measurements require interpretation to be applied to policy. The decision to ban ethylene dibromide (EDB) from foods was based on an established process for testing toxicity. Such tests require the use of animal models, rather than human subjects (clearly!), and one layer of interpretation involves the relevance of such tests to humans. Simple assumptions and average cases (e.g. consumption of different types of foods from

different locations) were required to estimate dosage, and each introduces error into the process. Two conflicting concepts conclude the essay. Professor Greenberg supports the use of a very conservative standard (i.e. human health protective) for foods, but then also raises the conflicting issue of malnutrition. How do we trade food safety against food production?

Benjamin Cole characterizes three broad forms of government, and the approach of each to managing social conflict: autocracies suppress interactions, totalitarian regimes seek absolute control, democracies attempt to harness social diversity and its complexities. He contrasts the need for deep reasoning in a democracy against the current trend toward fast and rather shallow communication, and the apparent ascendancy of hyperbole and polarization. As a contrary trend, he also cites the numerical rise of functional democracies in the 20th century. He offers that increased flexibility, and perhaps increased decentralization, may offer the best way forward in the face of growing complexity.

David Richman opens his essay on a contrarian note. While the thrust of our other essays focus on ways to move openly toward agreement and civil government, Professor Richman asks, "But what about the people with whom one cannot, and indeed ought not, seek common ground? What about the haters, the liars, the fanatics who will never be reached by evidence and argument?" He then uses classic characters from Shakespeare's plays (Iago, King Richard III) who represent pure and unrepentant evil. Here we find true moral complexity, and the difficulty in seeking "truth." I agree completely with his summary statement about UNH: "One of the things we learn at UNH—perhaps the most important thing we learn at UNH—is to search for truth." A corollary regarding the difficulty in this simple statement is in another statement from Professor Richman's essay: "It requires unusual courage to recognize the perfidy in those with whom we agree, those we love, or in ourselves."