Discourse is the exchange of ideas in which the object is to employ a dialectic in order to discover Truth through a point, countercpoint method. In discourse, the concept of winning in conversation is absurd because the only victory possible is getting closer and closer to the truth, or a partial understanding of the truth, by examining ideas newly generated as the discussion leads higher and higher toward the truth, or a partial understanding of the truth, because the only victory possible is getting closer and closer to the goal.

I have been fascinated by technology for most of my life. I remember another early morning in October of 1957 when my dad and I stood side by side and watched the rocket casing of the first man-made satellite, Russia’s Sputnik I, move in silence across a star-studded sky. I remember my awe of Sputnik as keenly as my disappointment over America’s first attempt to put a grapefruit size satellite into orbit two months later. The small pencil-like Vanguard rocket lifted several feet above the launch pad and unceremoniously toppled over and fell to the ground in a fiery explosion.

by Marien Helz in Editorials

by Charles Miess in Columns

Word Worth Volume VI issues are available in Archives

Word Worth Volume V issues are available in 2005

Word Worth Volume IV issues are available in 2004
Discourse and Debate

by Marien Helz

It’s often been said that the art of conversation is dead. While the fact that this idea recurs at various points in the course of centuries is proof of its not being valid, the recurrence also indicates that something is often missing in conversing. The reason for this may be that of the two kinds of conversation—debate and discourse—the former is practiced often enough that it overshadows and wipes out the later.

Debate is a type of verbal exchange in which the object is to win. Victory is all that matters; therefore, witticisms involving mockery, ad hominem tactics, disparagement, and personal attacks—as long as the audience accepts them—are all fair game. *Clever* is all-important and all that matters.

Discourse is the exchange of ideas in which the object is to employ a dialectic in order to discover *Truth* through a point, counterpoint method. In discourse, the concept of winning in conversation is absurd because the only victory possible is getting closer and closer to the truth, or a partial understanding of the truth, by examining ideas newly generated as the discussion leads higher and higher toward understanding as if the two sides are ladders balanced against each other and can only be ascended by two at once as each side climbs closer to the goal.

The only kind of conversation for which I see true value and in which I care to engage is discourse, yet whenever debate is interjected, discourse, of necessity, dies. As soon as winning enters the exchange, the goal of gaining knowledge and understanding is futile. No matter how much the mockery and barbed witticisms are clothed in friendliness, they have the effect of diverting the point—ending the ascent.

Unfortunately, debate is taking over exchanges on every level. This is fueled by the political arena where winning is viewed as crucial. It’s rare that discovery can occur in this setting since each political side is representing constituencies which have already clearly defined their views. Each side has reasons for promoting their points and wants only to prevent being bullied into a position which they find abhorrent. As a result, any derogatory and clever device which furthers their point over the opponent’s is not only considered acceptable, it’s considered laudable.
Consequently, the presidential debates in which the candidates vie with each other are futile. In the Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale debate, Reagan, whose advanced age caused some to question his ability to serve, was asked about whether his age would be an impediment. He indignantly responded that he refused to make age an issue in the campaign; he refused to take advantage of his opponent’s youth and inexperience. The audience’s mirth was uncontrollable since Democrats as well as Republicans were unable to be restrained by the rules. Mondale has subsequently stated that he knew he lost the campaign at that moment.

Whether or not that was the actual turning point in the election, it had an effect. That obtaining the office of the president can be impacted by a witty retort is not an ideal situation. Some may feel that it will benefit a country in the international theater to have someone at the helm who is capable of a quick comeback, yet no one wins in the long run that way. Whether a speaker puts down the opposition by a zinger or by banging his shoe on the podium Nikita Khrushchev style, the victory can only be short-lived. The tactic evinces a disrespect for the other’s point of view, if done in a humorous and somewhat friendly manner, or for the other person entirely if done seriously. The result is then to move the conflict toward confrontation rather than toward consensus.

As the United States of America was evolving from a collection of disorganized colonies to a unified nation, Benjamin Franklin was pivotal in obtaining international acceptance of and support for the fledgling nation. In his autobiography, he revealed the manner in which he achieved respect for his emerging country. Conversation was his tool, and it was discourse at which he excelled.

He stated:

...as the chief Ends of Conversation are to inform, or to be informed, to please or to persuade, I wish well-meaning sensible Men would not lessen their Power of doing Good by a Positive assuming Manner that seldom fails to disgust, tends to create Opposition, and to defeat every one of those Purposes for which Speech was given us, to wit, giving or receiving Information, or Pleasure...

Franklin, who was self-educated, read and studied the Platonic dialogues in his youth and became an excellent practitioner of Socrates' tactics for winning his argument:

I...grew very artful and expert in drawing People even of superior Knowledge into Concessions the Consequences of which they did not foresee, entangling them in Difficulties...and so obtaining Victories that neither myself nor my Cause always deserved. I continu'd this Method some few Years, but gradually left it, retaining only the Habit of expressing myself in Terms of modest Diffidence, never using when I advance any thing that may possibly be disputed, the Words Certainly, undoubtedly, or any others that give the Air of Positiveness to an Opinion; but rather say, I conceive, or I apprehend a Thing to be so or so, It appears to me, or I should think it so for so or such and such Reasons, or I imagine it to be so or it is so if I am not mistaken. This Habit I believe has been of great Advantage to me, when I have had occasion to inculcate my Opinions and persuade Men into Measures that I have been from time to time engag'd in promoting.
Thus, Franklin explains why and how he moved from what we have here termed debate to what we have here termed discourse.

There is no possibility that the debate style of conversation will end. Political arenas depend on it, and the various sides have come to their positions before entering the exchange. The problem lies in the fact that the political scene models styles for the wider populace where discourse is all-important.

Very few people understand discourse, so it is rarely modeled.

It is, however, through discourse that discovery is regenerated. What we miss as we grow from childhood to adulthood is the marvelous sense of discovery that is ours when the world is new to us. In one of the world’s best-known and often-quoted poems, William Wordsworth lamented that we lose the ability to see the newness in the world, to discover:

\[
\text{Though nothing can bring back the hour} \\
\text{Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower...}
\]

It is through discourse, however, that we again discover—that we once again get a glimpse of the splendor and the glory.
Winter Reverie

by Charles Miess

Nothing can match a cold, clear morning in January or February. When I get up for work, the sun is still well below the eastern horizon and the stars sparkle like jewels in black velvet. Jupiter, the most massive planet in the solar system, dazzles the western sky under the heel of the Lion. Scorpio arches her body through the red giant, Antares, and skims her stinging tail across the southern horizon. The Swan stretches out her long neck and flies the Milky Way—as she has done since long before the first human cast a wary eye at the heavens and was filled with awe and wonder. I follow the curve of the Big Dipper’s handle to find the bright star, Arcturus, almost directly overhead. It was over seventy years ago that astronomers first focused rays of light from that star on a photoelectric cell. They amplified the feeble signal to trigger the lights for the Chicago Worlds Fair. A technological revolution had begun.

I have been fascinated by technology for most of my life. I remember another early morning in October of 1957 when my dad and I stood side by side and watched the rocket casing of the first man-made satellite, Russia’s Sputnik I, move in silence across a star-studded sky. I remember my awe of Sputnik as keenly as my disappointment over America’s first attempt to put a grapefruit size satellite into orbit two months later. The small pencil-like Vanguard rocket lifted several feet above the launch pad and unceremoniously toppled over and fell to the ground in a fiery explosion.

We have come a long way since those early days. We have put men on the moon and rovers on Mars and have explored the furthest reaches of our solar system. I work for a high tech company that has played a major role in our venture into space by developing complex flight controls for those spacecraft. I have played a part in the design of the electronic control circuits and continue to do so to this day.

With age, however, comes wisdom, and I am now more aware of another side of humankind’s technology. The wonderful machines that allow our imagination to soar
into the heavens have been modified to make delivery systems for weapons too horrible to imagine. Consumer products such as cars, snowmobiles, computers, cell phones, and TVs have replaced many of the simple social activities that once formed the fabric of our families and communities. On top of that, the production, use, and disposal of our high tech toys have poisoned the air, our water, and our ground. But the earth is a very forgiving planet. Like a huge living organism, she slowly cleanses herself of the folly of her most intelligent inhabitants. She will survive, with or without humankind, and at least some forms of life will likely survive with her.

“It is strange to me...” says Bernd Heinrich in his book A Year in the Maine Woods, “It is strange to me that life itself doesn’t strike the average person as all that impressive, but for some reason ‘intelligent’ life does. When you consider life as a whole, intelligence is a mere bristle on the hog.” Heinrich’s assessment parallels my philosophical views as technology gradually loses its luster. Meanwhile, I find the simple forms of life that go largely unseen by busy humans, increasingly fascinating.

I have lived for many years on fifty-five acres in the country. I have seen that land change from a dairy farm with hayfields and pastures to abandoned fields, then thickets and woods. I have roamed those familiar fields since my earliest childhood and they have never lost their attraction. This place of enchantment is east of Lake Erie in New York State. In winter, the moisture-laden air from the lake blows across the cold land and blesses us with an abundance of snow. Throughout much of winter the snow is so deep and soft that I must put my explorations of this winter wonderland on hold.

By January, however, the snow has settled and is dense enough for me to skim across the top with my cross-country skis. The days are getting longer now too, and so I can seek refuge from the working world when I get home.

* * *

The oblique rays of the late afternoon sun skip across the snow leaving it sparkling and textured. The only sound is the whisper of my skis sliding across the top of the two or three feet of snow. Before I even leave the yard, I cross the tracks of a rabbit heading toward the apple orchard. I point my skis toward the woods. Except for a single jet vapor trail against the clear blue sky and the faint rumble of a truck in the valley below, I am in nature’s domain now. I follow the tracks of a wild turkey as they meander from bush to bush where the turkey was in search of his winter food. Soon these tracks are joined by those of the red fox and later by those of the coyote.

Of the millions of goldenrod plants that dominated this field in the fall, most have been flattened to the ground by the winter winds and ice. Only a few still wave their dried flowery heads above the snow. Many of those have a big round gall on the stem housing a larva that will emerge as the goldenrod fly in another month or two. Formed by mysterious chemical instructions that the insect gave to the
plant, the gall provides the larva with both food and protection. The larva somehow knows that when it changes to a fly it will no longer have chewing mouthparts to make its escape. So it bores a tunnel ahead of time—almost to the surface of the gall. The tiny worm survives the cold winter by producing glycerol in its blood to keep from freezing. Not all of them will make it through the winter, however. As many as two-thirds of the galls I see have holes drilled down to the larva’s hideaway by the downy woodpecker.

I almost feel guilty violating the expanse of pristine snow with ski tracks as I head toward a black cherry tree. I search the tree from branch tip to branch tip. I am just about to give up when I finally find one. Then I see another. They are small reddish-brown bands with a varnish coating—the egg masses from the moth of the eastern tent caterpillar. While unimpressive to the unaided eye, they are a marvel of art and engineering under a low power microscope. Like the goldenrod larva, the eggs automatically adjust the level of antifreeze in their tissues to survive the coldest day of winter.

My favorite quest on my excursions to the woods is to find cocoons from the large silkworm moths. There are not many in this area and the cocoons are generally well hidden or camouflaged. On this particular day, I spot a suspicious looking group of leaves stuck to a thin branch hugging the trunk of a small hawthorn tree. I make my way to it, across the pixie-fingered tracks of a raccoon and those of some creature that kept its four feet together while it leaped along. I push the thorny branches aside carefully with my ski pole and to my surprise and delight discover it to be the cocoon of the cecropia moth—a moth with a six-inch wingspread and the largest in North America. The cocoon would have been hard to get under the best of conditions, but on skis it is nearly impossible. Yet, I manage to reach in with my pruners and clip it free.

Many of the cocoons that I have found in the past turned out to be empty. Some were empty because they were old and the moth had emerged the previous summer, others because the downy woodpecker make a sumptuous dessert of the pupa after a meager meal of larvae from the goldenrod galls. I hold my breath as I lift the cocoon up the light of the waning sun. I see the outline of the pupa inside and no holes in the silken cocoon. I have a live one!

For a few moments I stare at the faint outline through the silken covering and marvel at the great transformation going on inside. What mysterious force is causing the breakdown of the caterpillar’s tissues and directing their reorganization into an utterly different creature—a creature superbly suited for reproduction? How does the emerging moth know how to fly and how to send out the pheromones to attract her mate? What guides
her to just the right plant to lay her eggs and so maintain a cycle of life unbroken for millions of years? Such questions, scientists have barely begun to answer.

Continuing my quest, I catch sight of the remains of a bald-faced hornets nest tucked deep in an arrowwood bush. All of the hundreds of workers have long since died, but the queens have made their way underground to wait out the winter and start afresh when the snow melts. I wonder where they are and what dreams dance about in their heads.

The sun is starting to set and the low rays of light throw a golden hue over the acres of snow. I reluctantly turn toward home. I think about all the hidden life buried below me waiting for its time. Although eager for spring, for now I am content with the peace and the promise.

* * *

I step outside once more before going to bed. The sun has sunk below the western horizon and the sky is alive once again with sparkling jewels. Orion, the hunter, now dominates the southern sky. Canis Major, the big dog, follows silently at his feet. Sirius, the brightest star visible from anywhere on earth, marks the dog’s nose.

Millennia from now, the mighty hunter and his faithful dog will still be making their lonely trek across the winter sky. The starlight, however, may no longer shine upon the works of humans. But I am confident, and strangely comforted to know, that under the billows of snow—life will be waiting for spring.
This month we bring you photographs of North Calcutta by Rita Banerji which are image designed by Word Worth.

Banerji writes:

In the 1800's north Calcutta had a substantially large and flourishing Indian merchant community, which not only had the means but apparently the hope, pride and desire to build palatial residences. Also the families lived as extended joint families, and a single household could entail more than 50 members at a time, which is also perhaps why these houses were built so big. Some of these merchants were engaged in overseas trade, and the architecture of many of these buildings reflects a curious combination of various European and Indian features.

However, presently north Calcutta is in a serious state of decay. It is undoubtedly the most neglected part of the city, and there is very little investment in it in terms of infrastructure or maintenance. Economically too, it falls at the lower end, and many of the families who once lived in these splendid homes don’t have the means to maintain them anymore. Some of the houses have been abandoned and squatters have occupied various rooms. Some of the families have leased different sections of the houses out to other families, but also to shops and businesses, on low rent, so as to be able to earn some income off the building. Given the current state of these heritage buildings, most of them between 80 and 150 years old, they most probably won’t be around in another 10 years or so.

You will be automatically forwarded through the photos, or click start.