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The Art of Thinking Critically

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The Art of Thinking Critically

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Monday December 13, 2021

By Eric F. Spina

“Anything going on in the news?” asked communication professor Joe Valenzano, opening up another lively edition of “Conservative Political Rhetoric.”

Without notes, Dr. Valenzano adeptly led students through a freewheeling discussion of current events, from the redistricting effort in Ohio to the new COVID-19 variant discovered in South Africa. About half the class identifies as conservatives and the other half as liberals.

As I listened to students share a diversity of views, I realized anew the mark of the most influential teachers in our lives. Like Joe, they make us think critically and challenge our long-held beliefs. There’s no political rancor in this small seminar, only respectful conversation. For me, it was a refreshing hiatus from the tenor of our times.

“I told the students at the start they would learn what it means to be conservative, and I said that if I do my job right, the liberals in class would realize they are more conservative than they think, and the conservatives would realize they are more liberal than they think. Feel free to ask them and see how I did,” he said.

Challenge accepted.

“It is not about what side of the aisle you are on; it is about making sure that whatever side you are on that you are educated and know why you are on that side,” said Drew Moyer, president of the Student Government Association. “The class has been centered around listening, truly listening, to others who share differing opinions so that we can learn from each other.”

Students are required to read two textbooks: *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison as well as *The Conscience of a Conservative* by Barry Goldwater. They also read *The Constitution* and writings by such well-known conservative thinkers as Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Arthur C. Brooks. A Harvard professor, Brooks spoke on campus two years ago about the principles in his book, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*. Earlier in the semester, former Ohio Governor Bob Taft made a guest appearance to talk about Goldwater’s influence on conservative thought and his own understanding of the role of government.

On the day I stopped by the students discussed the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia’s essay, “God’s Justice and Ours.”

“Read the first sentence,” Dr. Valenzano told the class. “Scalia wrote, ‘Before proceeding to discuss the morality of capital punishment, I want to make clear that my views on the subject have nothing to do with how I vote in capital cases that come before the Supreme Court.’ Let’s play with this for a second. What do you feel personally? What do you feel spiritually? What is your obligation to society?”

In the end, the students shared divergent views. Some drew the line at “torture,” calling it “cruel and unusual punishment.” Others believed in restorative justice and redemption.

Afterwards, Dr. Valenzano said, “I love this class. The students come prepared, make smart arguments and we apply them to political events as they unfold. I don’t set any ground rules, per se, except that I want people to share opinions — especially when they disagree.”

As I reluctantly left the class to rush to a meeting, I realized this is what the Marianists mean about “coming to the table.” These students and their professor have gathered together to learn how to engage in spirited conversations that value the dignity of each individual and respect the opinions of all.

The greatest lesson may be this: When we open our minds, we open our hearts.

