

# Afterword

by David Mathews

I would like to begin this postscript by returning to David Brown's description of the problem that led to this journal — the concern that America's campuses are confronted with differences that people find hard to talk about constructively. Because it is difficult to talk about these differences constructively, it is equally difficult to collaborate successfully in addressing them. David invites our attention to two different, though interrelated, matters.

One is *how* we deal with differences; the other is how we deal with one another as we talk about our differences. Obviously, the more difficulty we have in talking with one another, the more difficulty we will have in dealing with the differences themselves.

The very last essay in this collection, by Harold Saunders and Randa Slim, picks up on the problem of talking about differences. Harold Saunders should know a great deal about talking under trying circumstances. He was in the State Department and worked closely with President Carter during the Camp David talks. Before that, he had shuttled around the world with Henry Kissinger carrying messages back and forth among people whose differences were so great that they could not talk at all. More recently, in directing the Kettering Foundation's international work, Harold has developed nongovernmental dialogues between the United States and the then Soviet Union, and between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

The Saunders/Slim article argues that before any successful resolution of differences is possible, the parties have to engage one another successfully in finding a way to talk and think together. The way people talk to one another sets a pattern that can model the way they want to relate in the future. Not any kind of conversation will do when differences are so great that conflicts abound. Conversations have to be grounded in the recognition of legitimate differences in perspective and interest. Yet, they have to move beyond mutual recriminations to explore the possibility of overlapping, if not mutual interests. They have to go into sufficient depth, so that each party really comprehends what the other is saying. The Saunders' model of public talk relies on the ability of speech to shape political reality. The objective is not simply understanding if the parties want genuinely to act together to solve problems that no one party can solve alone.

A recent study by The Harwood Group on the political environment of college and university campuses finds students ready for the kind of talk that Harold Saunders advocates. Students hear "discussions" on their campuses that often appall them. For example, at one

institution a student complained, “People are very opinionated in my classes, there is no moderation at all and [the discussion] gets totally out of bounds.” Discussions seem to be dominated by the extremes, and these diatribes don’t strike students as useful. As a student on another campus observed, “There are no solutions discussed; it is all rhetoric.”

The Harwood Group asked students what they thought was missing in the campus discussions they criticized. They said they missed having a diversity of perspectives as well as an opportunity to really listen and carefully weigh trade-offs. Students wanted more discussions in which it was all right to be tentative, to explore possibilities. They didn’t argue for less emotion in discussions but for less acrimony. They wanted to see more moderation, more appreciation for what they called the “gray” or indeterminate nature of issues. They wanted to know how to make compromises with integrity and create common ground for action. Students said that college should be a place to learn how to keep an open mind, how to stand in another person’s shoes, and how to make decisions with other people.

The Harwood study tells me that students seem to know instinctively that in order to deal with differences, those on their campuses have to learn how to talk differently. Campuses — and the country as a whole for that matter — could use a little less debate and a little more dialogue, a little less ideology and a little more serious deliberation about practical problems.

Happily, some institutions and some faculty are trying to bring dialogue and deliberation back to their campuses. They are creating forums, often in conjunction with the community outside the campus, in which students can learn to talk about differences over issues constructively. Their timing is good because many of these same colleges and universities are also creating community service programs that will bring students into contact, not just with differences on campuses, but with social ills that often grow out of differences that society at large cannot talk about constructively. Students warm to opportunities for service. But the experience is likely to make them wonder even more about how to remedy the fundamental problems that make the service necessary. Service programs will create still another imperative for getting on with the business of teaching students how to talk about problems when differences abound.

Meaningful, that is, intentional and purposeful political action begins with the action of the public talking to itself. How else can the public decide on shared purposes? Political talk will inevitably be expressive, with individuals sounding off in various ways, but it also must be shared, civil, and exploratory. A democratic country has to have a political dialogue that is public — so do our campuses. It is there that students can learn to practice a different kind of political dialogue that helps them envision a different kind of politics — one that has a place for them.



## CONTRIBUTORS

Benjamin R. Barber is the Walt Whitman professor of political science and director of the Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University. His books include *Strong Democracy*, and *An Aristocracy of Everyone* (paperback, Oxford University Press, 1994), from which these remarks are drawn and the forthcoming *Jihad vs. McWorld* (Times Books).

Carlos E. Cortés is a professor of history at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author of many books, articles, and media productions. This article originally appeared in *The Humanities Network*. It is excerpted with permission.

John Lahr is the author of several books, including *Notes on a Cowardly Lion*. He is the drama critic for *The New Yorker*, and he lives in London.

Eric Liu is the founder and editor of *The Next Progressive*, a journal of opinion produced by men and women in their twenties. He is currently a speechwriter for National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and for President Clinton. This article originally appeared in *The Next Progressive*. It is excerpted with permission.

David Mathews, president of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, also chairs the National Consortium for Public Policy Education. He served as secretary of Health, Education and Welfare from 1975 to 1977 and was president of the University of Alabama from 1969 to 1980.

Harold H. Saunders, director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation, served the U.S. government for 25 years in the foreign affairs field on the National Security Council staff and, finally, as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs.

Randa Slim is a program officer with the Kettering Foundation. She has contributed chapters to *Mediation in International Relations*, St. Martin's Press; *Culture and Negotiation*, Sage Press; and *Power and Negotiation*, forthcoming. She is currently working on a book that focuses on the theory and practice of unofficial problem-solving dialogues with Dr. Harold Saunders.

Daryl G. Smith is associate professor of Education and Psychology at the Claremont Graduate School. She is the author of *The Challenge of Diversity: Involvement or Alienation in the Academy?* and other research on diversity in higher education.

Manfred Stanley is a professor of sociology, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. He is the author of books and essays on technology and culture, and the sociology of political and civic education.