

The Fine Art of Trojan Horsing



Send him mail.

"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

There are only two ways to respond to the realization that you might be wrong about something. One is to adjust your views to match reality as accurately as possible. The other is to attempt, in utter futility, to adjust reality to match your views. Only one of these approaches is conducive to an enlightening discussion, no matter what side you are on.

The willingness to seek out and eradicate inaccurate beliefs in spite of whatever emotional discomfort the alteration of those beliefs may bring is called intellectual honesty. Intellectual honesty is the most under-appreciated character virtue in the world. It is the foundational principle of discovering truth and rectifying error as quickly as possible. It is the only way to minimize unnecessary suffering, as even the nicest person with the best of intentions can unknowingly contribute to harm and malice when operating under false information. A truly noble person seeks to be proven wrong at every opportunity so they can grow in their understanding of something.

I've learned that to be a good explainer of things, you have to really be able to put yourself in the position of the other party. In fact, the ability to explain your understanding of something to someone unfamiliar with it is probably the single greatest test for how well you actually understand it yourself. New knowledge is not arrived at independently of previous knowledge. Whether or not you are consciously aware of it, your worldview consists of a tree of seemingly non-contradictory ideas or data which interlock and interweave to give you a logical explanation of causality behind everything you experience. The accuracy of these ideas and the consistency with which you categorize them effectively determines simultaneously how smart and sane you are.

Acknowledging this web of mental data in yourself is like learning to see the code behind the matrix. It is much easier to alter your programming and preconceptions when you can see the relationships of your ideas. A single false interpretation at one of the more pivotal nexuses of thought can make all the difference in the world in creating your values and

shaping your actions. A greater perspective of the knowledge you hold and its relationship to the rest of reality grants you a much more integral understanding of whatever sub-niche you fancy expertise on. If you can learn to recognize this internal idea chain in other people, you may find your ability to influence others growing.

If you are engaged in a conversation with someone who actually wants to understand your side of the argument, you have to identify where the discrepancies in your worldviews lie. It is vital to reaching a common understanding. You might already know you are right, but that is only because you hold a vast network of supporting premises and corroborations in mind to fortify your conclusion. Merely parroting out the conclusion, however passionately, without the entirety of the intellectual mapping which led you there will hardly ever work in convincing anyone of anything. Even if it does, all you have succeeded in doing is indoctrinating a non-thinker who will just as easily have the conclusion you planted erased and replaced as soon as another paradigm appears with prettier packaging.

Real lasting education and persuasion require new foundational premises to work from. Unfortunately, in the heat of an argumentative moment, we may find ourselves more preoccupied with attacking and destroying an adversary's inaccurate beliefs than with replacing those beliefs with superior right ones. The temptation to meet wrongness or disagreement with confrontation is huge. It is so huge that I thoroughly believe the only way to avoid it is to never have "arguments" in the first place. You have to stop being a debater and become a teacher and inspirer. You have to become competent enough in your understanding to rebuild entire worldviews from the ground up. You have to ask and answer questions like, "If I knew almost nothing about the world, how would I go about rationally arriving at what I currently believe to be true?". Spending time around children whom hold few preconceptions and culturally inherited biases is the best way I know to really practice this.

Since most of the things actually known about any subject are not the result of direct observation, but rather of many layers of indirect extrapolation, it is easy to see how somewhere along the way, in those many levels of interpretations resting upon interpretations, that some wires might have been crossed, and how two intelligent people could still disagree on major conclusions. Being smart is not enough; the willingness to be wrong is crucial.

The utility of metaphor and analogy cannot be overstated in the process of bridging the gap between two paradigms. If the justification for the conclusions you hold comes from a long series of foundational facts and premises which the other party is lacking, you have to find some way to link and compare what you are trying to get across to something they already have an intimate knowledge of. Think of an analogy as a lubricant for information (yes, even analogies about analogies). Comparisons of the unknown to the known provide context and definition for things. To pull off analogies successfully, however, it requires

that you actually get to know a thing or two about who you are talking to and how they see the world. It requires an empathetic human approach to what seems to have become a rather inhuman and robotic process.

A good teacher is like a surgeon for data. He can carefully and precisely enter into the mindset of the subject and remove unhealthy obstacles to clear thinking while simultaneously planting new seedling premises which will eventually blossom into conclusions. This is not easy. This will not change hearts or minds in the course of a single conversation, except on the rarest of occasions when epiphany was already ripe and ready to erupt. This requires patience and emotional temperance. It requires the maturity not to become discouraged or irate when other people do not immediately understand things as clearly as you do. Don't be a destroyer of doctrines or a mover of mountains. Become the Johnny Appleseed of rational thoughts and accurate premises, spreading your influence little by little wherever you go and upon whomever you speak to. Education is a cumulative process.

What I've typically found in the course of explaining a principle to someone is that no two mindsets are ever identical. While there are certainly common prevalent ideas and values in any given cultural sub-group, taking a one-size-fits-all approach to explaining something will leave the majority of those you speak to lost, or at best, with a partial and incomplete understanding of whatever it is you were talking about. If it doesn't work for the public school system, it certainly won't work for you. The more people you are simultaneously addressing, the harder it becomes to identify an approach that will sufficiently satisfy their present preconceptions and persuade them all effectively toward your position. A one-on-one personal and intimate technique where you can actually allow yourself to more precisely bond with your counterpart is the best approach.

It has been said that "the mark of intelligence is the ability to entertain a thought without accepting it". No matter how wrong or ridiculous you might think someone's point of view is, allowing yourself to envision how you would see the world in their shoes is vital to communicating effectively with people who think differently than you. Allow yourself the luxury of imagination and picture a worldview radically different than your own. You are no less intellectually impressive for being able to introduce new thoughts at will into your own mind and subsequently discard them just as easily. Mental rigidity is the first step toward intellectual death and the embrace of dogmatism. Fluidity of thought keeps us young and perpetually wondering whatever new possibilities may emerge from what is already known. A scientific mind maintains an optimally complementary balance of a firm dedication to the known facts with an unending search for new unknown ones. Being both firm and fluid in thought is a fine art which few can ever master.

Ridicule is easy; empathy is not. Any conversation which occurs without the explicit intention of all parties reaching a higher level of rightness is ultimately a waste of time. The

more I value my time, the less I allow people in my life who seek to argue for the sake of arguing. The more self-respect I have, the less respect I give to the narcissists who speak only for pleasure of hearing the sound of their own voices. It matters little to me anymore how wrong most people are about most things most of the time, unless the wrongness of their ideas and derivative actions are actually imposed harmfully upon me.

The removal of a single key piece of data, one single premise or preconception, can lead to a faltering collapse of a huge portion of a person's sense of identity or ability to conceptualize reality. Like a crashing Jenga tower, one structurally-principaled block might make or break someone emotionally. You might fancy your thoughts and reasoning to be impervious to emotional influence, but remember that other people are still only human. You can't expect miracles from anyone. Psychological restructuring requires time to allow new changes to become settled. We all need downtime to recover between bouts of rapid growth.

When you find yourself in the company of someone who actually takes a keen interest in expanding their own awareness and knowledge, act on it! Talk as long as you can or as long as they will listen. But be forewarned that if you present yourself in the wrong way, or counter-productively attack their existing beliefs instead of obviating them with better ones, that you can permanently disinterest that person away from intellectual honesty. You don't have to tear down the old house to build a new one. Build somewhere else. You have a great power and responsibility in your hands when you learn to explain how things work. Don't screw it up.