

How to Raise Kids to Be Leaders—Not Twitter Trolls

At the start of 2017, the *Atlantic* author Ta-Nehisi Coates self-importantly announced he was taking a year-long sabbatical from Twitter to focus on that old-fashioned long-form genre: the book. He's not the only one taking a Twitter hiatus; lots of celebrities and writers have taken temporary breaks from the social media platform. But the compulsion—or addiction—to tweet is often too powerful to resist for very long.

To be sure, one can appreciate the cleverness of those who can stir the pot—or get a good laugh—with merely a few characters. Succinctness has its power. President Donald Trump sees Twitter as the most direct way to communicate with the American public—his words, no middle man, no third-hand interpretation, no tortured ambiguity. But the short 140-character bolts of verbal zing and the resulting dopamine bursts that he must get from the tidal wave of re-tweets has none of the depth, richness, and evidence of argument that were once the hallmark of leadership.

I have come to appreciate this first-hand since working with a middle school debate team. Watch a group of middle school students—that's age ten-fourteen year olds today—prepare for a debate competition and you could be forgiven for thinking you've time-traveled back to the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention. Before the event begins, debaters are straightening out their shirts and skirts and ties, doubting their arguments, worrying about the weight (and merit) of their sources, resisting the impulse to move that *one paragraph* just one more time in the hope of achieving the perfect oratorical flow. Their eyes are darting back and forth at the words on paper they have spent two months compiling, expanding, editing, organizing and practicing. Some will look

as if they are being trundled off to the guillotine. Ask any of them—even the most seasoned three-year veteran eighth grade debaters—how they feel the day or the week before the verbal sparring begins and they will give you a one-word response: nervous. (Some will expand this to “very nervous”).

Francis Bellamy, who [wrote](#) the Pledge of Allegiance to the U.S. flag, argued in 1892 at the Saratoga Springs New York National Educational Association that debate, or the “old fashioned village lyceum” was “an institution” that “trained a race of statesmen.” Bellamy wrote powerfully and harshly about the individual who doesn’t think and debate, calling him out as a “kept man,” a “pauper,” and a bottom feeder who simply passes off others’ ideas as his own (not unlike the reposting-without-reading done so often today on Twitter and Facebook):

“The supreme advantage of debate is that it compels a man to think. A man is not a man unless he is a thinker—he is a fool having no ideas of his own. If he happens to live among men who do think he browses like an animal on their ideas. He is a sort of kept man being supported by the thoughts of others.”

In [American Ulysses](#), Ronald White Jr. relates how Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, then just fourteen, learned the art of debate when he joined the Philomathean Club. The club’s name, “derived from the Greek *philomath*, means ‘lover of learning.’” We know that Grant participated in nine of the weekly debates in his winter term when he was a teen.

Grant’s participation in debate wasn’t rare; in fact, debate was a central part of early American education. Presidents James Madison and Woodrow Wilson, Supreme Court Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth, poet of the American Revolution Philip Freneau, and Vice President Aaron Burr, were all members of Princeton’s Whig-Cllosophic Society, the oldest college debating society in the United States, with roots back to

1760s. From these debate societies emerged some of the lions of America's early political system. Others at the time extolled the virtues of debate for encouraging the development of an "intelligent patriotism" in younger generations.

Consider the topics middle school students debate today: Should the Electoral College be abolished? Should the United States build a wall on its southern border to prevent illegal immigration? Should the United States ban self-driving cars? These might seem like heady topics for tweens, but kids are capable of mapping out bold, persuasive answers to such questions with the right kind of guidance.

It is the school's business, Bellamy wrote, through vehicles such as debate, to supply the country with leaders "who will lead worthily and intelligently and with statesmen who will dare." These skills are honed in careful, measured, intelligent debate, not in word blasts on Twitter and Facebook. As the country's current overheated and thin political arguments suggest, the ability to marshal facts and form opinions to persuade others of the worthiness of a cause is a skill we shouldn't allow to wither—not if we hope to raise a new generation of honorable envoys.

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