

We're Debating Ourselves to Death

By Deborah Tannen

MY FATHER RECEIVED instructions from the board of his Florida condominium to move his car temporarily so his parking lot could be repaved. A meticulous and orderly man, my father did as instructed. But the morning after, his windshield sported an unsigned note in large block letters — the written equivalent of shouting: "DON'T PARK YOUR DAMN CAR IN MY SPOT AGAIN!" My father was incredulous that another resident — a neighbor, after all — would leave such an abusive note.

All around us, every day, we encounter rage in response to inadvertent errors or to events that are not our fault. On an airplane, I flipped the lever to put my seat back in a reclining position, and triggered a verbal assault from the man in the seat behind me.

A woman who works as a clerk in a large discount store regales her family with tales of the latest outrageous customer. The staff of an expensive private school trades war stories about "terrorist" parents,

who berate and threaten them. Doctors tell me that new patients arrive with a challenging, suspicious air, suggesting they will sue at the drop of a hat.

Why are so many of us ready to approach each other with fists figuratively raised? We are under more stress, and more of our encounters are with people we don't know.

Anonymity breeds hostility. The nasty scrawler was not chastising a neighbor, but lashing out at an anonymous villain. Anonymity enables what I call the "argument culture" — a readiness to approach others in an adversarial spirit. And this hostility aggravates the breakdown in community: the sense of connection to people

around you.

There are pressures aplenty in our day-to-day lives, but we are spurred on by what we hear in the public conversations around us, both the actual behavior of politicians and other public figures and the way their behavior is presented in the press.

An alarmingly low percentage of citizens exercises the right to vote, and many express the belief that it doesn't matter, because politicians are interested only in fighting each other. There is similar contempt for the press and for lawyers.

It might seem that these public disappointments have little in common with the private frustrations that erupt in face-to-face rage, but they are all of a piece — the fracturing of human connection.

When I wrote "You Just Don't Understand" — a book designed, in part, to ameliorate some of the hostility between women and men — one local television talk show invited me to appear with a man who warned me before we went on the air: "When I get out there, I'm going to attack you. Don't take it personally. That's why they invite me on." Sure enough, when the show began this man first attacked me, then quickly moved on to an obviously preplanned diatribe against all women.

What was most startling was the effect this had on the studio audience. The producers had invited several unsuspecting women to talk about problems they had communicating with their husbands. When the guests spoke, audience members — both

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A SEARCH FOR COMMUNITY
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women and men — turned on them, accusing them of the evil motives that my fellow “expert” had outlined. The magical connection that typically is created when people share personal experiences was stood on its head: What emerged instead was a toxic enmity.

The television medium is particularly congenial to spectacle, and fights are especially easy to engineer, as Jerry Springer knows. But even the most serious news and information shows are helping to split us apart. The practice of presenting shorter and shorter soundbites, for example, denies viewers a chance to be drawn into connection with public figures.

In print media, under the guise of providing “balance” and presenting “both sides,” writers often substitute for analysis the easy juxtaposition of two

opposing views — the more extreme the better. Most issues are a crystal of many sides, but the polarized debate encourages readers to wash their hands mentally of the matter; they don’t see their own views represented in the argument. They also think that the two sides are so far apart that a solution is impossible.

When an editor chooses a headline that turns an issue (drugs or crime, say) into a war, when a television producer books two diametrically opposed guests, when a politician mounts a negative ad campaign, when a lawyer encourages clients to sue for an exorbitant amount — each wants victory, in the form of sales or ratings or votes or client service. But the effect is to break down connections between people.

Technology too has exerted a centrifugal force, pulling us away from meeting each other face to face. In the early days of radio and television, families gathered to listen to programs emanating from the large piece of furniture. As receivers got smaller and cheaper, individuals took them to separate corners of the house.

The Internet and e-mail make possible communication at any time across vast expanses of space, but their anonymity encourages levels of extreme animosity, which have led to the vituperative, vicious e-mail attacks known as “flaming.”

There are many forces breaking down our sense of community. People move around more, change jobs more, are less likely to live near extended family. But the argument culture is a major contributor to a corrosive sense of disconnection.

How can we move away from the culture that so needlessly polarizes? We can start talking of “another side” or “all sides” rather than “the other side.” Information shows can devote at least some air time to a single guest, or more than two — the magic number that tends to reduce varied views to two sides. Teachers can train students to explore ideas truly rather than approaching everything as a debate — a battle to win rather than an effort to understand.

In the public arena, there are positive movements afoot. Alternative dispute resolution

is the fastest-growing subfield of the law. Some journalists are examining the state of their profession. Members of Congress just attended a retreat in Hershey, Pa., to learn to talk to each other across party lines.

But it is individuals who suffer the worst consequences of the argument culture and who must be in the forefront of resistance. For one thing, people can voice their objections to shows or articles that polarize and assault.

Most important are the changes we can make in our own lives: When you feel your ire rise — as likely as not against an anonymous clerk, a voice on a telephone line, the distant addressee of an e-mail letter — catch yourself and catch your breath. Try to remember that the face, the voice, or the car parked in your parking space belongs to another person, a human being — a member of the same community.



Deborah Tannen teaches linguistics at Georgetown University and is author of “You Just Don’t Understand.” Her book “The Argument Culture” was just issued in paperback.