

# "A GOOD IDEA"

by  
David Baker

# Debate

I was ambushed during round four of the 2002 College National Debate Tournament. I traveled to the NDT with the team from Dartmouth one day after I mailed admission decisions for the coming year. In all, it seemed like a perfect time to visit Missouri. I was comfortably lounging at the end of a hall, checking my email, when I saw Melissa Wade approaching. She had a look in her eye similar to the one you see when somebody is about to hand you a ballot for a round you are not scheduled to judge. I knew the verdict before the jury was seated.

**...You can write the history of debate in any manner that you choose. It is your activity to control. It is your activity to reinvent.**

Everything is sort of blur from that point, and I'm not sure if I actually agreed to give this speech, or if I just surrendered. In what could only be described as an epiphany, I suddenly understood why Barkley Forum Luncheon speakers typically begin this speech by telling their story about being asked to give it, and we will get to that later.

I asked my wife Lori what she thought I should talk about. Her immediate suggestion was that I get a copy of the round five pairings from Bill Newnam and read them aloud. That way, she said, I would always be able to say that I had the audience's full attention, and that everyone took notes.

After I left debate to become an admission director, I thought about what I might take from my experiences to share with you and the world. To that end, I pondered the authorship of several travel books. Working titles included, *A Restroom Cleanliness Guide to McDonald's Restaurants of North America*, *Where The Streets Have One Name: (subtitled) Navigating Streets Named Peachtree in Atlanta, Georgia*, *Airline Bistro Meals: (subtitled) A Sack Lunch by Another Name*, and *The Underground Guide to Buying Beer in Atlanta, Georgia on a Sunday Night*. I also considered a series of books on traveling with young people. The many

possible titles included, *If You Knock and they ask "Who Is It?" They're Guilty* and *Intimidating Adolescents with Music Trivia from the 60's and 70's*.

My life has changed a lot in the past three years. I miss all of you, but I do not miss the grind. In truth, I have found that there are a few similarities between coaching debate and directing admission. I used to argue with debaters about decisions that I made. Now I argue with parents about decisions that I made. Arguing with debaters was much more challenging. When parents arrive for the debate, they don't even know the debate topic, though they usually think they do. They are also unaware of the time limits and order of speeches. As a result, they drop lots of arguments in rebuttal. The other team has no cards on any of my arguments, and in fact I am the only one in the debate who is allowed to use evidence. It helps, of course, that while I am a participant in the debate, I also serve as the judge. I also get to decide when the debate is over.

It is not possible to share with you a perspective on this activity that is not taken from my experience. My experiences in debate were deeply personal, and perhaps of no real value to you. What I might do however is speak briefly about a broader set of dreams, about the things that I believe remain to be done, things I wish I had done, the enormous potential of the activity, and ask those who remain as active coaches to ponder the worth of those ideas.

During the twenty years of my coaching career, there were always those who believed that debate was near death. The imminent demise of the activity has always been a hot topic among the coaches and leadership of the activity. The fact that it did and has survived, does not mean that there are no issues to be addressed, but it does speak to the resilience of what is inherently a very good idea. The other night I was watching the excellent Ron Howard film, *Apollo 13*. Soon after the explosion that crippled the spacecraft, the flight operations officer was fielding dozens of reports about the various problems created by the explosion. The loss of the ship and the lives of the crew seemed imminent. At one point the flight director cuts off the conversation and asks, "What do we have on the spacecraft that's good?" Perhaps we should ask the same question. Perhaps we should look at the activity from the perspective of its inherent strengths, and build on those strengths. An inventory of what is good can give us valuable per-

spective to assess what is potentially broken and it seems to me to be a good place to start the discussion.

Debate is a really good idea. It enhances and compliments many other areas of academic expression. The resilience of debate, I believe, can be easily traced to this simple concept. While the epitaph of debate has been written a thousand times, and in spite of everything that is or may be wrong with the activity, it survives because it is a very good idea. Competitive magic drives students to explore ideas in ways that would never happen in an ordinary academic setting. I have said before that debate might best be described as full-contact social studies, and I still believe it. There are elements of academic magic that you observe every year when a skinny little kid suddenly gets it. Magic expressed on the face of that same kid coming back up the isle after receiving the first trophy of a career. The paradigm of learning starts to change. Grades start to improve. You can't get rid of that skinny little kid. Skinny little kid is constantly interrupting you in your office or your classroom. Skinny little kid won't go home.

I remember a conversation I had many years ago with the parent of a St. Mark's 8<sup>th</sup> grader. The parent was angry with me after finding her son on the floor of his closet, well after bed time, with a flashlight, cutting cards for my 8<sup>th</sup> grade debate class. "What are you doing to these children?" She demanded. I was tempted to ask her if there were other activities she would prefer her son to be doing on the floor of his closet. That skinny little kid became a Barkely Forum champion, and he still interrupts me on the phone and in person, he's still skinny and I can still see the magic on his face.

What do we have on this spacecraft that's good? We have an amazingly magical educational tool. It is a tool that transforms lives. It is an activity that has proven its resilience over time. It is an organizing principal around which scholars gather, learn from each other, compete, and achieve.

And yet, there are as always challenges to be addressed. In an activity that is inherently competitive and controversial, it seems to me that we spend more of our time assigning blame than we do solving problems. Once blame is our focus, solutions languish. If we believe that debate is troubled, then our attention should be focused on ways to make a good idea even better. That debate has survived many predictions of demise does not mean that it will continue to do so. From a distance, it also occurs to me that you have enormous power over the future of this activity. Those in this room can control the future direction of the activity.

You can write the history of debate in any manner that you choose. It is your activity to control. It is your activity to reinvent. It sometimes resembles an organism without an immune system. It often seems incapable of detecting dangerous or destructive organisms that may infect it. It is by nature vulnerable to those who may have poor ideas or personal agendas. Judgments are difficult to make because silencing a voice is and should be contrary to the organizing principals of the activity. This too, is something good. This apparent weakness is ultimately an inherent strength.

Historically, the response to controversial trends and practices has been to add voices rather than silence views. It is a tendency (however noble the intent) noticed at the high school and college level. Like a fighting church congregation, we find it easier to splinter into competing camps than to resolve our ideological differences. While it would be better if those differences could be resolved, the tendency to split is not my concern. It is the separation and ideological conflict that ensues that I believe fur-

ther complicates the language of the activity, divides his patrons, confuses its supporters and dilutes the accomplishments of its participants. We don't all have to agree about the best way to debate, to agree that debate itself, in all its forms, is good.

By my count, there are currently eight national championship trophies on which the word "debate" appears, and we are about to add a 9<sup>th</sup>. The justifications for these new events are almost always related to a notion of how to improve the activity that is at odds with some aspect of current practice. The recent article in the *Rostrum* defending the newest debate event complained of the inability of Policy and Lincoln-Douglas debate to appeal to a mass audience—a concern I share. Of course, this is the same complaint that prompted the creation of Lincoln-Douglas debate. Specialization, activity specific vocabulary, bazaar speaking styles, and cult-like behavior are all things that tend to separate debate from common understanding.

In many ways, debate is a secret society. It is cloaked in language and behavior foreign to much of the academic world, and the most of society. It is, and has always been my greatest criticism of debate that we speak a language understood only by us. We make only token attempts to explain to the rest of the world what it is we do, and why it matters. It is more than a little ironic that the greatest controversy surrounding this tournament is that, to win it, the participants in the final tutorial must actually communicate their ideas in common language.

As with many other issues, there are those who seek to define differences in absolute terms. You are either pro or anti Kritik, you are either pro or anti rapid speech. I do not wish to align with any absolutist philosophical view. I simply want to see the activity make a greater effort to improve its communication with the world. It seems to me that this good idea may be better served if more people understand it. To do that, we must first appreciate our own diversity, our own voices.

Perhaps surprisingly, I support new and different kinds of debate. What I oppose is the competition and zero sum assumptions of those voices. If somebody has a better idea about how to advance the broader goals of the activity, I wish them well. One of our great strengths is our inclusiveness; one of our greatest faults is our philosophical and pedagogical possessiveness. As a cross examination debate coach for twenty years, I took my fair share of shots at alternative formats. What I more clearly see now is that the united voice of coaches, extolling the virtues of all types of debate, is critical to a broader acceptance and understanding of our magic.

Debate is good in all its forms. My dream of a more appreciated and worldly understood activity is enhanced by the emerging voices in debate. If new events attract new participants, and even partially bridge the understanding gap, then those experiments will have been a success. If they fail, that failure should not prove that one philosophical camp was right, and the other wrong. Coaches agreeing to means that improve the global appreciation for this activity within the format framework of existing events would be even better. I can think of no good reason why debate in all its forms should not be celebrated. I can think of no more noble goal that to dedicate ourselves to the cause of improving the global appreciation for the educational magic of debate.

I spent the first ten years of my coaching career working for my own personal glory and seeking the approval of those I admired. I spent the second ten years trying to pay back part of what I had taken. Part of my effort during the second half of my career

was to find ways to help the rest of the world and your own schools better understand and appreciate what you do. Even early in my career, I think I intuitively knew that a broader appreciation of debate would be a healthy thing. I remember my very first day on the job at St. Mark's. It was the fall of 1984. I went to the mailroom to make sure that my name was on a box—proving that I had arrived. As I explored the area, I noticed a very large sign posted over the Xerox machine. It said, "Debaters are not allowed to make copies on this machine." Clearly, efforts to improve the acceptance and appreciation for our activity must start at home. Many may see those efforts as pandering to an ignorant public and inviting potential criticism from uninformed bureaucrats. At one time, I know I did. And that concern is probably fair. It is, however, a risk versus reward question. While making efforts to better inform the world about our magic may in fact bring unwanted criticism to the workings of our secret society, there are rewards that must be considered as well.

What could happen in a world where the world "gets it?" What could happen if everyone in this country truly appreciated and understood the value of what you do? The impact that debate could have would be enormous. We are uniquely qualified to comment on the quality of public debate. If given the respect that you truly deserve, it would be possible for those in this activity to have a much more significant voice in education and public policy. Remembering and trusting always that debate is a really good idea, I think the risk might be worth it.

I would love to see Paul Newman and Alex Pritchard on CNN assessing the evidence in the national debate concerning Iraq. Could you even begin to imagine the pure entertainment, much less educational value of watching Newman and Pritchard systematically dismantle Bill O'Riley on national television? Spin this, Bill. That the image is funny proves the point. We know, but too much of the rest of the world doesn't. Keeping this wonderful activity to ourselves is silencing a voice. It silences ours. Our disputes and internal conflicts focus our energy on ourselves, when many others could benefit from the chorus of our united voices.

Two years ago, I went to a local legal foundation with an idea for a national written argument competition for high school students. Within a month that foundation had committed over seventy-thousand dollars to the contest. The idea was simple. Debate is good, and written arguments can be comprehended and appreciated by a larger audience. There are other examples of outreach that I support and applaud the Barbara Jordan debates, the Urban Debate Leagues, Public Debate, Public Issue Forums, and many others. More voices, more debate, more perspective, more appreciation, more good. Not all of them will succeed, but any of them could further the cause of creating a broader appreciation for the educational magic of debate. I want everyone to know what we know, and I am willing to take risks to create broader appreciation and respect. I believe that we need to do a better job of speaking the language of the broader society. We need to make debate matter more, by helping people understand. We will never accomplish that goal until we appreciate each other and the different voices that we may represent.

I spent twenty years of my life coaching debate. If the broader society could have the perspective provided by a single year of my experience, then the people in this room would be the most respected and appreciated educators in the nation. Please try to see yourselves as colleges in a broader educational mission. Debate

coaches have two speeds; asleep and full throttle. They are caffeine propelled creatures who usually don't have enough time to worry about whether or not anyone appreciates what they do. Well I do appreciate you. I do understand the magic that you create. What I want is for others to understand it too. To that end, I challenge you to appreciate each other in all the ways and with all the voices that you make debate good.

Melissa schedules this speech annually so that one of us can offer a report from outside of the secret society. It is a dispatch from another world, from someone who can offer the perspective of a new perspective. I now understand that closure for the speaker's career is also one of her goals, and I am truly grateful to her more for the therapeutic value of writing this speech than for the opportunity to give it. For me it is a very personal opportunity to say good-bye and hello. To tell you that from my new perspective, I believe our differences are trivial when compared to our potential. That epiphany hit me in a hallway on a cold March day in Missouri, and T. S. Eliot captured the notion of how I feel at this moment much more clearly than I ever could.

He said,

*We shall not cease from exploration,  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive from where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Melissa, thank you. It's good to be home.*



*(David Baker was Policy Debate Coach at the St. Mark's School of Texas. His team won nationals in debate in 1990 and was runner-up in 1987 and 1992. This speech was delivered at the Barkley Forum Key Coach Luncheon at Emory University in January.)*