Musing 14 The Loudest Person in the Room

So I started getting interested in politics back in 2013. Not that I'd ever run for any office (I actually like my sanity), but I began to notice how much our elected officials affect our lives.

Unfortunately political interest also comes with political debate. I use the word debate loosely, because what I see on tv between pundits is usually better described as a screaming match.

From what I learned in school, a debate follows a pretty simple format: two or more people discuss with each other the merits and drawbacks of those two or more positions. There are rules to follow, including set time limits and restrictions on offensive language or personal insults, but that's pretty much it. The goal was also simple: either one side would win out over the others because it's a better position, or all sides would agree on a position that's superior to any of the original ones. To quote Joseph Joubert, the aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress.

That sounds reasonable, doesn't it? If one person is wrong, but thinks they're right, shouldn't they be debated? Shouldn't other people think about the ups and downs of the first person's position, and then challenge it based on its own merits?

Good luck finding any of that on TV, especially in political discussions. There are no set time limits, aside from how long the tv show is supposed to run. There are no rules preventing pundits from insulting each other, and there's certainly no winner or compromise reached.

How did this happen? When did we stop valuing 'progress over victory', as Joubert would put it?

The truth is, we never really did care about progress. Not when it came to politics, anyway. Politics isn't about setting or maintaining or challenging policy. It's about making people think it is. Politics... is performative.

I have a lot of issues with organized sports, but the most problematic one to me is pro wrestling. It's nothing but an act. Every entrance is staged, every word scripted, and every move is choreographed. The 'wrestlers' are actors, and they all know it. The audience knows it as well, even if they're not willing to admit it even to themselves.

The only way in which politics is different is that more people are duped into thinking it's real. More people believe that the politicians mean what they're saying, instead of just reading a script handed to them by their party. As a result, the very very few people who run for political office intending to make a real difference... are completely and overwhelmingly drowned out by the voices of all the actors!

That makes every election race a popularity contest. If no compromise is even possible, and popularity is the only goal, every contestant has to be more and more sensational in order to have a chance at winning. Every argument has to be combative and over-the-top. Sadly, any real attempt to make things better for the people doing the voting just becomes a liability to victory!

The point of a 'debate' in politics isn't to convince your opponent. It's to convince their audience.

Now imagine you're an academic. You're used to the normal politeness and rules of a debate, when you're suddenly thrust into this world of political discussion. You prepare for the debate by gathering evidence supporting your position. You practice how you're going to present that evidence, and how you're going to summarize it in closing statements.

The discussion begins, and your opponent makes an outrageous statement that's only partially connected to the truth. You respond reasonably, bringing up evidence of why he's wrong, and what the truth is. Your opponent immediately switches tracks, making a different outrageous statement on something that's only partially connected to their first point. Again, you reasonably call up evidence about why that is wrong, too. The conversation (also a bit of a stretch under the circumstances) continues in this vein. That is, if your opponent doesn't immediately shout over you and cut you off at every opportunity. This example is the best-case scenario, and it's still a disaster.

We as a society need to recognize that almost all of our politicians never mean what they say. They're reading a script, playing a part, performing a trick for us. They're entertainers, even if they're not entertaining at all. They're the bright shiny coin tossed in front of us as a distraction.

So how do we tell the ones who mean what they say, from the huge oceans of paid liars? There might be more options, but I've only come up with two so far.

Option one: Ignore what they say entirely. Focus on what they do. Focus on the legislation they sign, and the money that they allocate. Focus on the rulings they try to impede, and the rulings they ignore. Look for what's not there as much as for what is. Say I'm a political leader, and I claim that I'm not a white supremacist, and that I oppose everything they stand for. While I'm saying that, I regularly vote for legislation that hurts black people. Pay attention to what I do, not what I say.

The other option I've found is to compare politicians to actors in a more literal sense. Actors change what they say all the time, because they're paid to. One action actor might end up doing a rom-com next, and an historical period piece after that. You can tell if a politician means what they say if they don't do that. The genuine politician sticks by what they say, and they do it over the long haul. Look up footage of them from the very beginning of their career, and compare it to what they say today. Look up footage from dozens of points along their career and do the same! We can recall it. We have the internet.

If there are other ways to separate the chaff from the wheat politically speaking, please let me know. Until the forums are up and running just email me. I put my address on the site. Until then, I hope you're all doing well.