

Honorable Mention

11th – 12th Grade

22nd Annual Student Essay Contest | Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum

The Responsibility to Listen

“We have two ears and one mouth, therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak.”

Zeno of Citium said this. Father of stoicism. He lived in Ancient Greece, at the inception of democratic thought. So far have we strayed from the democracy he envisioned.

In the United States of America, the first, foremost, and greatest benefit of our democracy is freedom of speech. We are free to speak our minds when we want to, where we want to, and how we want to; and when we can't, we elect representatives to do the speaking for us. So much of our nation's history is rooted in freedom of speech. But before we were given the freedom of speech, democracy gave us the responsibility to listen.

“I'm right and you're wrong” sums up about ninety percent of political conversations in 21st Century America. But it was not always this way. At our nation's inception, people debated to reach a common good. It was a duel in the authorial arena—a sparring match of words—to make the individual debaters and the collective audience stronger, more Enlightened thinkers. Listening was part of the process. Read the opponent's moves: when they lunge, you block or dodge, then react again. Democratic discourse fails when we stop listening. We lose awareness of the argument and start swinging at the air with no thought for the other debater. The babbling swordsman falls easily. Everyone in the arena feels cheated that day. If that's how debates are nowadays, why should we indulge in them at all?

You know, this sounds vaguely similar to people who say, “So what if I don't listen? There's not much I want to hear anyway.” An ignorant statement... with a nugget of truth. The reason why we do not listen is because the rhetoric has become so violent, as Hemmer pointed out.

Violent rhetoric—

Started by the news in the Spanish-American War,

Propagated by Red Scare and McCarthyism governance,

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Living vicariously through our modern political leaders
—has trickled down into everyday political conversation.

Being right and wrong is perceived to be infinitely more important now than it was to our forefathers. We have built verbal militia groups of political parties, firing bullets of beratement at each other every single day on social media. That does not strengthen our nation. That kills our democracy. Discourse fails when we stop listening, yes—but discourse dies when we debate to kill.

So how can a nonviolent democracy become America's reality? What once was true for Zeno's Greece, Jefferson's democracy, and Washington's young republic... Civil, co-operative debate... Can we really make it back there?

It starts by deciding that your words—in a duel of blade or bullet, face-to-face or over social media—are not meant to kill. Acknowledging that debate is rooted in respect and the intention to spar and not to scar. And lastly, to listen to people who do not agree with you. Echo chambers make weak debaters. Therefore, our nation in its current state is weak. Make the change internally, listen across party lines, and allow yourself, and the audience who watches, to learn from this experience and proceed with a more nuanced understanding, and a less violently opinionated viewpoint. That is how we achieve a nonviolent democracy.

“We have two ears and one mouth, therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak.”

To Zeno, and to my fellow Americans, I'm all ears.