

Chapter 10

Civil Discourse

In 1980, Milton and Rose Friedman collaborated with the visionary television producer Bob Chitester to create a television series called *Free to Choose*. The series aired originally on the Public Broadcasting System in the United States, where, with about three million viewers per episode, it was one of the most popular programs in PBS history. A companion volume with the same title, written by the Friedmans, was near the top of the year's bestseller lists.

A decade later, *Free to Choose* served as a major inspiration for the leaders of several formerly communist countries that were reinventing themselves after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mart Laar, the first prime minister of the newly independent Estonia, explicitly named *Free to Choose* as his primary source for economic policy guidance. Following a series of reforms modeled on the Friedmans' recommendations, Estonia spent several years as the fastest-growing economy in Europe. Today, according to the human freedom rankings in the Cato Institute–Fraser Institute–Friedrich Naumann Institute *Human Freedom Index*, Estonia is a freer country than the United States of America.

Each episode of *Free to Choose* begins with a brief documentary highlighting the successes of capitalism and/or the failures of socialism, followed by an extended discussion between Milton Friedman and an ideologically diverse panel of experts. As the series was being developed, Friedman embarked on a lecture tour of colleges and universities, where he engaged at length with audiences, answering their questions and addressing their comments. Many of these lectures were filmed by the *Free to Choose* production crew and still draw a steady audience on the Internet.

Readers of *Capitalism and Freedom* and readers of *Newsweek* were already familiar with many of Friedman's ideas and arguments. But *Free to*

Choose revealed another and equally remarkable facet of Milton Friedman. In the battle of ideas, he managed always and everywhere to be, all at once, both purely relentless and perfectly respectful. I know of no other public figure who has ever been able to pull off this combination so deftly.

The videos—both the episodes of *Free to Choose* and the lecture tour videos—reveal Friedman as a master communicator, skewering the substance of ill-considered arguments without cheap shots and without resorting to personal disparagement. His famously infectious smile manages to convey satisfaction at having set the record straight with no hint of gloating or personal triumph. It seems clear that he likes the people he’s engaging with, even when he deplores their errors.

As a good economist, Friedman surely recognized the benefits of specialization. Most carpenters are not good economists for the same reason that most economists are not good carpenters, and there’s nothing disreputable about any of that. Many economists lose sight of this truism and let themselves become exasperated by economic ignorance. Friedman, by contrast, always reveled in human diversity. When a carpenter, a beautician, or a chemist spouted economic nonsense, Friedman was quick to point out that “I’ve thought about this stuff and you haven’t,” but scrupulously avoided the implication that he was castigating them. When he debated with leaders of the radical Students for a Democratic Society, Friedman always stressed that he and they sought the same things—individual freedom, pluralism, and prosperity for the masses. “The only difference between us,” he said with a smile, “is that I know how to achieve those things and you don’t.”

With professional colleagues and others who *could* be expected to have thought things through, Friedman was famously sharp-tongued, but he saved his sardonic wit for targets his own size. Friedman’s lifelong friend Charles Brunie recalls a cocktail party where a young man asked him a question in an exceedingly rude manner again and again. Milton’s response was very gracious. The next morning Milton was debating James Tobin, another Nobel laureate. Tobin asked almost exactly the same question as had the young man the prior evening, but he did it very politely. Milton went at him hammer and tongs. Later, Brunie asked Milton why he was so polite to the young man and so aggressive with Tobin. Friedman replied, “The young chap didn’t know what he was talking

about. Conversely, James did—it was an ambush question, and I wasn't going to let him get away with it."

The same sharp tongue was in evidence during Congressional testimony about the military draft. Friedman was called to testify along with General William Westmoreland, the top commander of US forces in the Vietnam War. Westmoreland, an opponent of the volunteer army, said that he preferred not to command an army of mercenaries. Friedman immediately responded by asking Westmoreland whether he preferred to command an army of slaves. He went on to observe that if volunteer soldiers are mercenaries, then so is everyone else who is paid to do a job, including Westmoreland, Friedman, and every physician, lawyer and butcher in the country.

For some, no degree of civility or fairness could compensate for Friedman's infuriating refusal to accept their poorly supported prejudices. The storyteller Leo Rosten, in his book on *People I Have Loved, Known or Admired*, changed Friedman's name to Fenwick but otherwise painted a portrait that was instantly recognizable to all who knew him:

He is an exceedingly lovable little man. His disposition is so sunny, his character so open, that even the Most Hardened Cynics, of whom my wife is International Chairman, call Fenwick "utterly adorable."

Yet, says Rosten, many people can't stand him:

Fenwick is a man who goes around being logical. He even uses reason at cocktail parties... The basic problem is that Fenwick, who is very intelligent, assumes that other people are very intelligent too. And that, believe it or not, is the way he talks to them. This makes people uneasy, for nothing is more unsettling than to be treated as if you are extremely intelligent—especially by someone you hardly know. To avoid disillusioning such a man requires that you maintain a constant state of alert, and think before you speak... It even makes you examine the partly packaged platitudes you have always employed instead of thinking.

In ordinary conversation, Fenwick is a fellow-traveler. He follows every chug in your train of thought—indeed, he leaps right on the train with you. And you have barely begun to pick up steam before Fenwick excitedly demonstrates that (a) you have taken the wrong train; or (b) it doesn't stop where you want to go; or (c) the tracks don't lead from your premise to your expectations; or (d) you had better jump off while the jumping's good or you'll land in the swamp of mushy ideas you never suspected your position rests upon.

Oscar Wilde ... once quipped: "I can stand brute force, but brute reason is quite unbearable... It is hitting below the intellect." Fenwick, a beamish fellow, never hits below the intellect. He is always kind, fair, patient, moderate—which greatly increases his unpopularity. Do you follow me? Fenwick is so fair in discussions that people can't even accuse him of using unfair tactics, than which nothing is more aggravating when you are wrong.

It is a truth universally acknowledged among those who knew Milton Friedman personally that Rosten's portrait of the kind, fair, patient, moderate, and infuriatingly logical Fenwick is close to a perfect likeness. The maintenance of that fair and even disposition even in the face of extreme hostility is an accomplishment as rare and as praiseworthy as the permanent income hypothesis or the quantity theory of money.

It is a testament to his personality that Friedman was beloved by almost all who knew him. I spoke with him at length on a total of four or five occasions. Each time he was gracious and kind beyond measure, even when we sharply disagreed. We once clashed over the Drug War, to which we were both opposed for the same reasons, though we differed over which reasons were most important. He believed the biggest issue was the cost of enforcement, including the cost of incarceration, not just to the taxpayers but to the families of those who were incarcerated. I agreed this was big, but thought it still might be small compared to the costs imposed on recreational drug users who overpaid for the product and in many cases were deterred from using it entirely. Rather than argue, we pulled out a scrap of paper and made some quick estimates.

Our calculations showed that to some reasonable approximation, the costs of enforcement and the costs to consumers were equal. As soon as we realized this, Friedman laughed in evident delight. I'm still not sure exactly what he found so delightful, but I think it had a lot to do with the sheer joy of being reminded once again that disagreements are best settled with logic, evidence, and an honest respect for the truth.

Friedman's extraordinary warmth and kindness manifested itself too in the strength of his marriage, which was much remarked upon. When Milton and Rose were in a room together, the love between them was tangible. You saw it when they were near each other, and you felt it even when they were on opposite sides of the room, communicating in ways too subtle to describe and too powerful to miss. This was evident even to strangers, who, remarkably often, inquired afterward whether anyone else had noticed this exceptional bond. Yes, they had. I'm honored and thankful to have known Milton Friedman, and to live in a world that was much improved by his presence.