

Facebook politics and the face-to-face

Arguments about common concerns are most likely to be compelling in person—but that doesn't stop us from trying to make them on social media.

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Almost never do we change a person's politics with verbal arguments—with reasoned discourse, dispassionate evidence, or passionate speech. It's disheartening, really, especially for people who care deeply about language and its power to compel, convince, convert.

But, God in heaven, do we try. With such earnestness, such determination. Why can't you see I'm right? How can you *not* be persuaded by this or that article I just posted on Facebook?

With social media—no surprise here—I'm emboldened to say things I wouldn't communicate in a face-to-face encounter with family, friends, or strangers. And for all that is social about it, Facebook and other media platforms are in fact hyper-individualized modes of consumption and dissemination, both through the user's own choices and tendencies and Facebook's algorithm logic, inscrutable as the latter may sometimes be.

But here's the thing. Or at least one thing. A good argument—about anything—and how we make it well is less like a carefully crafted press release and more like a performance piece, an embodied act intelligible within a set of other actions, convictions, stories, and dispositions.

When a lawyer makes a closing argument, it's her body language as much as the written text—her physical comportment, her eye contact with each juror, that catch in her voice—that does the necessary work (or doesn't). We don't phone these

things in—presence and embodiment are everything.

And when it comes to politics—by which I mean how human life is ordered for the good of all and how we routinely fail at this—the arguments we make about this or that issue are rooted in a wider set of concerns and convictions about what counts as the good life.

We have honest disagreements about this. And any hope we might have to compel, convince, or convert another to our vision of things is in how well—how *beautifully*, I would suggest—we perform, embody, live out, bear witness to our particular vision in a deeply social way, a truly social way. No pixels necessary. Real bodies in real time in real places.

From [Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement](#) to indigenous North Dakotans and their allies at [Standing Rock](#), we do this together. We do it (if I can quote theologian [Kathryn Tanner](#) slightly out of context) as “a genuine community of argument, one marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift.”

So we might make something “public” on Facebook and we might talk about our “public discourse” and there is such a thing as “public policy,” but the truth is we are members of communities, not members of the public. As [Wendell Berry](#) has said, a community is “a group of people who belong to one another and to their place. We would say, ‘we belong to our community,’ but never ‘We belong to our public.’”

May we inhabit our communities and engage other communities with the kind of compelling witness, beautiful belonging, that makes people say, “I want some of that; I could belong there.” And thus may we argue well.

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