



Win the Peace

Prevent arguments.



by John Clements

WE'VE ALL HAD A RUN-IN with someone who goes around *looking* for arguments. Even if his vocabulary is not combative, other elements of his communication (tone, volume, emphasis, body language) are carefully crafted to broadcast a single message: "I am *right*!" And, as a reward for your compliance with his ultimatum, he'll pay you a gratuity—a neurotic relationship.

Brain Versus Brawl

How should you respond to Mr. I. M. Right? This fellow is out to outdo you. You have a choice of responses.

- Instinctively, you want to fight Mr. I. M. Right with his own weapons, to "give as good as you get." But the moment you do that, you're playing by his rules! Much better to:

- Neutralize his tactics for drawing you into battle.
- Recognize each tactic for what it is.
- Recognize *him* for what *he* is.
- Understand enough about his psychology to make *him* play by *your* rules, which are, of course, the normal rules of human interaction.

The technique will require considerable practice on your part. After all, Mr. I. M. Right is a dedicated squabble-monger who views people as instruments for the enhancement of his self-image, and will, if not prevented, treat them as stepping stones to personal glory. That being the case, you need to understand his strategy in advance. He'll subject you to a three-stage process: 1) test your strength as an opponent; 2) find the quickest way to make you uncomfortable; and 3) force you to play *his* game by *his* rules. Naturally, he must succeed at stages 1 and 2 before he can progress to stage 3. His progress will be hampered if you show resilience at stages 1 or 2. And *resilience* is not the same as *resistance*.

Resilience Disarms Others

Mr I. M. Right will poke you with any number of sticks to provoke you to battle. The moment you poke back, you've given in. Show him your strength, and he'll seek out your weakness. Act defensively, and he's found your weakness. Try to disengage, and he'll exploit your weakness to make you feel increasingly uncomfortable until you fight back again. Whereupon his strategy has succeeded, the poking will resume, and he'll consider you fair game forever more.

Resilience, however, disarms Mr I. M. Right. When he initially irks you, give him a non-committal reply with neutral body language. This indicates that you're not willing to engage in battle. If he jibes at you again, display some positive-to-bored body language, like a half-smile or raised eyebrow. If he lunges a third time, ignore him.

At this point, he may be confused and resort to a different tactic, a gentler one, to throw you off guard. This is your cue to reward him with pleasantries. If he replies on an equal level, you can continue rewarding him with light banter until his signals (tone, body language, etc.) indicate that he knows you will not be provoked. Thereafter, you can confidently proceed with more substantial conversation, as long as it's not the argumentative stuff that he wanted at the beginning. You've rewarded him for good behavior without resorting to punitive ripostes.

When we're tired of overwork or irritated by combative characters, our old "give as good as we get" mindset gains the ascendancy. At those moments our biggest conflict is with ourselves. Once we can dominate our own worst instincts, everybody else will be a pushover by comparison.

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ACTION: Have a respectful conversation with an argumentative person.

Personal Excellence

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