

Two Brothers & Two Chairs

Air travel in 2021 is expected to be less than a quarter of 2019's level, but we can be sure many of us will soon be taking a plane, and for that, we are grateful to the Wright Brothers.

According to Orville Wright, they had no special advantages, but the greatest advantage was growing up in a family where intellectual curiosity was always encouraged. Furthermore, their dad encouraged them to debate, which happened a lot at dinnertime when the boys took turns making arguments and exchanging sides.

Their training prepared them to look at things from a variety of perspectives and search for answers. In other words, they were accustomed to giving up their positions rather than holding on tight if someone else presented a better case. Thus, their arguments were not personal and their debates served to find the best resolution.

Vincent van Gogh did not have the same fortune.

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Having admired Paul Gauguin, Vincent invited Gauguin to come to Arles to support his utopian dream of creating an artists' colony. Gauguin's stature and talent, according to Vincent, would bring the artists' colony to life. As soon as Gauguin agreed with Vincent's brother Theo that he'd get an allowance in exchange for some paintings, Vincent quickly decorated his humble abode and eagerly awaited for his new friend to arrive. Initial bonds were formed as the two painted artwork after artwork and spent a lot of time together wrestling about the future of modern art. But in the short 9 weeks that the two spent together, they debated so heavily that Vincent wrote, "Our arguments are terribly electric; sometimes we come out of them as exhausted as a used electric battery."

In reality, Gauguin wasn't interested in Vincent's dream of a colony of artists; he really only needed Theo's financial assistance for a short time to sail to Tahiti. Their relationship was fraught. The last argument between Gauguin and Vincent was not over art; rather, Gauguin mocked Vincent for a lack of women in his life. In his state of anger, Vincent severed his own ear and made history as the mad artist who cut off his own ear. Vincent's paintings of two chairs exemplified their differences in personality. The simple wooden chair that represented him contrasted with the much fancier armchair that embodied Gauguin.

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In contrast, the Wright Brothers' dream was a joint pursuit while Vincent's aspiration was both a one-sided affair and not shared by Gauguin. As a result of their father's conditioning, the Wright Brothers mastered the art of argument and developed something better through the art of debate, while Vincent lacked social skills, and Gauguin attacked Vincent personally instead of his work.

Having an alignment in goals is essential in any team environment, whether it is in sports teams, corporations, family businesses, startups, or, between husband and wife. In addition, our ability to engage in healthy discourse plays a huge factor in whether we create something groundbreaking like the Wright Brothers or dissipate like Vincent and Gauguin.

Is it time to (re)visit your common goals and/or strengthen your skills in a civil contest of ideas and viewpoints?

Let's chat!

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