
TED Talk: Zachary Wood, “Why It’s Worth Listening to People You Disagree with”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

These reflection questions can be used to generate discussion, in small groups or classroom wide, or to elicit reflective short writing, in response to Zachary Wood’s TED Talk, “Why It’s Worth Listening to People You Disagree with.”

1. What arguments do Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein make in *The Bell Curve* (1994) that are so offensive to Zachary Wood and many others on the campus of his university (Williams College)? What views does John Derbyshire express that are equally anathema to Wood and Williams College?
2. Zachary Wood invited Charles Murray and John Derbyshire to speak at Williams College despite “knowing full well that this invitation would give these men and their views a platform for expression.
3. Zachary Wood was separated from his mother when he was 14 years old because she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. But Wood feels very grateful to his mother for the lesson he taught her about the value of being exposed to ideas that are different from and sometimes contradictory to your own. Inferring some from what he actually tells us – or perhaps adding on to it – what do you think were the grounds for this life principle of his mother’s?
4. What was Zachary Wood’s mother’s nuanced position on affirmative action?
5. What were the attributes that Zachary Wood had to have and display to his peers and their parents and community to gain their acceptance at the elite private schools he attended from 4th through 12th grade?
6. Zachary Wood joined an organization on the campus of Williams College that attempted to bring controversial speakers in to debate highly controversial and sometimes very sensitive issues. Wood is careful in his talk to acknowledge the force of the arguments that people made at Williams (and have made on other campuses and in other education and social settings) *against* bringing these kinds of speakers to the campus for talks and debates. Paraphrase his summary of their arguments.
7. Wood has what can be summarized as two responses to these arguments against inviting highly controversial speakers to express their views and debate. What are these two responses and what are the grounds for them?
8. In the last segment of Wood’s TED Talk, he discusses changing people’s intellectual values toward his own. What does he say about his experiences with his attempts to change others’ intellectual values?



9. What relevance does Wood’s anecdote about his dinner with Charles Murray have to his overall argumentative position in this TED Talk?
10. “I’d like to see a world with more leaders who are more familiar with the depths of the views of those they deeply disagree with so that they can understand the nuances of everyone they represent.” How does this closing statement give his TED Talk an explicitly political turn?