As per my usual modus vivendi, I have procrastinated in sitting down to write this editorial until nearly the last minute. Although procrastination is by no means a character trait worthy of celebration, I can at least take comfort in knowing that at this moment I am in exalted company. I type the present musings a mere 3 days before August 2, 2011, a deadline for raising the US debt ceiling that has hung over the US capitol for months. Perhaps by the time this editorial is published, a brilliant Solomonic solution will have emerged that will cause the current high drama to appear in retrospect to have been little more than a run of the mill legislative hiccup. I certainly hope that this is the case. At the present moment, however, I am struck by the impression that this impasse is symptomatic of a much broader and extremely dangerous trend. Our culture at large seems to have eschewed the capacity to appreciate dialectic nuance and compromise, and has instead enthusiastically embraced polemical, binary views of the world. I expect that sociologists will long discuss how we arrived at this distinctly medieval state of affairs and how the current fashion for grandstanding and compromise, thoughtfulness, and empathy became synonyms for cowardice and lack of resolve.

My goal in exploring this depressing topic is not to dwell on the current maelstrom but rather to celebrate a small and fragile beacon of hope that still flickers on its periphery. Like many readers of Physiology, over the past month I had the good fortune to attend a couple of the sort of small, topically focused summer scientific conferences that gather scientists in lovely settings, chosen to highlight the natural beauty of places like New England or the Rocky Mountains, and then lock them in auditoriums for 16 hours per day. Although these meetings’ dense schedules did not permit me to take long salubrious treks through the forest that I had hoped for, they did provide me with an opportunity to take part in a healthy activity of another sort. As a member of the communities that each of these meetings brought together, I had the privilege of witnessing vigorous, dispassionate discussions of ideas. Speakers presented data, interpreted data, speculated about data, and defended data. Participants asked hard questions, pointed questions, insightful questions, skeptical questions, challenging questions, and the occasional downright stupid questions. Sometimes these discussions took place in the conference auditorium, sometimes over meals, and sometimes over beer. The topics, intensity, and importance of these conversations varied widely. What they always shared was a tone of mutual respect, tolerance, and civility. All of the individuals involved implicitly acknowledged the overarching fact that the scientific point at issue has a truth value that is separable from the power and persuasiveness of its proponents and detractors.

I am not so naive as to believe that all scientists are constantly nice and that they always play well together. I understand that self-aggrandizement, fads, and herd-like mentalities can skew the quality and direction of scientific communication. I remain impressed, however, that a gathering of intelligent and opinionated individuals who recognize the importance of substantive dialogue. Not infrequently, the individuals involved in a scientific discussion are tremendously invested in its outcome and have banked years of work and their career success on the acceptance of their position by the community. Notwithstanding these high personal stakes, most participants in scientific debates recognize that weight of data, logic, and cogent reasoning will convince their peers far more readily than will slogans, venom, or volume.

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that scientists, whom the public tends to regard as non-communicative, soulless geeks, appear to be better at pursuing productive public debates than are many of the people who have made careers out of debating in the public arena. I believe that the scientific community has a lot to teach the general public, the media, and politicians about how to effectively talk to one another. Unfortunately, it does not seem likely that the scientific community is going to be invited to teach that class any time soon.