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## Dining With Jeff

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Founding a democracy, rather like living in a democracy, can be very tough on friendship.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson began as friends. The tensions and frictions of the early Republic took care of that. Then, after years of silence between them, a mutual friend persuaded them to write to each other. In 1812, they launched into a correspondence that continued until it was ended by their deaths.

That ending point was on their minds and drove their correspondence. As Mr. Adams wrote Mr. Jefferson, "You and I ought not to die, before we have explained ourselves to each other."

I fell in love with this quotation 30 years ago, about the same time that I fell in love with Jeff Limerick, and for some of the same reasons. Honest, self-aware and articulate, Jeff made "explaining himself" into an art form, but his performance soared past his fellow mortals when it came to the tougher side of this transaction. Jeff had a genius for listening and giving people the best opportunity to explain themselves and to become his friend.

On Feb. 1, 2005, Jeff died of a stroke. Having trained with a master, I carry on with the methods I learned from him.

When I find myself puzzled and even vexed by the opinions and beliefs of other people, I invite them to have lunch. Multiple experiments have supported what we will call, in Jeff's honor, the Limerick Hypothesis: in the bitter contests of values and political rhetoric that characterize our times, 90 percent of the uproar is noise, and 10 percent is what the scientists call "signal," or solid, substantive information that will reward study and interpretation. If we could eliminate much of the noise, we might find that the actual, meaningful disagreements are on a scale we can manage.

To put this hypothesis to the test, we will now apply it to two well-known people who are not, at this moment, friends. In a recent fray, escalated by the conflict-enhancing powers of the Internet, the journalist Bill Moyers misquoted James Watt, Ronald Reagan's first secretary of the interior. Mr. Moyers gave a speech last winter at Harvard, criticizing the Bush administration's environmental policies and making the case that an unfortunate theology, particularly a belief in an imminent Second Coming, was the driving force behind these policies. At the start of his speech, to illustrate this theology, Mr. Moyers shifted back in time and quoted Mr. Watt. Mr. Moyers said that Mr. Watt "had told the U.S. Congress that protecting natural resources was unimportant in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. In public testimony, [Watt] said, 'After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back.'"

But there is no evidence that Mr. Watt ever said this improbable thing, and Mr. Moyers acknowledged his "mistake" in quoting a remark that he could not confirm. But between these two very interesting Westerners remains a canyon of misunderstanding, in which people of Christian faith accuse each other of holding beliefs that jeopardize the well-being of the earth and its inhabitants.

By casting many evangelical Christians as enemies of the earth's well-being, Mr. Moyers has made a not entirely strategic move to alienate people who could, should they be persuaded to recognize the hand of the Creator at work in the creation, prove to be remarkable and effective supporters for a cause that he considers urgent and crucial.

It's surely time for lunch.

So I invite Mr. Watt and Mr. Moyers to break bread with me, in a setting where a transcendent Western landscape both stirs our souls and reminds us of the economic, aesthetic, biological and spiritual riches at stake in our conversation. (The good news is that one man has already accepted.)

My prospective companions are both people of earnest, generous, tested and resilient religious belief. It wouldn't take them long to find and face up to this common feature of their lives. And as a recovering secular humanist still struggling with my husband's death, I would find comfort in the company of people of faith.

A successful outcome would be a vindication of the faith held by Jefferson, Adams and Jeff Limerick. But even if I dine alone, I'll still hold to the conviction that American citizens have the ability to explain themselves to one another, and to let friendship redeem the Republic.