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My View: Maintaining ethics and character are more important than winning debates

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Aug 13, 2026

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Every morning begins the same way. Turn on the television or scroll through your phone and, within minutes, you're immersed in political arguments, wars, wildfires, rising prices and enough opinions to fill a lifetime. Before breakfast we're encouraged to pick a side or worry about things we have little ability to change.

Lately, I've found myself asking a different question. What is actually within my control?

It is hardly a new question. Nearly two thousand years ago, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius wrestled with the same idea. Despite leading one of history's greatest empires, he reminded himself that wars, politics, disease, the weather, public opinion and even his own reputation were beyond his control. Instead, he focused on what he could govern.



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Joe Kreuz thinks it's more important to know what you can control than argue about what you can't.

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Those thoughts quietly reinforced something I've believed for years. Standards are what others expect of us. Ethics are what we expect of ourselves. There is an important difference.

Standards are often written into policies, employee handbooks, laws and organizational values. They establish the boundaries within which we operate. Ethics begin where the handbook ends. Ethics ask not, "What can I do?" but "What should I do?"

That distinction feels especially important today.

I try to consume ideas from both sides of the teeter-totter before reaching my own conclusions. Listening does not require agreement, but it does require respect. Thoughtful people can arrive at different opinions while still sharing many of the same values.

Ethics shape the example I hope to set for my family, my friends and the circles I travel in. More importantly, they help preserve the cohesiveness of groups whose members may sit on opposite sides of the teeter-totter yet still treat one another with dignity.

We spend enormous energy debating things beyond our influence. Markets rise and fall, international conflicts dominate the headlines. One day it's inflation, the next it's tariffs.

While those issues deserve thoughtful discussion, they can also distract us from the one area where each of us possesses complete authority: our own conduct.

Perhaps that is what gallantry looks like today. I see quiet examples throughout Western New York. A neighbor who shovels another family's driveway before finishing his own, someone returning a lost wallet without expecting recognition, a family opening its home to strangers whose own land has become uninhabitable. Those acts of everyday gallantry reveal character, and they are rooted in ethics.

History rarely remembers who won the loudest argument. It remembers those who lived by principles that outlasted the arguments themselves. The world will always offer us reasons to become distracted, discouraged or divided. It always has.

Perhaps the better question is not whether we can change the headlines. Perhaps it is whether, despite the headlines, we can still choose integrity, kindness, restraint and courage.

As the old proverb reminds us, "Fear knocked at the door. Courage answered and no one was there." In a world increasingly defined by noise, perhaps the greatest measure of our character is not what happens around us, but how we choose to respond to it.