

CAN
CEL

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Cancel is from Latin for ‘make like a lattice’,
like crisscrossed wood fencing
in our backyard where we safely
dine with friends,

or like COVID-caused crossouts
on calendars--
a cancelled appointment (*dis-appointment*)
or music event (*dis-concerting*).

Teachers don’t like saying ‘cancel’
lest students get carried away,
cancelling sixes of $26/65$,
which *does* equal two-fifths

but it’s ‘cause we multiplied by $1/13$ over $1/13$,
another name for one.
And don’t say we ‘reduced to lowest terms’
lest students think it shrank.

But context factors into when
cancelling simplifies:
 $2/5$ is less clear than $26/65$
for the chance of drawing a black card
from a deck augmented by another deck’s
diamonds

while with $y = (x^2 - 1)/(x - 1)$,
cancellation reveals
the whole
limit at $x = 1$.

Now cancelling an x from both sides of $x^2 = 3x$
yields one solution, but loses the other.
Never cancel something
that could be nothing.

My red-voting uncle says our national petri dish
of polarization yields ‘cancel culture’
that cancels minority opinion
not from a minority,

forming a fractious fraction of
conformity over free speech,
to shut up and shout down
undesired values.

Of course, algebraic
structures allow
cancellation
from the left *and* from the right.

Just as we should be slow
to write off students
who casually make a
cancelling error,

who take something like $(x^2 - 8)/(x - 2)$
and strike parts of the expression
without considering
whole factors,

I say don’t always
cancel a person for the terms they use.
Let’s first try calling them *in*,
not calling them out,

and help them see the error,
learn what led them to make it,
and help them outgrow
and correct it

as headphones
make opposing waves
to cancel noise
and lower the volume of the world.