

The Growing Lack of Civility in Our Culture

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Benjamin Franklin said, “Be civil to all, sociable to many, familiar with few, friend to one, enemy to none.” (1) Such counsel has been largely ignored in our culture and for that matter, the world. Our nation’s founding fathers and their emerging parties were often at each other’s throats. (2) Quite literally, South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks was at Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner’s throat when he beat him to unconsciousness on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1856. (3) Incivility, therefore, is nothing new to our American culture. Ever since we have had norms for public behavior, persons have followed, ignored, mocked, challenged and/or changed them. Consequently, incivility is part and parcel of the world and in the eyes of many, has grown to grave levels in the United States today.

In the 2016 annual “Civility in America” poll conducted by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate with KRC Research, 70% of Americans said that incivility had reached “crisis” proportions in our culture and 58% expect it to get worse. (4) A year later, in the 2017 annual poll, 79% said that the 2016 presidential election was uncivil and an unprecedented high of 69% said that it was a “major problem.” (5) Also, according to “The PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist Poll of 1,205 National Adults,” conducted in June of this year, 70% of the nation’s adults think that political incivility has worsened since President Trump was elected. (6)

But it is not just in the political sphere that Americans sense a growing incivility. In the October 2016 edition of *Psychology Today*, “Wired for Success,” Ray Williams wrote, “Most Americans report they have been victims of incivility (86%)....and approximately six in 10 Americans (59%) acknowledge that they themselves have been uncivil.” (7) This includes all realms of daily living—home, work, school, all forms of entertainment, the news, public service and religion. Nothing is exempt from this growing trend.

So, to what do we attribute this lack of civility? Is it all bad? And how and to what end can or should we control it?

Scholar and educator Virginia Sapiro has broken down civility in the United States and characterized its parts as 1) that which “focuses on politics” and has to do with the community and what it means to be a good or bad citizen; 2) is “closer to manners” and has to do with etiquette and being polite, mannerly; and 3) is “communicative in nature,” which involves the ability to converse, agree and disagree, listen, argue and debate. (8) Because these parts often overlap and relate to one another, the growing lack of incivility can be examined as a whole (as I am doing in this paper), or separately.

With that in mind, just about anything that affects our behavior can cause us to be civil or uncivil—ethical and moral values and principles, stress, anger, fear, happiness, modus operandi, injustices, divergent objectives, changing times, different civility codes and incivility itself.

In former President Obama’s commencement address to the University of Notre Dame’s class of 2009, he pointed to “selfishness, pride, stubbornness, acquisitiveness, insecurities and ego” as stumbling blocks for civility. Or as he said, “all the cruelty large and small that those of us in the Christian tradition understand to be rooted in original sin.” (9)

Regarding how we operate or work, historian Jon Meacham compared the styles of Presidents Andrew Jackson and Donald Trump, saying, “Andrew Jackson was a chess player. Donald Trump is an ‘Angry Birds’ player.” (10) Both approaches can contribute to and affect not only their civility and incivility, but others’ too.

Meacham also pointed to the need for nations to have common objectives. He said that his favorite definition of a nation is St. Augustine’s, which is, “a nation is a multitude of rational beings united by the common objects of their love.” He, then, went on to say, “So what we have

to ask ourselves at every critical point is, what do we love in common?" And he concluded, saying, "Right now, we don't love enough in common." (11)

I suppose we also should ask, do we have enough rational beings? Tim Rutten wrote in September 2009 a piece for *The Denver Post*, entitled, "Incivility is Taking the Place of Facts." He showed how incivility had become more popular and profitable than facts. (12) That has continued with the advent of "alternative facts." Looking at today's political wrangling, Michael Gerson wrote in June of this year, "If we have learned anything from the past few years in our politics, it is that civility is for suckers, that compromise is a sign of weakness, and that moderation of temperament is boring and unmarketable." (13)

Some of this can be attributed to our form of government, the pace and number of changing social and cultural norms and technology. When comparing our democracy to the aristocracies of his day, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1800s that "manners in a democracy vary and are in contrast to the codes found in European aristocracies in part because of the diversity of the people (class, race, region, party)." This led him to conclude, saying, "There is still some memory of the strict code of politeness, but no one knows quite what it said or where to find it." Consequently, he thought that civility was a work in progress that might be impossible to attain fully in our democracy. (14)

Though George Washington did not think he was addressing our nation's need for a civility code when as a boy he copied the norms of behavior that the French Jesuits created in 1595, he was in that they evolved somewhat into a code of conduct for our nation and are now published as *George Washington's Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. Its first rule is, "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect, to

those that are present” and its last is, “Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.” In between are rules that apply to personal hygiene and table manners, but also rules like “Let your conversation be without malice or envy...and in all causes of passion admit reason to govern.” (15)

In noting that incivility is nothing new in the United States, Keith Bybee lists some of the cultural and social changes on which it has been blamed. In the 18th century, he says that “truculence and crass materialism brought about by interest-ridden politics” was blamed for incivility. In the 19th century, it was “the Civil War, new immigrants, urban life, the vulgar rich *and* the insolent poor.” And then in the 20th century, it was “jazz music, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, rock and roll *and* the large-scale entry of women into the workforce.” (16)

Thus far in the 21st century, we might include things like 9/11, terrorism, the Great Recession, nationalism, economic disparity, racial tensions, drugs and social media.

Though modern technology has contributed to the free flow of information, social discourse and rescue efforts, it also has posed problems. Karen North, a psychologist and director of the University of Southern California's Digital Social Media Program, writes, “Social media is an atmosphere devoid of the social cues that mitigate behavior in real life. When violating social norms in person, there's immediate feedback from others through body language and tone of voice. No such indicators exist online, and retweets can feel like validation.” (17)

Jeff Goldman, speaking at this year's Fall Event of the Jewish Federation of Fort Wayne, also pointed out that we often do not know who is blogging and posting material on social media. He asked, “How do we know that they're independently sourcing their information? What's their

background?” Therefore, he advised everyone to “take things with a grain of salt and look at multiple sources of information.” (18)

This lends credence to Susan Herbst contention that technology may allow for and promote behavior that would be considered uncivil in public, in-person arenas. (19) But the shift from what was once considered uncivil to being civil has occurred in other sectors of life, too.

In her feature article, “Discourse Gets Dirtier: Growth of Vulgarity in Workplace Signals Clash of Cultures,” Kim Ode writes that the f-word is being used more often in the workplace to the chagrin of those who consider it rude and the approval of those who see it as a way to add “a punch to what is being said...and thus is called the ‘f-bomb.’” (20)

Over the years, codes of civility have changed and undoubtedly will continue to do so. Some of Washington’s rules are out-of-date and some should not have been adhered to in the first place. As a member of the clergy, I just might like the rule, “In pulling off your hat to persons of distinction, as noblemen, justices, churchmen etc. make a reverence, bowing more or less according to the custom of the better bred, and quality of the person.” (21) The problem is that this rule harbors notions of superiority, prejudice and classism, all of which can and often do lead to incivility.

The manifestations of incivility are numerous and varied. They include insults, line-cutting, road rage, bullying, exchanging fact for fiction, hate speech, mudslinging, flaming, harassment, sarcasm, violence and belligerence to name just a few.

In light of this, is civility all good and incivility all bad? Does civility have an ugly side and if so, what is it? Can incivility sometimes be called for and warranted? Such questions may seem anomalous and even alarming. But the reality of human nature along with the United

States's diverse culture and commitment to freedom of speech may at times call for incivility to open the door to more inclusive and equitable norms of civility.

James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers*, "As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence." (22) This is what we in the Christian faith call being both sinner and saint, for when it comes to morality and civility, we humans are a mixed bag.

In "Romans," Paul says of being faithful and civil, "Let love be genuine...contribute to the needs of the saints...bless those who persecute you...associate with the lowly...feed and give something to drink to your enemies...do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (23) Such a high bar for civility led Paul to confess what I suspect we all can confess at times and that is, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (24)

James Madison also noted in the *Federalist Papers* that there will always be differences of opinion among human beings as long as our reason is subject to error and persons can express their thoughts. Listing a number of things, including religion and government, he writes, "A zeal for different opinions...have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good." (25) Such is the case with the simplistic and uncompromising partisanship found in our politics today.

Civility, then, can be hierarchal and repressive. It can rob us of expressing conviction and feelings, create double standards, be deceptive and deceitful, stifle reform and creativity, and be just for show. In other words, it can be uncivil. For civility is a following of the rules and if

the rules are stacked in favor of some at the expense of others, then they lack integrity and become merely tools for self-enhancement and gain.

John Kasson noted that a confidence man (con man) is a “genteel,” but conniving person. (26) Marx argued that Christian capitalist civility is a cover for materialism. (27) An experiment in 2015 exposed the double standard that anger expressed by men was considered to make them “more credible and persuasive,” whereas expressed by women characterized them as “emotional and untrustworthy.” (28) Such double standards have emboldened discrimination and resulted in second-class citizenry, slavery and Jim Crow laws, which in turn have brought about civil rights and Black Lives Matter demonstrations that some have labeled uncivil, because dissenters have spoken out, marched and knelt instead of stood for the national anthem.

This fall President Trump railed against National Football League players who refused to stand for the national anthem, saying, “get that son of a bitch off the field.” (29) However, Eric Reid of the National Football League’s San Francisco 49ers wrote that Colin Kaepernick and he ended up kneeling instead of sitting for the anthem, because, out of their faith and patriotism, they felt that would be a more respectful way to protest against police brutality. (30)

Circumstances can dictate that what is civil for some is not civil for all. For what is more civil—crying out for justice, abiding by one’s conscience, or doing what is deemed mannerly? The nineteenth century saw an outpouring of etiquette books that added to family teachings and are now augmented by numerous advice columns, all of which can differ so greatly that Keith Bybee writes, “The multiple understandings of appropriate conduct make it easy for individuals to spot incivility when they experience it, but harder to identify incivility when they inflict it.” (31)



If we turn to the Latin derivation for civility—*civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (city)—civility, must entail more than rules for good manners. Zizi Papacharissi of Temple University writes, “Civility standards should promote respect for the other, enhance democracy, but also allow human uniqueness and unpredictability.” (32) Therefore, he distinguishes between politeness and civility by saying politeness is “etiquette-related” and civility is related to and respectful of the “collective traditions of democracy.” (33) Incivility, then, is “disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy.” (34)

Such an understanding of civility and incivility led Susan Herbst to argue that we should look at civility not as a set of norms, but rather as a strategic asset or tool. She writes, “The line between passionate engagement and civility seems chronically fuzzy and arbitrary....Norms of civility certainly exist....But civility is also very much in the eye of the beholder....What we should attend to are strategic uses of civility and incivility.” (35)

This is similar to situational ethics in that both support standards for moral and civil behavior, but allow for them to be fluid, depending on the situation and goal. Theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich and especially Joseph Fletcher with his book, *Situation Ethics*, proposed that ethical norms are subject to God’s unconditional love and, thus, may be followed or broken depending on the situation. Herbst is saying that civility needs to take into account that everyone is capable of being civil and uncivil at times, that both can be strategically and effectively employed and what should be done can change depending on the purpose and context.

In her book, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics*, Herbst says that Sarah Palin became one of the most astute users of civility and incivility when she campaigned with John McCain against Barak Obama and Joe Biden. She did this by closely aligning herself with her followers and using questionable means to attack her opponents, rouse up her

supporters, state her position and garner the attention of the media with words like “McCain, not Hussein.” (36) Herbst writes, “Whether it was planned or not, we have a ‘good cop, bad cop’ team of McCain and Palin. McCain tries briefly in the fall of 2008 to use civility as a weapon....Palin, in contrast, chose incivility as a tool.” (37)

The game of “good cop, bad cop” is being played out today by President Donald Trump, the bad cop, and Vice President Mike Pence, the good cop. When President Trump tweeted on July 2, 2017, an edited video of him punching on the ground a man depicted to be CNN, Tamara Keith on *The PBS NewsHour* said that Trump not only sees the press as his foe, but he wants and needs one. Stuart Rothenberg added to that by pointing out that this advances his cause by exciting his base, who along with 80% of Americans do not trust the news media. (38)

On the Friday before, June 30, Judy Woodruff on *The PBS NewsHour* asked Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri about President Trump’s tweets against cable news hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski and especially about Mika, whom Trump said had a low IQ and needed a face-lift. Blunt said, “I think, generally, the president’s tweets are not helpful to him. At the same time, he’s figured out a way to communicate with people in ways that no other president has, or he wouldn’t be president.” Blunt then said that the President’s tweets sometimes contribute to and sometimes do not contribute to the Republican agenda. (39)

The President also has attacked Mexican immigrants, Muslims, Senator John McCain, the Mayor of San Juan and other leaders and institutions. Sometimes, he also has reversed himself, though seldom if ever apologizing. Consistently, though, he has, as you would expect, attacked his presidential opponent Hillary Clinton, whom he has called the Devil (40) and continues to call “Crooked Hillary Clinton.” (41)

During all of this, Vice President Pence has stood by the president, championing his agenda, trying to smooth over the rough spots and appearing abroad and at home to clarify the President's stances and express concern and resolve on his behalf.

Of course, strategic incivility is not just limited to the President and Vice President. Though Hillary Clinton has not publicly attacked Trump as belligerently as his mock video of him hitting a golf ball that strikes her on the back of her head and makes her fall down, (42) she has called him "Donkey of the Decade" (43) and a "creep." (44) She also said that half of Trump's supporters belonged in a "basket of deplorables," being that they were "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic." But then she expressed regret for saying that and acknowledged that "many of Trump's supporters are hard-working Americans who just don't feel like the economy or our political system are working for them." (45)

To a large extent, strategic incivility assesses a situation and allows the end to justify the means. But that can be too open-ended. Checks have been needed. And so, civility is called for, as it was at the birth of our nation, to preserve and advance our democracy.

Michael Gerson wrote, "civility and a spirit of compromise were required, again and again, to prevent the Constitutional Convention itself from breaking apart in anger and recrimination." (46) This is not to say that everyone was always civil, because they weren't, but it is to say that the common goal of forming this nation kept the convention from letting the incivilities get the upper hand.

Returning to Steve Inskeep's interview with Jon Meacham, Meacham said, "...at our best, we, I think, loved the idea of liberty under law, of an American dream in which that dream became a reality because there was an equality of opportunity, a capacity to move forward and that we were all, more or less, in a large, national undertaking together." (47) Regrettably, some

still have to fight for an equal opportunity, but the capacity to move forward has existed, because persons have been able to speak out.

Responding to an editorial, entitled, “Undebatable,” in *The Journal Gazette*, which criticized those who walked out of Vice President Pence’s commencement address at Notre Dame this spring, Laura Steele, Associate Professor of Life Sciences at Ivy Tech Community College, defended the protest saying that no one sought to intimidate Pence or anyone else and that he was able to give his speech without any interruption. She also said that the protestors knew Pence’s public stance and their walkout allowed him to witness their disapproval. Beyond that, she wrote, “Good protests do not happen at convenient times...they do not guard the feelings of those with whom they disagree.” Rather, she says they “bring visibility to an issue that needs discussion...and lead to awareness of those issues in a way that observing expected decorum never would. (48)

Tomas Spath and Cassandra Dahnke, founders of the Institute for Civility in Government, write that civility “is political in the sense that it is a necessary prerequisite for civic action. But it is political, too, in the sense that it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone’s voice is heard, and nobody’s is ignored.” (49) Some voices, though, can be questionable, offensive, even immoral and, thus, difficult to defend, allow and accept.

Because the American Civil Liberties Union defended the rights of the white nationalists to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee this year in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the protest led to a white nationalist driving a car into a group of counter-protestors, killing one, the ACLU was criticized and charged with having “blood on its hands.” In response to the charge, the ACLU’s national staff said that they “will no longer stand with hate groups seeking to march with weapons, as some in Charlottesville did.” (50)

This summer, the Supreme Court sided with the American rock group, the Slants, against the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's refusal to trademark the group's name. The office contended that the name was disparaging. The group said that they were trying to "use it as a badge of pride." And the justices decided the case on the basis of the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment. (51)

So, why and how should we strive for civility in light of how nebulous it can be, how different our convictions can be and how protective we are of our right to speak freely?

Being civil is meritorious if, as defined by the Institute for Civility in Government, "Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process." (52) For then it looks at every person as a fellow human being, is willing to accept and address the complexities of life, relies on facts, reason and truth for constructive discourse and argumentation, encourages participation in the democratic process, and enhances one's work, home and personal life; thus, contributing to an environment in which everyone can work for a more equitable, productive and stable world. But that requires a willingness to exercise and teach what Edward Shils called "substantive civility," or civility that works on behalf of and for the good of all. (53)

Such civility seeks to be more humane, inclusive and egalitarian; is open to constructive confrontation, critical thinking and compromise; stands opposed to deception and falsehood; is attentive to assuring everyone's freedom to speak; is sensitive to different and even conflicting norms of civility; and is grounded on fair and decent expectations and policies for everyone.

All of this requires a thick skin, keen mind and devoted heart, especially when some persons and groups are subject to greater incivility than others, our culture is uncomfortable and ill

prepared for meaningful debate and argumentation, and there is a mood to ignore, disregard and hold in contempt what is reasonable, proven and true.

More than 90% of Americans see that incivility is directly related to violence and discrimination, but over 30% of them avoid talking about issues like racial inequality, gun control and immigration. (54) Many Americans cast aside facts (55) and 48% of workers decrease their work effort because of incivility and, thus, are more likely to be angry or withdrawn at home. (56) As for facts, *The Washington Post* calculated that as of August 24, 2017, President Trump “made more than 1,000 misleading statements since assuming the presidency.” (57)

Because of the amount of disruption and incivility surrounding religious matters in the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes championed “civil silence,” allowing persons to disagree privately, but not publicly. John Locke, on the other hand, called for “mutual charity,” which required that persons have some appreciation for the opposition’s point of view. Roger Williams, however, advocated “mere civility” or “mutual contempt,” in which he encouraged everyone to speak their mind even if it was found to be abhorrent to another’s ears. (58) For civility’s sake, we might favor Locke’s camp and be mutually charitable; however, it may be better to complement that with William’s mere civility. For with mere civility can come a more visceral outpouring of differences that can be more revelatory, persuasive and just.

Of course, there are times and places in which a civility code is required. Justice Hugo L. Black wrote in the Supreme Court’s decision of March 31, 1970, “It is essential to the proper administration of criminal justice that dignity, order, and decorum be the hallmarks of the court proceedings in our country.” (59) Congress has codes of conduct along with other government

entities, private businesses and colleges. The U.S. Equal Employment Commission has established laws against harassment and discrimination. (60) Where such laws and polices are established, equal and consistent enforcement of them is crucial for them to be effective. (61)

Having said this, laws to enforce civility are generally resisted and unwritten rules of conduct are largely preferred, since they allow for a greater freedom of expression and diversity in practices.

But every plus has its minus and the minus of a more fluid code of civility is its potential to erode civilization. David Brooks expressed this concern when addressing President Trump's tweets against cable news hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski, saying, "the issue here is the corruption of our public sphere....it makes it harder for us, our country, to ever get back to normal, when these things are corrosive to just the way people talk to each other." (62) Carl Wilkins speaks of "dangerous speech," which encourages violence and just looks the other way when violence happens. (63) Catherine Steiner-Adair warns against the harm that being hypocritical about incivility and normalizing it can have on our youth. (64) And Harvey Weinstein along with too many others have demonstrated how demeaning, abusive and widespread sexual improprieties can be. (65) Therefore, it is imperative to embrace and teach civility by thinking critically, speaking rationally, revering the truth, respecting everyone's humanity, being humane and working for the common good.

Dolley Madison sought to civilize Washington D.C. during her husband's presidency with her "Wednesday evening squeezes." These were weekly dinners at the White House to which diplomats, legislators, the president and the public met as a whole. The dinners were quite literally open to everyone and they offered everyone an opportunity to see each other as human beings. (66) Inviting the whole of Washington D.C. to the White House at one time would be

impossible today, but anyone can host gatherings of diverse groups to socialize and address common concerns. All that is needed is a commitment to stepping outside of one's comfort zone.

Niamh O'Connell and Catherine Sparks are media literacy teachers in Seattle, Washington. O'Connell teaches third grade and uses old true and false news stories to teach her students how to determine what is and is not fabricated. Sparks teaches high school students and uses stories she has made up from the play *Hamlet* along with having her students write fake news reports. Today, ten states have legislation that encourages media literacy in their school curriculums. (67) For sure this is a start, as is the #MeToo campaign, which encourages women who have been sexually harassed to share their story, (68) and songs like Fred Rogers' "What Do You Do with the Mad that You Feel" from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. (69) But much more needs to be done to teach children and adults how to relate to one another and tackle the issues that confront us, our culture and the world.

After five days of riots, sixty persons killed and one thousand buildings destroyed over the acquittal of the police officers that beat Rodney King in Los Angeles, Rodney King asked, "Can we get along?" (70) That was in 1992. It is a question that still needs to be asked, in that, as Martin Marty is attributed to saying, "There are lots of people in the world with strong convictions, but do not have any civility. And there are lots of people with civility, but no strong convictions. And what we need is convicted civility." (71) Whether or not there is a growing lack of civility in our culture, a convicted civility is needed. For just being nice and polite with each other will not do. We have to get to the heart of the matter and to paraphrase James Ryerson, make sure that "one person's civility is not another person's repression." (72)



## Appendix

Constitution of United States of America 1789 (rev. 1992), First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

“What Do You Do with the Mad that You Feel?”

By Fred M. Rogers

© 1968

What do you do with the mad that you feel  
When you feel so mad you could bite?  
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...  
And nothing you do seems very right?

What do you do? Do you punch a bag?  
Do you pound some clay or some dough?  
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?  
Or see how fast you go?

It's great to be able to stop  
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,  
And be able to do something else instead  
And think this song:

I can stop when I want to  
Can stop when I wish.  
I can stop, stop, stop any time.  
And what a good feeling to feel like this  
And know that the feeling is really mine.  
Know that there's something deep inside  
That helps us become what we can.  
For a girl can be someday a woman  
And a boy can be someday a man.

## Footnotes

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