Martin: Exactly. But in court societies you'd be a gentleman by birth no matter how you behaved. That's the point about America—you have to behave like a gentleman to be a gentleman. And surely that is a superior system.

Cole: That's a great way to conclude. Thank you so much for talking with me.

Martin: It's been a pleasure.


IV

CIVILITY MATTERS:
MEDIA AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

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Charles Dickens' opening to the *Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” has resonance in some of the troubling dialogue in the public and social sphere in 21st-century America. There are flashpoints across the country on topics ranging from health care to same-sex marriage, to carrying concealed weapons, to teacher tenure and unions. Of course, as should be the case, everyone has an opinion. What has been troubling is the tone, mean-spiritedness, and personal attacks occurring among individuals, in public protests, Congress, state legislatures, and city halls. Individuals and public officials, who, by the way, are elected to engage in healthy debate, have in some instances charged their rhetoric with a tone that is more than oppositional, sometimes hostile and downright threatening.

Media are ubiquitous and the First Amendment extols the importance of their presence in society—“Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...”—in our lives. In 1917 the Pulitzer Prizes were started as a result of the will of the estate of Joseph Pulitzer, *New York World*, and editorial writings were among the published works recognized for excellence. W. David Sloan’s (1980) *Pulitzer Prize Editorials: 1917–1979* is indicative of the litany of prize-winning editorials from around the nation that addressed concerns of the day. Although civility is not included in the titles, topics addressed include politics, race, social change, economics, and education, to name a few. Editorials fill newspapers addressing public affairs issues. The ideas of citizenship and civility are among the topics editorial writers address to contribute to the ongoing public dialogue.

Civility is neither the lack of difference nor the squelching of debate. It is the application of care for the dignity of every human being, even those with whom we may sharply disagree. It is listening carefully when others speak, not just to understand what they are saying and thinking,
but to open ourselves to the possibility that they may have something to teach. This definition of civility in *The Dallas Morning News* in 2010 came from the Jewish Council for Public Affairs as part of the launch of a nationwide civility campaign. Civility does not mean the citizenry cannot disagree; a healthy debate includes dissent. However, the process through which such disagreements manifest themselves may cause uncivil behavior to follow. Name-calling, personal attacks, threatening and demeaning attacks do not advance the argument, any argument. Sound reason and logic with robust discussion can lead to meaningful solutions, and even compromise on the most hot-button social or political issues.

As citizens work to maintain the democracy one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, stated was so important, they need information in order to exchange ideas and make decisions. Little is accomplished when important issues are reduced to sound bites, misinformation, gnashing of teeth, and dogma from political ideologies. Our contemporary society is strained further by the 24/7 news cycle in which blogs, websites, cable stations, and social media are used as digital platforms to spur the conversation, sometimes in an untenable fashion. The hope was that these advances in digital technology would increase the cacophony of voices heard on a range of topics. More often than not, spurious comments are replayed and revisited through blogs and videos and social media. Unfortunately, traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio have also lapsed into the immediacy of digital technology, which has caused healthy debate to be crippled by digital blips, brash headlines, and sound bites.

*The Rally to Restore Sanity was held in 2010 at the National Mall in Washington, DC, with the purpose of allowing everyday citizens to be heard outside the polarized political conversations in the United States.*

*Photo by Sheila Riker-Wade*