

“Why Civility Is Necessary for Society’s Survival,”

by P. M. Forni

P. M. Forni, founder of the Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, writes on the necessity of civility for society.

IN TODAY’S AMERICA, incivility is on prominent display: in the schools, where bullying is pervasive; in the workplace, where an increasing number are more stressed out by co-workers than their jobs; on the roads, where road rage maims and kills; in politics, where strident intolerance takes the place of earnest dialogue; and on the Web, where many check their inhibitions at the digital door.

In the last 10 years, the coarsening of life in the U.S. has become a high-profile concern, in part because of the misbehavior of high-profile people. In opinion surveys, Americans say incivility is a national problem—one that has been getting worse. And the concern goes beyond simple rude words and acts; incivility is known to escalate to physical violence, a fact of life confirmed by the daily news.

Of course, not everyone has joined the chorus lamenting the decline of civility. Dissenting voices point out that conflict is the life of democracy, that an excessive concern for the niceties of language and demeanor can stifle political debate. And they worry that many pro-civility measures adopted in the last 20 years by colleges and other organizations run afoul of the First Amendment.

As the national conversation on civility gains momentum, the time has come to take a closer look at what civility is, why it matters and whether it deserves all the attention it is generating. Are we making too much of too little? After all, one of the dissenting voices could say, although life may be littered with the nuisance of little incivilities, the world does go on. The problem, however, is that the incivilities we confront every day are many—and some of them are not so little.

But let us begin at the beginning. From where did we first get “civility”? “Civitas” is a juridical and political construct that Greco-Roman antiquity bequeathed to Western civilization. In Latin, it meant “city,” in the sense of city-state, the body politic, the commonwealth. Consequently,

“If we are forced, at every hour, to watch or listen to horrible events, this constant stream of ghastly impressions will deprive even the most delicate among us of all respect for humanity.”

– Cicero, Roman orator, philosopher, and statesman

“civilitas”—which became “civility” in English—was the conduct becoming citizens in good standing, willing to give of themselves for the good of the city.

Building on the notion of “civilitas,” here is a possible definition of civility for our times: The civil person is someone who cares for his or her community and who looks at others with a benevolent disposition rooted in the belief that their claim to well being and happiness is as valid as his or her own. More Americans are discerning with increasing clarity the connections between civility and ethics, civility and health, and civility and quality of life. In fact a consensus is developing around the notion that a vigorous civility is necessary for the survival of society as we know it.

Civility and ethics: What gives true civility depth and importance is, first of all, its connection with ethics. Just look at the Principle of Respect for Persons, a cornerstone of all ethical systems known to history. It states that we are to treat others as ends in themselves rather than as means for the furthering of our personal advantage. In other words, our behavior must be informed by empathy.

For example, say your spouse loses a big argument with you; you may be tempted to use your victory to manipulate him into making concessions he would never make otherwise. But you know the honorable thing to do is to spend a few conciliatory words to help him save face. This is civility.

Civility is not trivial, because it allows us to be ethical agents in the most common of situations. To put it more simply, civility does the everyday busy work of goodness.

Civility, health and quality of life: Imagine a supervisor harshly upbraiding a worker in the presence of colleagues—and then the upbraided worker retaliating by making the supervisor look bad in front of the boss at the first opportunity. This kind of uncivil behavior happens all the time. It is disruptive and stress-inducing—and can affect the health of employees and businesses.

Studies have shown that protracted exposure to stress caused by living in an uncivil environment increases the chances of contracting cardiovascular disease, for example. And the American Psychological Association has estimated that workplace stress (considering absenteeism, loss of productivity, medical expenses and turnover) costs U.S. businesses about \$300 billion a year.

On the other hand, when we engage in a civil and pleasant exchange with a friend, for instance, our bodies release neurochemicals such as oxytocin and serotonin that lower our stress levels, make us feel better and strengthen both our immune system and our bonds with that friend. The bottom line? The harmonious relationships that civility helps foster have a positive impact on our overall well-being.

Civility and the survival of society as we know it. History is rife with examples of deep thinkers who understood the critical role civility plays in a well-ordered society.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution assumed that their fellow citizens’ pursuit of personal interest would be bound by self-regulation based on religious belief and ethical principles. John

Adams saw with particular clarity that without allegiance to those principles, no government could survive.

“We have no government capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion,” he wrote in 1798. “Avarice, ambition, revenge or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

In Britain, judge and mathematician John Fletcher Moulton observed that between the realm of the things we do with unrestricted freedom and those we do because they are prescribed by the law, there exists a middle ground, the domain of Obedience to the Unenforceable. Here our actions are influenced by our sense of what is the proper, responsible and decent thing to do. They fall, that is, under the rule of an unofficial code of duty to goodness. Coaching a Little League team is an example. Participating in a neighborhood watch program is another.

Civility and good manners belong to the realm of the unenforceable. For Lord Moulton, “the real greatness of a nation, its true civilization, is measured by the extent of this land of obedience to the unenforceable.” The more a society relies on self-regulation—the more civil it is—the less need it has to legislate and the less it will be plagued by coercion, conflict and litigation.

What Adams and Moulton recognized is that for any society to survive and thrive, the total amount of goodness circulating at any given time needs to remain above a certain level. We are the world’s trustees—not just of the air we breathe and the water we drink, but of one another’s quality of life, contentment and happiness.

Civility is the shape that care takes.

Humans are the most social of all earth’s creatures. We constantly connect and relate. If life is a relational experience, then its quality is, to a considerable extent, measured against the quality of our relationships.

Receiving a good training in civility allows us to acquire an effective code of conduct for these relationships that will serve us well throughout life. Thanks to these skills, we behave in ways that make others want to keep us around them. We thus find ourselves embedded in circles of connection and care, such as family and friends. Through the bonds we forge, we stave off isolation, which—as studies conducted by researchers such as J. K. Kiecolt-Glaser and J. T. Cacioppo—is a predictor of early onset illness and early death. Yes, at the cost of sounding guru-ish, civility can be a matter of life and death.

And the nation is catching on. As the conversation about civility has grown louder over the last decade, groups have taken notice. Many communities, schools, agencies and corporations have launched pro-civility initiatives.

In Duluth, Minn., the “Speak Your Peace” campaign was conceived to bring civility to public discourse so that more citizens would consider civic engagement. At NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland, workers have regular meetings to foster talks on civility and

diversity. Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles, Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and George Washington in Washington, D.C., are among the many hospitals that have opened an in-house conversation on the impact of medical workers' disruptive behavior on therapeutic outcomes. The initiatives are in the hundreds, if not thousands, and few existed even 10 years ago.

It's safe to say that the first decade of the millennium was when America rediscovered why civility matters. It will take the second decade to figure out what we do with that knowledge.

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"The Meaning of Civility," by Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess

Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, co-directors of The Beyond Intractability Knowledge Base Project, Conflict Information Consortium, at the University of Colorado, share conflict resolution strategies for fostering civility.

THE INCREASINGLY VOCAL CAMPAIGN for civility in public discourse reflects an understandable and widespread frustration with the current tenor of political debate. There is a growing realization that our inability to deal with a broad range of problems is largely attributable to the destructive ways in which the issues are being addressed. This raises a crucial and increasingly controversial question—what exactly do we mean by “civility”?

Clearly, civility has to mean something more than mere politeness. The movement will have accomplished little if all it does is get people to say, “excuse me please”, while they (figuratively) stab you in the back. Civility also cannot mean “roll over and play dead.” People need to be able to raise tough questions and present their cases when they feel their vital interests are being threatened. A civil society cannot avoid tough but important issues, simply because they are unpleasant to address. There must also be more to civility than a scrupulous adherence to the laws governing public-policy decision making. Clearly, there are numerous instances in which the parties to public-policy conflicts act in ways which are destructive and inappropriate, even though they are (and should continue to be) legal.

In short, any reasonable definition of civility must recognize that the many differing interests which divide our increasingly diverse society will produce an endless series of confrontations over difficult moral and distributional issues. Often these issues will have an irreducible win-lose character and, hence, not be amenable to consensus resolution. While continuing confrontation