

Political Civility Service

presented by Allen Avenue UU's Worship Committee

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"Once you start thinking about what it would take to change your mind, you start to wonder why you were quite so sure in the first place. "

- Julia Dhar

Is Political Civility Possible?

by Erica L. Bartlett

Around the holidays last year, a lot of people worried about getting together with family members who didn't share their political views. For those people, Bill Maher gave this advice: just don't talk politics. Because in his opinion, such conversations don't end well.

Coming from someone who had a show called *Politically Incorrect*, and who prides himself on speaking his mind, this struck me as rather sobering. Admittedly, he was specifically talking about holiday gatherings, when you want to avoid any unnecessary stress. But still, it made me wonder, is political civility even possible?

I have to admit to being skeptical. Certainly I never saw this modeled when I was growing up. Most holidays were spent with my dad's family, and many of them involved heated political arguments, with swearing and shouting. It didn't help that my grandfather was conservative and a generally angry person, while my youngest aunt was a flaming liberal and my dad's brother liked to rile people up.

These days, things are quieter, since between death and estrangement, none of those three are around. And on my mom's side, I'm very careful not to talk politics with those on the political far right. I can have civil discussion with them about other things, like pets and kids, but I leave it at that.

I wonder, though, what would happen if I *did* bring up politics? Could we have a civil conversation? I don't know. But then I ask myself, why is this such a difficult concept to begin with?

I found one answer to that in a [TED Talk by Teresa Bejan](#), author of *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*. In the talk, she mentioned something philosopher Thomas Hobbes said in 1642 that still holds true today: disagreement is offensive.

Bejan went on to explain: "If you and I disagree, and I'm right, because I always am, how am I to make sense of the fact that you are so very, very wrong? It couldn't possibly be that you've just come to a different conclusion in good faith? No, you must be up to something, you must be stupid, bigoted.... Maybe you're insane. And the same goes the other way. Right? So the mere fact of your disagreeing with me is implicitly an insult not only to my views, but to my

intelligence, too. And things only get worse when the disagreements at stake are the ones that we somehow consider to be fundamental... because these are the [ones]... people really, seriously disagree about..., and they define themselves against their opponents in the controversy.” End quote.

Well, no wonder this can get loaded, and fast.

So then the question is, how do we get from there to actually being civil with those who don't share our views? I'm not completely sure. I suspect you might need to get both sides to agree on what being civil means and to act that way.

And what does this mean? According to Bejan, “being civil means speaking your mind, but to your opponent's face, not behind her back. Being merely civil means not pulling our punches, but at the same time, it means maybe not landing all those punches all at once, because the point of mere civility is to allow us to disagree, to disagree fundamentally, but to do so without denying or destroying the possibility of a common life tomorrow with the people that we think are standing in our way today.”

That's certainly easier said than done, which is why Bejan adds that this requires “having the courage to make yourself disagreeable, and to stay that way, but to do so while staying in the room and staying present to your opponents.”

With all that in mind, do I think political civility is possible? I want to say yes, but to be honest, I have a hard time imagining it with some people, including those I used to see in my dad's family. I also can't quite picture it with certain people on my mom's side. Then again, I also know that if I don't even try to imagine it and make it a reality, it will never happen.

So in the short term, I'll likely continue to follow Bill Maher's advice for the holidays and not talk politics, but I'll also consider how I can build up my courage to be disagreeable and find my way to civility.

(Full text and video of Teresa Bejan's TED Talk can be found here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/teresa_bejan_is_civility_a_sham

Anti-cantankerousness

by Rick Kimball

Perhaps we all have cantankerous moments. I know I do.

Recently when Rev. Anita told the congregation to breathe in, I breathed out. I was in a mood having nothing to do with church, or anything else I could identify. I was just in a very dark mood.

When Anita said to breathe out, I breathed in. Whatever anybody directed me to do that day, I intended to do the opposite.

Then Anita said . . . “keep breathing.”

Cantankerousness has a price – my own death if I stop breathing just to be ornery. That’s an unlikely result. But the death of societal civility at the hands of crabbiness is not. Witness the present.

Dangerously uncivil discourse destroys one’s relations with others. Our former governor discovered that. And our current president is finding it out. The rest of us already knew it – but even so, some of us sometimes still let self-righteous surliness drive our words and actions.

Cantankerousness is self-generated. Only we can control it. And we must if we are ever to restore civility to our political and societal lives.

Let the world be cantankerous free, and let anti-cantankerousness, like peace, begin with me.

How do I start to achieve that beginning? By righting my sense of self in relationship to the rest of the world. And how do I do that? By quiet reflection, some of it in this room. By passionate commitment to the principles and mission of this church. By striving for personal civil discourse with others so that civil discourse comes back to me. What goes around comes around.

We must all commit to the cause of anti-cantankerousness. Otherwise we are doomed to the possibly catastrophic consequences of discourse so increasingly and decidedly uncivil that it threatens to be lethal.

The next time Rev. Anita asks us to breathe in, breathe out, and keep breathing, I’ll do it, with no contrary rumbles, no matter what my day and mood are like. Let the word be cantankerous free, and let it begin with me. And with you. And with our whole UU congregation and denomination.

Breathing New Life into “We the People”

by Parker Palmer

Text can be found at OnBeing.org (<https://onbeing.org/blog/breathing-new-life-into-we-the-people/>).

Mostly Civil

by Mike Luce

Civility is claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process.

- Tomas Spath and Cassandra Dahnke, Founders, Institute for Civility in Government.

Lately, political civility is an ideal which seems to be in hibernation. There's the language of civility, especially in the senate. "My esteemed colleague" and such, but precious little beyond phrases inserted here and there by habit, even by rule. It's a pretty thin veneer. That might be useful if it were in the spirit of "fake it til you make it", but most of our politicians these days seem to be firmly stuck in the fake it mode at best.

Here in this church you might be expecting me to talk about how we should always be civil to one another. To never yell or swear at or insult someone we disagree with. Allow me to disagree, civilly of course, and only a little. I'm going to make the proposition that this is both unrealistic for normal human beings and once a while just doesn't fit the situation.

Those situations in which abandoning civility makes sense are rare, but we're human and that doesn't imply constant calm and equanimity. I'm aware of the Fred Rogers ideal many aspire to, but for myself there is that every once in a while when I'd feel like my utter disgust needed to be out there in no uncertain terms. Like it would be a betrayal of decency to remain respectful

Daniel Patrick Moynihan is credited with the saying "Everyone is entitled to (their) own opinion, but not their own facts". I'll be honest. There are people out there to whom I feel I owe no civility at all in some situations. Particularly, I'm referring to the gaslighters. Those who knowingly and strategically repeat outright lies. .

If someone who most always swims in a sea of civility finds he can no longer contain himself and unleashes a barrage of invective and pent up disgust then people will pay attention in a way they might not have otherwise. In purely practical terms, I think that has its place.

Why? Because constant civility can just become a drone. People stop paying attention. Because civility doesn't portray the range of human emotion very effectively. In a word, it's unnatural. There are times when the degree of outrage something arouses in a person can't be expressed in civil tones. Nor should it.

Now this isn't a screed against civility. It's a suggestion that we reexamine what it is to be human, to be honest about what it sometimes takes to get our attention and to forgive ourselves when we can't always practice our ideals.

There may be the occasional person who can always respond in a civil manner and be effective no matter what the situation. If so, they're freaks of nature. Freaks of a good sort, but freaks nonetheless. I'm talking about the rest of us. There are times when expressing outrage in an outrageous tone is simply honest, when to react in civil tones is disingenuous. That's only effective if it's rare, if it stands out. If you're doing that a lot, then you may have other issues, or you just need to turn off the TV.

In a time such as ours when the outrages come fast and furious it's tempting to rage on a regular basis. I surely could find endless things to rage on about. I could call conservative talk

shows and spew invective, enumerating their sins and drenching them in bile. What fun! Not really. I used to call the local talk radio back in the day when you could sometimes find a little bit of decency in disagreement. No more. After having been baited into anger a couple of times I gave it up. I won't put myself through that for no gain.

I've made the case for occasional incivility, but I haven't found that occasion in quite a while. I'm just giving you and me a little leeway. There may come such a time when a full blown in-the-face outburst is just what's called for. I'd rather not, but I have to admit that I'll never rule it out. I'm way too human, and I have no aspirations to sainthood.