

THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVILITY

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The recent shooting tragedy in Tuscon brings to my mind a speech that I gave in 1999 on the subject of civility. It appears below. It's surprising how similar our society of today is to that of the past...

A popular childhood nursery rhyme reads:

Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet
Eating her curds and whey
Along came a spider
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

In today's contentious political and economic climate, is civility in public discourse too thin a web to hold hope of reasonable responses? Are there too many spiders lurking beside us, and is an erosion of civility an expected consequence?

How important is reasoned public discourse? Is its loss fact or fiction?

The significance of civility was summarized succinctly in a single sentence written by Sheila Suess Kennedy: "We cannot find common ground without civility, and we cannot solve our problems without finding common ground."

What is driving today's lack of civility? I offer as Exhibit A the ubiquitous talk shows that seemingly thrive on interruptions, insults, and invective. Can we blame these talk shows for the lack of civility?

Can we blame the loss of civility on politics and the growing trend toward negative campaigns? Do candidates spin webs of deceit and distrust, rather than promoting positive programs? Is contentious political discourse becoming a model for behavior, setting the tone for individual relationships? Have political campaigns become the spider that sat down beside her?

Can constitutional constraints be ignored because they don't fit our opinion or the tenor of the times? Isn't it too often, too easy to manufacture contempt when we disagree with either the law or the Constitution? Is public policy the spider that sat down beside her?

It is easier to express hostility against the impersonal because we become impervious. E-mail is impersonal, often anonymous, and results in flaming messages that attack verbally, protecting the sender from any sense of accountability or civility. What unknown spiders lurk in the World Wide Web?

Perhaps William Ouchi, author of *Theory Z*, was right when he noted, “We Americans have lost our sense of trust, our appreciation of friendship, and our concern for one another as individuals.”

I have often heard that we cannot legislate morality. I think we can. And, in fact, we do. Our entire Criminal Code is based on certain moral standards. Aren’t laws against murder, robbery, even trespassing, defining standards of moral conduct?

Civility is significant and essential because it cements civilization. Courtesy, common sense, and civility promote meaningful relationships, communication, and cooperation. Nearly 130 years ago, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, R.J. Ingersoll noted, “True civilization is where every man gives to every other every right that he claims for himself.”

Is the Golden Rule so outdated that we cannot practice and preserve mutual respect and civility? We have the right to be wrong as well as the responsibility to be civil in public discourse. There is still room available for disagreement and dissent in the house of civility.

In summary, civility is the fertile soil of common ground, and cultivating it shouldn’t frighten Miss Muffet away. There is a pressing demand today for thoughtful, public discourse of service over selfishness and ethical behavior over meandering morality. We don’t need politics of the left, but politics of lift. We don’t need politics of the right, but politics of respect.

I think Emerson said it best: “Life is short, but there is always time for courtesy.”