

ROTARY DISTRICT 5440 PEACEBUILDER NEWSLETTER  
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**CIVILITY AND PEACEBUILDING**

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and Lloyd Thomas, Fort Collins Rotary Club, and  
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In these newsletters of the Rotary District Peacebuilders, we want to invite readers for contributions and ideas, suggestions and possibilities for our efforts to promote the foundational skills for promoting peace, i.e., nonviolent conflict resolution, improved communication and cooperation, successful negotiation and mediation as well as the critical and creative thinking that can help communities move through obstacles and difficulties.

**CIVIL DISCOURSE: THE KEY TO CIVILITY**

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In the last few months, the topic of “civility” has filled our news stories, our political discussions and even our behavioral protests. What is civility? How is it expressed? Of what value is it? What does incivility mean? How can civility be taught? How can civil discourse contribute to the development of a civil (peaceful?) society? Recently, such questions have been raised in response to the pandemic, to the civil unrest in our streets, even to our political discourse and our electoral processes.

The issues around today’s civility are much more complex than politeness or good manners. And they are not new. Even George Washington, at age 16, wrote about civility in his *110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*. His first rule was, “Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.” Certainly today, respect for others remains a critical aspect of what we mean by civility. In his book, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (1998) Harvard law professor, Stephen Carter, writes that “[civility is] An attitude of respect, even love, for our fellow citizens.” Such respect is first learned through the language and behaviors exemplified by parents and teachers of children.

The acquisition of language is the result of complex learning by imitation and repetition. It is the habitual attribution of meaning to the sounds made by parents in association with environmental events. Learning language is a natural, human skill and all babies are born with the ability to learn it. All children, no matter which language their parents speak, learn a language in the same way. Research has shown that babies begin to learn language sounds even before they are born. This means that at this stage infants can learn any language that they are exposed to. Gradually babies figure out which sounds they are hearing the most. If what they hear is loud, angry, demeaning, humiliating, degrading, vulgar or racist, they will learn to speak in the same way using the same words. Their discourse becomes uncivil. Conversely, if they hear words that are

comforting, gentle, caring, encouraging, supportive and respectful...they will learn the language of civility...even love. So “civility” can be defined as the common language for communicating respect for one another.

The capacity to engage in civil discourse exists in all human beings. It is critical to the development of healthy interpersonal relationships and reflects our ability to connect with other human beings by verbally and non-verbally sharing our ideas, opinions and feelings. It is essential for us to establish and maintain positive interpersonal interactions with others, thereby getting our needs met, developing our human potential, remaining safe in our environment and being able to give and receive compassionate (empathic) behavior.

Nicole Billante and Peter Sounders live in Australia. They have co-authored a commentary in the Australian magazine, *Poliev* (vol. 18. no. 3), titled *Why Civility Matters*. They write, “*Contemporary confusion over the informal rules of social interaction goes to the heart of what it means to be a citizen in a free and open society.*” They offer three reasons why civility is essential to a democratic way of life: *Civility is a moral virtue; Civility aids social cooperation; and Civility is the desirable alternative to repression.* They write, *Civility is a good in and of itself: ...Being civil towards others is part of being a good and moral person. More specifically, it signals to other people our willingness to obey shared rules and to regulate our behavior so as not to undermine their well-being.* Even Stephan Carter (above) agrees with them when he writes, “*how we should treat our fellow citizens is independent of the question of how we feel like treating them.*” Our democratic values should be reflected in our civil discourse with our fellow citizens. Values such as: “all persons are equal under the law” and should be treated that way; and in our democracy, “no one is above the law” no matter what position is held in our country.

Billante and Sounders’ second reason for civility is its effective aid to “social cooperation.” “*...we need to be civil to each other if social life is to function efficiently and with a minimum of unnecessary conflict and disruption. ...A spirit of mutual cooperation and ‘give-and-take’ enables us to get more done more efficiently than when people have to be monitored, regulated or coerced.*” We are much more creative, attain greater goals and are much more successful at keeping our freedoms when we converse and cooperate with one another in a civil manner.

Their third reason for civility is that it “*is the desirable alternative to repression.*” They write that the reason we “*should take civility seriously is that the self-regulation it demands of people is all that stands between us and increasing coercion by the state.*” They quote Edmund Burke who wrote in 1791, “*Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their own disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites.*” Unless we want the law or the state to intervene in our lives, we need to recognize the truth of what my father taught me: “*...your freedom ends where my nose begins.*” This answers the question of how far and how well our individual liberties are to be restricted or restrained. Billante and Sounders describe this dynamic this way: “*In liberal-democratic capitalist societies, individuals legitimately pursue their own self-interest through two spheres of power---the market economy and the political system. Both offer ways of aggregating individual interests into collectively-binding outcomes...*” Civil discourse enables people to agree on what actions result in fulfilling both individual interests and addressing “the common good” of any society. Only in civil discourse can both be kept in balance.

Finally, I want to share a quotation from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*," which he wrote in 1759: "When the happiness or misery of others depends in any respect upon our conduct, we dare not, as self-love might suggest to us, prefer the interest of one to that of many. . . .One individual must never prefer himself so much even to any other individual as to hurt or injure that other in order to benefit himself, [even] though the benefit to the one should be much greater than the hurt or injury to the other." Clearly, the key to a civil society lies in not only the actions but also in the language we use while interacting with each other in ways that neither hurt nor injure any other of our fellow human beings.

### JUSTICE, MANNERS AND CIVILITY

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Justice represents honest communications, fair behaviors, ethical treatment, peaceful outcomes, and genuine respect for people. Justice is part individual actions and incorporated into society's codes of conduct, laws, and practices of governments. Manners are what individuals learn at home, school, and in their communities that enable them to function with acceptable actions as part of their society. Normative behaviors are not the same for all peoples, places, and times.

Civility describes a citizen with orderly behavior. The sense of politeness arose in language during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, not everyone is a citizen. Order takes many forms. Politeness has different meanings around the world. Interacting thoughtfully with others is important and civil.

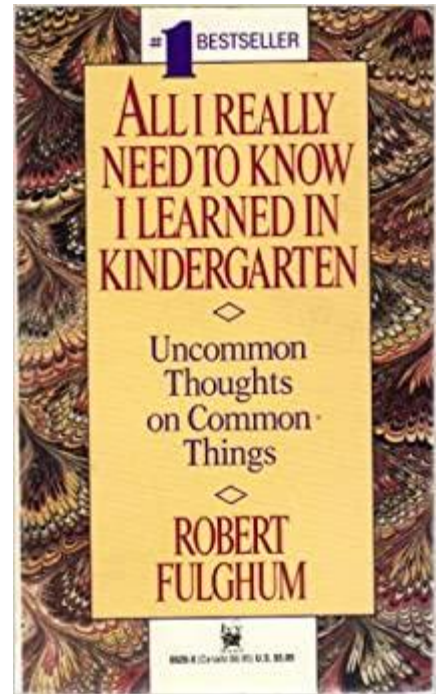
I usually equate lessons from animals and the environment with how people might behave, but justice, manners, and civility are human constructs that primitive animals have not and cannot comprehend nor help to educate humans. Humans with advanced brains for communication, keeping records, and planning for futures are in a different category than other animals. Humans form standards for reasoning, educating, and behavior that are communicated to others over generations. Other animals lack this sophistication.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, acceptable actions change in space and time. Thoughtful persons continuously work to improve their actions and words that describe acceptable behaviors to others. Societies should advance with time on this finite planet, but conflicts over land, people, and ideologies resurface over time.

History teaches about conflicts and change. Psychology and Sociology help us to understand why. Education is our means to learn about becoming more just, mannerly, and civil. Everyone is correct from their perspectives according to Chris Maser in Resolving Environmental Conflict Second Edition. Chris Maser and Carol A. Polio (CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group, 241 pp). Managing conflicts and resolving correctness are not easy processes; thus, persons can become embroiled in debate, controversy, and conflict over their perspectives and the words used to describe them.

A fun little book by **Robert Fulghum**, [All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten](#), simplifies very complex reasons to be just, mannerly, and civil with others. If only the world could live by these simple ideas.

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don't hit people.
4. Put things back where you found them.
5. CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS.
6. Don't take things that aren't yours.
7. Say you're SORRY when you HURT somebody.
8. Wash your hands before you eat.
9. Flush.
10. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
11. Live a balanced life - learn some and drink some and draw some and paint some and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
12. Take a nap every afternoon.
13. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
14. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
15. Goldfish and hamster and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
16. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all – “LOOK.”



Justice, manners, and civility start with the willingness to “LOOK,” to seek, to understand, and to appreciate interests and needs of others. Playing fairly with others can result. Use diplomacy before aggression to communicate human interests and the messages are heard with less conflict. Fulghum’s simple principles can be elaborated upon and applied to environments and people most everywhere if there is a willingness to try. When in the world of conflict and opportunity, watch out for the traffic of injustice, use your manners to help each other, and hold hands in civility.

#### FALSE OR FAKE CIVILITY

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Civility should be an aspiration of individuals, groups, politicians, and nations. It is the glue in communications that make exchange of ideas and opinions work. It is absolutely essential for love between persons, successful diplomacy between nations, compromise among politicians, and

peace building. Civility comes from the word *civis*, which in Latin means “citizen”, and it implies behavior befitting a citizen. Civility is often proposed as the way we protect diversity as well as active disagreement in the public sphere. So why are so many relationships among people and nations broken? Who are those who practice “uncivil” behavior?

Civility is used by people in different ways, often it is used constructively and may be the foundation of tolerant societies, but sometimes accusations of uncivility are used as a weapon to discredit the person or group with which one disagrees. Nobody believes they are uncivil...it is always the other guy. But listen to the words spoken by many Democratic and Republican political leaders, proponents of different religions, Eastern and Western heads of state, or even worse, yourself! If one pays attention carefully to the choice of words by some so-called civility protagonists, it is something more sinister--a covert demand for conformity that silences dissent. The implication is that if you disagree with the speaker you are, by definition, promoting uncivil behavior. Thus, such civility is often essentially a sham, bullshit, or a way to be self-righteous and paint the opponent as unrighteous and unreasonable.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Winston Churchill said, “Some people’s idea of free speech is that they are free to say what they like but if anyone says anything back, that is an outrage.”<sup>2</sup> The mere act of disagreement to such people can be offensive and intolerable. The other is being bigoted, stupid, or even insane, and his/her opinions seem an insult to the individual. How can one then be pleasant when talking about race, religion, politics, etc. without hate, violence, or destruction of peace? It is all too easy for each side to call the other “uncivil” and claim the moral high ground. (Here are links to two examples with opposing accusations of false civility.)<sup>3, 4</sup>

Throughout history many nations have acknowledged the importance of effective communication. We should be very proud that the United States stressed from the very beginning that through the *First Amendment to the US Constitution* in 1791 freedom of speech is assured. Similarly, England’s *Bill of Rights* in 1689 legally established the constitutional right of freedom of speech in parliament. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* which was adopted during the French Revolution in 1789 affirmed freedom of speech as an inalienable right. John Stuart Mill’s book *On Liberty* published in 1859, argued freedom of speech was the first in importance of the three basic liberties. Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted in 1948 by the United Nations states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, expression without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart such opinions through any media.

But it was also generally recognized that such a freedom imposes responsibilities that avoid obscenity, libel, incitement to violence, the right to privacy, and dignity, i.e....Civility. Realistically, for people to “listen” to free speech the speaker must practice discretion, acceptance of alternative viewpoints, and respect for other’s right to speech and person, i.e... Civility. Yet at the same time both still retain the right to identify speech they think is dangerous or wrong. Civility should not

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Bejan, *Is civility a sham?* [https://www.ted.com/talks/teresa\\_bejan\\_is\\_civility\\_a\\_sham?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/teresa_bejan_is_civility_a_sham?language=en)

<sup>2</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, Speech before U.K. Parliament on October 13, 1943, contained in *Churchill By Himself*, compiled and edited by Richard M. Langworth, RosettaBooks, Kindle Edition, 12 December 2013, 658 pp.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Racette (2018), Pushing Back: True and False Civility, <https://ricochet.com/557879/archives/pushing-back-true-and-false-civility/>

<sup>4</sup> Chris Ladd (2018), The Tyranny of False Civility, <https://www.politicalorphans.com/the-tyranny-of-false-civility/>

mean self-suppression of opinions to avoid unpleasantness. That would be “fake civility.”

Again, civility is what allows a tolerant society to live with disagreements, but it does not mean that differences of opinion should just be unspoken or identified. Civility is very very difficult to maintain, it takes courage and must be practiced face to face despite the possible unpleasantness of the subject matter.

Author Teresa Bejan suggests that we should instead try for “*mere civility*”: the virtue of being able to disagree fundamentally with others without destroying the possibility of a common life tomorrow.<sup>5</sup> Civility thus requires that difficult topics be spoken in terms that express opinions without straying into expressions which are “unforgiveable.” Again, this can be very difficult when opinions are held fervently.

There are techniques to avoid escalation of disagreements and maintain “mere civility”, for example:

- Avoid the use of the pronoun “you” when expressing opinions that tend to assign blame,
  - Say “Those words make me uncomfortable...” rather than “You are a bigot...”,
  - Say “Have you considered these alternatives...” rather than “You are wrong...”,
- Avoid flaunting “symbols” of disagreement that cause emotional responses and destroy communication before discussions even begin,
  - Confederate or Nazi flags, images of burning crosses, blackface makeup, hangman’s noose, etc. or
  - Anthems or music that denigrate the opponent positions,
- Avoid insulting labels or abusive *ad hominem* arguments that demean the opponent,<sup>6, 7</sup>
  - Designating an opponent as a member of the law firm: *Lyn’, Liddle, Sloppy, Sneaky, Crazy, Crooked and Pocahontas* is not helpful, or
  - Distorting other’s names into swear words: Rep. Adam Schiff to “little Adam Shitt.”<sup>8</sup>
- Practice active listening, do not interrupt, allow the other speaker to complete their thought,<sup>9</sup> and
- Do not accept “uncivil”, rude, or hateful behavior in others as normal.

Finally, it is worth noting that sometimes there is no intention or effort made to establish civil discourse, arrive at compromise, or avoid confrontation. History is full of political opponents who determine they are better served by destroying their enemy using any means available including distortion, exaggeration, emotional context, photoshopped content, fearmongering, and even

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa Bejan (2019), *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*, Harvard University Press, 288 pages.

<sup>6</sup> ZZ Packer (2018), *When is ‘Civility’ a Duty, and When Is It a Trap?*, New York Times Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/magazine/when-is-civility-a-duty-and-when-is-it-a-trap.html>

<sup>7</sup> An *ad hominem* argument is one which uses a personal attack to replace logical argumentation unrelated to the truth of the debated issues. This approach is generally considered a logic fallacy because it is usually irrelevant.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Burke (2018), Trump labels Schiff ‘little Adam Schitt’, The Hill, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/417335-trump-labels-schiff-little-adam-schitt>

<sup>9</sup> Interruptions are permissible in a “discourse” as opposed to a “harangue.” Interruptions should be constructive and limited to questions that continue discussion, interjections that relate to the subject, or alternatives that might expand the topic.

falsehood.<sup>10</sup> Political campaign ads using short video clips have become endemic in every election since 1964. Such approaches are not appropriate if the intention is to achieve harmony as opposed to victory at any cost.

So, it is important to expect various roles for “civility” in public discourse. Politeness, courtesy, and respect are never wasted effort. It can be the willingness to agree to disagree during

communication even when stressful and engaging to curtail one’s own immediate self-interest to allow continued conversation.

Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged the importance of tension in disagreement to achieve justice. *“I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.”*<sup>11</sup>

### CREATE CONCENTRIC CIRCLES FOR POSITIVE PEACE

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In *Learning Life’s Lessons* (2019) I make reference to January 1892 when Ellis Island opened to immigration providing a gateway that inspired millions of immigrants to leave their ancestral homelands, emigrate to the U.S. and escape from oppressive conditions in the hope of starting a new life. While life could be very difficult, new opportunities awaited for these immigrants as Native Americans were killed, pushed aside, or restricted to reservations and prime land was given to Homesteaders from Europe. With the right leadership, expectations about civility might have helped calm the conflicts. The following “Tip” is adapted from #2 in *147 Practical Tips for Teaching Peace and Reconciliation*.

Johan Galtung (1969, 1988) infused peace theory, or a set of principles that guide peace thinking and peace education practices, with the concepts of negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace can be understood as the absence of direct physical violence—war, domestic violence, etc. Positive peace can be understood as conditions without indirect violence—both a lack of trust, intimidation, the presence of fear, bullying, and conditions without structural violence. Educative efforts toward positive peace seek to build new macro-structural alignments that promote capacity, prosperity and happiness for all, as well as trust in peace, trust in relationships, hope, and reflection on positive conditions that create peace.

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<sup>10</sup> Joanna Weiss (2020), *What the Lincoln Project Ad Makers Get About Voters (and What Dems Don’t)*, Politico Magazine, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/07/06/lincoln-project-ads-republicans-democrats-349184>

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963), *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

*The activity provides an opportunity for people to reflect on past, present, and future conditions of peace, thus generating positive memories, present mindfulness, and future possibilities. Outside or in a large room, ask a group to form two circles with even numbers—one inner circle, one outer circle. People should stand face to face. Ask them to introduce themselves to their partner.*

*Use the following series of questions and time each question (about 3 minutes each) and then rotate. “Describe a peaceful time in your life.” After 3 minutes of back and forth discussion, ask the inner or outer circle to move one, two, or three people to the left or to the right; this promotes interaction with multiple members of the circle.*

*Then ask: “Describe a time when there was peace in your community, your nation, or the world?”*

*Then ask them to fill in the blank: “I currently find peace when \_\_\_\_; my community finds peace when \_\_\_\_; the nation \_\_\_\_; the world \_\_\_\_.” Finally, ask them to fill in the blanks: “I will find peace when \_\_\_\_; my community will find peace when \_\_\_\_; the nation \_\_\_\_; the world \_\_\_\_.” Debrief by identifying the conditions for peace from the personal to the global level; write them on a chart.*

### **CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IS A WAY TO SAY NO TO NUKES**

***Paul Gessler** is an Air Force veteran who was stationed in Wyoming at a missile site. He is the founder of the Fort Collins Chapter of Veterans for Peace and a frequent participant in the F.C. Rotary Club’s Peacebuilder Fellowship. He refers to himself as a conscientious objector to militarism.*

A demonstration of a moral wound hampering our nation was self-evident on the 75<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the 2 atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Japan August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945. In the ensuing 75 years it can be safe to argue that the United States has leveraged two anti-communist wars, an oil war and the present war on terror in quest to have what its war lords thought of as nuclear-leveraged world dominance. What was absent from the many commemorations surrounding the events, was the lack of acknowledgment that the use of and possession of nuclear weapons has accelerated America’s decline as a world power. Could it be time to cash in nuclear weapons and make the world safe for civility?

Nuclear weapons are like a bigoted racist overlord. As easily as the government built and leveraged these weapons for world domination over the past 75 years, we the people can demand our government leverage these weapons to broker and insure the peace. As we abandon nuclear arsenals our leaders will be able to return to the road of democracy and functioning government. Where once existed lies, opinion, mistrust and division, we can easily build truth, verification and civil discourse. But it takes an acknowledgment and a renunciation of racist brainwashing and propaganda that support the war footing. Nuclear weapons are illegal according to the Nurnberg war tribunals because they fit into the category of planned genocide. Conscientious objector status is a gentle declaration against racist militarism, symbolized by nuclear weapons. Isn’t it time to give peace a chance?



August 28<sup>th</sup> is the 92<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Idaho Senator Frank Kellogg and French diplomat Aristide Briand wrote up a document outlawing war as an instrument of National Policy after the heinous slaughter of World War I. It was eventually signed by the United States, Soviet Union, Germany, and Japan. Great Britain had their empire and did not abide to the

pact. Kellogg-Briand became the law of the United States by a vote of 85 to 1 in the same year. Unfortunately, the United States violated its own law and seized the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War as an opportunistic road to assert its empire, albeit illegally.

One hopeful sign coming into play before the election is making the non-accountability practiced at the pentagon, accountable to the laws of our land. This epidemic of non-accountability has brought down the curtain where the wizard of total destruction is leveraging, with false privilege and arrogance to a virus. One proven way to counter the effects of this militaristic, deep state of denial, is conscientious objector status. Don't fall into the propaganda trap!

I invite veterans and their families to vote for giving peace a chance. We heal this deep moral wound affecting our nation by being accountable to each other, because we know the moral wound is too

great for just a few to bear the burden. For our civic and political leaders I urge shaking off the dust upon the binding covers of the Kellogg-Briand pact law and act to boldly abolish nuclear weapons. We can all opt out of this unhealthy aggression and become conscientious objectors to the madness. Warning: sanity, peace and reasoned thought may happen.

## **PRIORITIES OF THE ROTARY FOUNDATION**

See the RI website: <https://my.rotary.org/en/learning-reference/about-rotary/our-priorities> If you would you like to respond to one of the pieces in this newsletter, check out our blog [www.rotarypeacebuilder.com](http://www.rotarypeacebuilder.com) and join the conversation! If you would like to contribute to a future newsletter, visit [www.rotarypeacebuilder.com/submit/](http://www.rotarypeacebuilder.com/submit/). You can find some of our past issues at the Rotary District 5440 website: <https://www.rotary5440.org/sitepage/peace-building-newsletters>. Future issues may explore the following: OCTOBER—(Thomas) How peace is created. If you have ideas for future topics, please send them to any of our writers.