

Civility in Political Discourse

By Amy Young, PhD

Associate Professor of Communication; Chair, Department of Communication & Theatre, Pacific Lutheran University

I'd like to begin my talk by thanking Dorothy McBride for suggesting my name to give introductory remarks on a topic as significant and salient as civility in our current political moment. Thank you to the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the 253 chapter of the NAACP, and Restoring the American Dream Team Tacoma. Thank you also to First United Methodist Church and the Center for Dialog and Resolution.

I was asked to provide some historical perspective on civility in public life and public discourse, so I will begin with that. But as a scholar of public and political agency, I also want to talk about the rhetorical *function* of civility, and its supposed opposite, incivility, and to think through ways to position civil disobedience as a necessary, rather than socially destructive or aberrant, force. That is, I'm doing the job I was asked to do, but I'd like to mix it up a bit, too. So, let's get to it, shall we?

Perhaps it's wisest to begin with a definition. Frankly, I think defining civility may be the chief insight of this panel—what does it mean, or not mean, to be civil or to engage in civility? The denotative, that is the “official” dictionary definition of civility, is politeness and courtesy in behavior and speech. That definition, though, is so vague as to mean very little when we think about what actually guides our behavior and speech in public life. The connotative, that is the circulated, “real world” meaning of civility is probably more like a shared set of norms or standards that ought to inform how we behave and speak in public life. The difference between the denotative and connotative definitions may not seem particularly large, but it turns out to be somewhat fraught. That is, who defines the norms and standards by which civility is guided? Who has access to the authority to change those norms and standards? How do those norms and standards morph over time? How do we “update” civility for our current political and social climate?

Americans are a very forward-looking people, an optimistic people. There are many positive entailments of that kind of optimism, but it tends to make us lousy students of our own history, or to make us nearly ahistorical, as if the current moment is the only time anything like what we're seeing in our politics has happened. Historian Joanne Freeman's book, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, details the “regional distrust, personal animosity, accusation,

suspicion, implication and denouncement” that has characterized our politics from the start of this country. In our houses of Congress in the 1830s, 40s and 50s, it was considered normal and right for politicians to wear weapons on the House and Senate floors. In 1850, in fact, there was a shooting between senators and in 1856, another senator was nearly caned to death on the senate floor. In other words, there was no golden age of civility in our country—we’ve always been contentious. I think the difference is, in the 1850s, no one was seeing this live on C-SPAN. No one was live tweeting the event. We didn’t have a sense of immediacy in our politics.

Freeman, though, does describe a kind of “honor code” that has long been part of our political discourse. There was tremendous hostility and violence at the beginning of this democratic experiment, so the honor code existed to channel those feelings more productively. Not quash them, but channel them, and I think that’s an important distinction. Freeman writes about a series of unspoken rules against certain words or slurs or behaviors that were commonly understood to be off limits. She writes, “Disagree as men might on the purpose, structure or tenor of national governance—argue as they did about the meaning of concepts like federalism and republicanism—clash as they must about the future of the nation...they expected their opponents to behave like gentlemen.” And perhaps that’s why we seemingly have such nostalgia for a past, even if that past is, like all pasts, revisionist—today, it seems we don’t really have an honor code.

But let’s think through what an honor code means and what it does. If an honor code is to function, it needs to be at least implicitly known—even if our rules aren’t written down, we all generally understand how we’re supposed to speak and behave. In my classrooms, I expect my students to have completed the readings (this expectation seems increasingly laughable, but I still have it), I expect them to participate in class, I expect them to turn off their phones, I expect them to move the conversation forward, I expect them to take their colleagues seriously. We are socialized to recognize these implicit rules. But beyond recognizing them, an honor code requires that we actually endorse a set of rules, norms, or boundaries. It isn’t enough to recognize the honor code exists, or to recognize what the honor code contains. We must also agree not only to follow it ourselves, but to require others to as well. That is how civility works. Civility is a community process.

And rhetorically, civility can serve important functions. In Fisher, Ury and Patton’s *Getting to Yes*, a book on most managers’ shelves, civility calls us to separate the person from the problem—that is, to creatively problem solve rather than focusing on an us v. them paradigm. Civility can limit interpersonal misunderstandings by asking interlocutors to be honest, to have more transparent perspectives on the other person’s motives or behavior. Civility can also be about

process—if a process is fair in both appearance and fact, people are far more likely to accept the outcome, even if it isn't their preferred resolution. Civility is not compromise—it allows and demands persuasion and staking claims, but it also demands that we listen to and consider another person's claims.

Of course, all of these positive outcomes of civility are predicated on the idea that we all, to some very great degree, agree on what is civil and agree to speak and behave according to those standards. What happens in an era where traditional considerations of civility no longer apply? What happens if we look the other way when someone is in flagrant violation of our understood honor code? What is civility, then?

I think our nostalgia for a more civil age is also about a longing for a sort of social and political order. We are, after all, not a democracy but a republic, a system where a very few are elected to represent much larger constituencies. And that is by design. You see, our founders were wary of “the people.” “The people” were dirty and uneducated and simple. They did manual labor. They were not well read, if even literate. They didn't own property. How could they be fit to govern themselves when they couldn't even make proper life choices? Communication scholar Robert Ivie calls this perspective “demophobia,” or fear of the people. In many organizational contexts, democratic messiness is seen as a bug rather than a feature—too much deliberation, too much agitation, too much activity messes with productivity and efficiency and neatness. So, civility is used as a way to police people—tell them they aren't behaving appropriately or up to the standards we expect, and people are far more likely to fall in line.

But we do not bear the burden of this call to civility equally. People who have historically and are contemporarily marginalized and disenfranchised are far more likely to be asked to be civil and to be required, socially and politically, to uphold a much higher standard of civility than those who historically and contemporarily have power. That is, there is far less leeway for women, for people of color, for people young people, for LGBTQ people. Civility as a rhetorical strategy constrains and limits. No one *wants* to be thought of as uncivil, and for those outside of the structures of power, any display of incivility is seen as fomenting violence, as lawlessness, as culturally destructive. If you are privileged by your race, your gender, your socioeconomic status, your sexuality, YOUR incivility is often tolerated if not celebrated. It is patriotic, it is American, it is a sense of national duty and obligation. Let's take Muhammed Ali for instance. We like to think about sports as apolitical, somehow, though I have no idea where that notion started. Ali was a conscientious objector during Vietnam—he was sentenced to 5-10 years in prison for draft evasion, given a \$10,000 fine, and banned from professional boxing for 2 years. Conscientious objectors were ultimately civil,

right? He didn't flee the country, he didn't destroy property, he didn't enact violence. He refused to be drafted. And yet, he was vilified and hated. Not until he lost the ability to speak out in dissent because of his advanced Parkinson's Disease was he revered as a hero. Civility is an unequal burden.

Incivility's denotative definition is rude or disruptive behavior. And we need look no further than our current political climate to find myriad and ubiquitous examples of this kind of incivility—personal attacks, baseless allegations, ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual slurs. We're in a political moment where political correctness is seen as demeaning, as a weakness—political correctness asks for inclusion, respect, and mutuality. We're in a moment, in other words, where a destructive kind of incivility is championed, where it is acceptable for people in positions of authority to ridicule and mock, to exclude, to disrespect. And because this incivility brings traffic and gets stories circulating, incivility is also monetized. It sells. So what is the motivation to stop it?

Civility, ultimately, presupposes equal power and equal access to resources. If we take even a cursory glance at the history of social movements in this country, however, we would notice immediately that social justice rarely advances without incivility. So while the denotative definition of incivility is rudeness and disruption, a connotative definition might also include the idea of going outside of traditional authorities and structures of power to bring about social change, justice, and progress. It is Black History Month, as you all likely are aware.

Frederick Douglass, someone who's "done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more", once wrote, "I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." That is, until he MOVED. His physical and political movement freed him—staying civil and on his knees kept him in bondage. All social movements that have delivered measures of equality and justice have required incivility. Many Americans stop reading Martin Luther King at or around 1964—though even nonviolent protest was seen as deeply uncivil—but King got more uncivil as he continued in the movement because he recognized its necessity. On April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination, he addressed striking sanitation workers in Memphis saying, "All we say to America is, 'Be true to what you said on paper.' If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of the press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just as I say, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are going on."

Henry David Thoreau's very famous essay, *Civil Disobedience*, calls upon us to see politically destructive forces and to resist, to be civilly disobedient. He writes, "If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth--certainly the machine will wear out... but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn." In Thoreau's conception, then, dissent and disobedience are, in fact, moral actions. If policies exclude and endanger and impoverish and destroy, the patriot DISOBEYS. Later in the same essay, Thoreau asks, "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resigns his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward." We are, historically, a country founded on the principle that average people are terrifying and messy, but every average person has a conscience. And if that conscience calls us to speak out? I think we're seeing the power of that kind of disobedience in the last few weeks.

Civility has its place. Understanding and endorsing a code of honor can be unifying, can help ease conflict, can facilitate negotiation and community. Civility as political correctness includes and respects and values. But civility is also used to police and to control, particularly those without other resources at their disposal. And this is where incivility also has a place. While we can see a litany of examples of a dangerous brand of incivility that works to demonize and vilify and make afraid, we can also understand the incivility as civil disobedience is a way around injustice, a challenge to a system designed to marginalize most while empowering a few.

I want to thank you all again for inviting me to speak, to introduce this conference on civility. I think this topic could not be more relevant. I look forward to the rest of our time together as we discuss both the promise and problems of civility in public and political life. Thank you.