

A Return to Civility

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

June 3, 2007

Lately I've begun a number of my sermons with little stories about my family, everyone but Milt. Today it's his turn.

Milt is not usually one to pour over and memorize the newsletter or my preaching schedule. So sometimes he asks me, during the week when I'm writing, what my sermon will be about. I said "A Return to Civility." He said "Oh, so it's a fairy tale."

Which got me thinking "What *would* a world, to which civility had returned, look like?" Let's pretend we all fell asleep and somehow, when we woke up, *things* were different.

My first thought is that we'd all be living in that Monastery from our earlier reading where any one of us could be the Messiah, you or me! Maybe we'd have figured out that the truth is we all *do* have the potential to bring some saving grace to our world, and that a return to civility will require that all of us find that potential and use it.

I clipped a December editorial from the Hampshire Gazette, by Peggy Noonan, called "America, under pressure, needs grace." She writes "People often speak of an absence of civility in Washington, but that's not quite the problem. Faking civility is a primary operating style [as in] 'My esteemed colleague.' What is needed is grace – sensitivity, mercy, generosity of spirit, a courtesy so deep it amounts to beauty. We will have to summon it. And the dreadful thing is you can't really fake it."

Yes, I think a world into which civility has returned would look very different at the public level of the media and politics. We wouldn't have so many news reporters interrupting their interviewees, for example, and our country's president wouldn't smart mouth back to the father of a soldier fighting in Iraq (at a White House holiday party) who was attempting to avoid answering the president's question, "That's not what I asked you."

But this fairy tale world would also look very different at a more local level, too. If the sales person at the appliance store didn't know the answer to your question about washing machines, he or she would go find out – cheerfully. No one would treat you like a suspicious type in an upscale jewelry store just because you didn't have on your fancy clothes when you decided to go shopping, or your skin was a different color. Children would respect their parents, at least until they became teenagers (some rites of passage will still be necessary!), and students would respect their teachers – always. Those young clerks at the grocery store might actually smile at you as they take your money.

When my daughter was a teenager, she and I would make a game out of trying to get people to smile while we waited in line to make our purchases – at the Mall – just before December 25th. Sometimes it just took smiling at them. Something as simple as that.

Civility refers to things social – behavior between persons and groups that conforms to a social mode. Civic virtue is the cultivation of habits of personal living that work for the positive health of the community. In a compendium of little wisdom quotes called *Abounding Grace*, M. Scott Peck says some very wise things. He would like “to rescue civility from the state of vapidness into which it has fallen. Indeed,” he writes, “the most common dictionary definition of civility is merely that of ‘superficial politeness.’” (p. 172) He believes what we need is more thoughtfulness behind the considerations we pay to others. Not merely the golden rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Peck calls this the “beginner’s course.” “What the advanced course teaches is: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but only if you were in their unique and very different shoes.’”

“This advanced kind of consideration has much more to do with empathy than sympathy. But do not toss it off as an easy, basically emotional virtue. It requires a great deal of actual experience of others and the capacity to not only absorb that experience but also think about it, consider it.” Beyond superficial politeness.....

While we’re on the subject of superficial politeness, and just for fun, I want to read to you from a list of rules popularly assigned to school children in George Washington’s time, called *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. People make a big deal out of the fact that George Washington wrote out all 110 of these at the age of sixteen. I found some of them rather humorous.

Make no show of taking great delight in your victuals, feed not with greediness; cut your bread with a knife, lean not on the table neither find fault with what you eat.

If you soak bread in the sauce let it be no more than what you put in your mouth at a time and blow not your broth at table but stay till cools of it self.

Put not your meat to your mouth with your knife in your hand neither spit forth the stones of any fruit pie upon a dish nor cast anything under the table.

Gaze not on the marks or blemishes of others and ask not how they came.

In the presence of others sing not to yourself with a humming noise, nor drum with your fingers or feet.

Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace, walk not on when others stop.

Put not off your clothes in the presence of others, nor go out your chamber half dressed.

When in company, put not your hands to any part of the body, not usually discovered.

I love how they say these things! And number 110, in this list of civil behavior:

Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

That last one seems out of place in his list – it’s not so superficial at all, which makes me wonder if it was added on later. The still, small, voice of our conscience.

Have you noticed the increase in a new kind of business – people that you can pay to mediate your argument or disagreement. Actually, this is a very civil way to address the issue of difficult conflict, but it paints a somewhat sad tale, to me, that says we have become incapable of handling our differences of opinion and interpretation. It made me sad to read, in an essay on *The Meaning of Civility* by Guy and Heidi Burgess, that “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 is inevitable, the enormous destructiveness which commonly accompanies these confrontations is not.” (<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/civility.htm>) Thus the authors’ proposal for an approach called “constructive confrontation.” This from a site also advertising something called “beyondintractability.org.”

Obviously, what they are doing is good, and based on the reality of our society. But this kind of business only treats the symptoms, and does not address a cure for the causes. That’s what we try to do here in religious institutions – address the kind of principles that will be able to influence our behavior and hopefully lead to lives of more civility – right relationship – shalom – God’s kingdom some call it. We are the institutions where you can learn how to get along with each other so you don’t need to call in the mediation consultant!

My fairy tale about a return to civility might be called Snow White and the Seven Principles. Justly, Equitably, Compassionately, Responsibly, Considerately, Kindly, and Diplomatically. Their cousins live next door: Courteously, Moderately, Patiently, and Generously. Their great-grandmother was named Freely. Their niece is named Lovingly.

I know I have said to you before that I believe what we try to do here is model a way of getting along with each other that works. Despite our different beliefs, our different politics (or not), our different life style choices, our different educations, our different skin colors, we are trying very hard (and much of the time succeeding) to be together the best way we can. After Friday’s annual meeting, someone said to me, “Gosh, an annual meeting that wasn’t contentious!” We can do it.

For those who might be visitors, or like me have not memorized our seven UU principles, here is a brief summary of what they entail: inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity and compassion in our relationships, acceptance of our differences, encouragement to growth, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, peace and liberty for all, respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

Compare these to this list, from the National Civility Center, of principles of engagement for creating collaboration among peoples:

1. View everyone in positive terms – see everyone as a potential resource and agent of change. (The Messiah is among you.....)
2. Develop a common language – this is about understanding others and listening with a forgiving ear. Remember that sermon I gave way back in the fall of 2005 about not jumping to conclusions about what someone meant without at least asking them about it. We all know it's hard to say exactly what we mean sometimes.
3. Build strong relationships and trust – community, community, community, small group ministry, community, getting to know you, fellowship, appreciative listening, community.
4. Remember our shared humanity – we are all one, the human race, with more in common than our differences. A community of individuals. Use what we have in common to help us live with our differences. (An annual meeting without contention...)
5. Value both the process and the results – we talk about this a lot in Unitarian Universalism; that fact that people do their decision making in different ways, which sometimes causes friction, or at least annoyance, between us. Working together, particularly toward consensus decisions, can be tough. I read somewhere, about collaboration, that “collaboration is an unnatural act between consenting adults.”
6. Look both within and outside the community for guidance – we cannot do it all alone. We need the diversity of each other to make our own lives whole.

Don't the points on this list sound a lot like our principles and other things we talk about a lot in Unitarian Universalism? Around the country, how many interfaith groups are led by UUs? How many gatherings of people of diversity are initiated and facilitated by people from our congregations? In my experience I see this everywhere. What were the principles that were guiding the founding fathers of this country to form a government and a way of life unheard of in the world before 1776? Many of them were Unitarians, if not in membership, at least in their philosophies.

By no means am I holding our spiritual tradition up as perfect – we are rarely able to reach as high as we would like to. But the high banner of our principles that we hold before ourselves is a lofty and deserving one that, if taken to our hearts in very personal ways, beyond superficiality, would go a long way toward bringing more grace and civility at least into our private worlds. And from there, who know what might happen.