Voices: On civil discourse: Have we ever gotten along?

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If we're being honest, the only time we worry about the topic of civil discourse is when we see others being uncivil. Finding and condemning the sins of others is one of our specialties as humans. But if we, ourselves, are uncivil, we easily defend it as an impassioned argument for some cause worthy of our bold attempts to "tell it like it is" by any means necessary.

Those tendencies to find fault in others can blind us so strangely, we might even think there's never been more incivility than right now.

When enough people in a society convince themselves of such things, historians call that a "declension narrative:" a story people tell themselves to reinforce the notion that times used to be better.

Humorist Will Rogers repeatedly tried to warn us about producing declension narratives, most pointedly with the quip, "Things ain't what they used to be and probably never was."

How bad has it been?

The political world takes a lot of heat for its incivility, but here again, politics in America has been uncivil since the beginning.

The 1790s were rife with hostility of all kinds. The unenviable President John Adams was called "an inept politician who was a burden to the party"—and that was from someone in his own party!

An Adams foe publicly denounced him as having a "hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a

man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman."

Insults could lead to actual violence, most famously as when Matthew Lyon, a U.S. Representative from Vermont, spat in the face of Roger Griswold of Connecticut in 1798. This led to Lyon and Griswold pounding each other with a variety of handy devices apt for pounding. Then came the kicking and wrestling, all on the floor of the House of Representatives.

Things didn't improve with time. Historian John F. Kasson's 1990 book *Rudeness and Civility*, a study of manners in the 1800s, should have shattered the declension narrative related to American civility. He examined the immense number of works giving advice on how to behave in public, authored mostly by the middle class for the middle class and by the old for the young.

The advice never stopped and clearly never took. In 1859, one guide for good behavior lamented, "It is rare to meet with persons who can converse agreeably." A few years after this, Americans North and South took some time to stop conversing entirely and start killing one another in the hundreds of thousands.

The advice continued into the 20th century, but civility seemed always just out of reach as we continued to idealize the past and worry about the future. By 1992, in the midst of the Los Angeles riots, Rodney King plaintively asked, "Can we all just get along?"

One could easily have asked in retort, when have we *ever* gotten along? The cloud of negative witnesses seems to stand against us.

It stands to reason then, if we historically have had such a hard time being civil, there's never a bad time to appeal to the "better angels of our nature," as Lincoln hoped Americans might in 1861.

We value and praise technology so much, in part because we can see it

improving over time. It helps give some people hope. Virtue and wisdom, on the other hand, need cultivating constantly.

The next generation can't inherit and improve upon virtue in the same way they will with technology. They've got to be carefully taught, to paraphrase Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Creating a civil world

At Hardin-Simmons University, we've embarked on a project to help our students improve their civility, emphasizing the emergence of community when we reason together. The overarching goal of the project is for our students to learn that community—or what Parker Palmer calls the "capacity of connectedness"—doesn't simply happen. Rather it emerges through intentional personal interaction. The project is, in many ways, an experiment in experience.

Student data several years ago told us Hardin-Simmons could strengthen its curricular and co-curricular focus on better understanding the perspective of others. Thus, in our core courses, particularly in our first-year seminar classes, we've begun emphasizing application of effective communication skills, collaborative skills and appreciation of perspective. Overall, we hope to enhance community on campus and help our students learn to be more humane humans.

One popular aspect of the project is the creation of a Community Coffee Hour. An hour every Thursday morning, everyone on campus is invited to converse together in our university library. Lest there be nothing really to talk about, we also provide a question for the week that helps us explore important topics related to community.

The questions align well with the weekly chapel topic. Examples include:

“How do we love those who disagree with us?”
“If you were in the margins, how would you want people to reach out to you?”
“How do we stay positive in the midst of struggle?”
“What’s so hard about being welcoming?”

How would you answer these questions? And are you open to hearing how someone else would? That’s the key to civil discourse.

Employers certainly want these skills from those in their workplace. Even more importantly, our world seems to be demanding people who can listen carefully as well as speak kindly, work together toward a greater goal, and appreciate that others aren’t always going to see things the same way.

Since these are big life questions, students, faculty and staff alike share our perspectives, our struggles, our frailties. And if we’re being honest with each other, the conversation becomes a laboratory in the larger project of creating a more civil world.

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