

## Civility

All too regularly, we experience or observe incidents of hostility, crudeness, or insensitivity in our day-to-day experience. During these occasions, our fellow human beings fail to demonstrate the common courtesies their parents failed to teach them or that they failed to learn elsewhere. On many of the recent television “reality” shows, rudeness appears to be both encouraged and celebrated. This type of boorish behavior should be discouraged or condemned, and not considered stylish or acceptable.

What these offenders need is a well-taught lesson in civil behavior. Who can provide these lessons? The organization best equipped to teach these types of lesson is the Masonic Fraternity. We teach our lessons by word and by example. Our organization is structured with lines of authority, orderliness, courtesy, and cooperation.

The subject of civility was raised last month at the Conference of Grand Masters in Baltimore. The featured speaker at the event was a renowned expert in the history of Masonry. UCLA history professor, Margaret Jacob, stated that at the time of development of modern Masonry, the world was in a state of turmoil and flux. Uncouth behavior, poor manners, and a disregard of others were common place. Politically, the intellectuals were challenging the authority of the monarchs and espousing the merits of democracy and a representative form of government. Advances were being made in the sciences of physics, chemistry and astronomy. Great strides were being made in literature and education. Out of this Renaissance movement developed modern Freemasonry – a forum for free thinkers, where ideas and concepts could be discussed and debated. Masonry conveyed the benefits of civility to a coarse world around them; brought light to darkness; and contrasted a new form of order juxtaposed against a chaotic way of life.

Today in Masonic lodges, the Worshipful Master is the ultimate leader of the lodge; he is responsible for the wellbeing of the lodge and the welfare of the Brothers of his lodge. His rule must be benevolent because this is a voluntary organization. His decisions must be wise, farsighted and equitable. A good Worshipful Master uses all of the resources at his disposal. The evidence of good leadership is the smooth operation of the lodge, the satisfaction its members, and accomplishments of the Craft.

Similarly, the remaining officers of the lodge must take their lead from the Worshipful Master. Their loyalty, energy and efforts must speak to the goals set forth. Each lodge officer has his duties spelled out in the Code and By-Laws of the Lodge and inculcated at the installation. The serious execution of his duties insures the suitable functioning of the Lodge and is his prelude to the next chair in the lodge.

As members of the lodge, we must contribute our segment of the equation. The officers of the lodge can only have success with the efforts of those who follow. The cheerful consent of the lodge members is key to a successful year and a strong future of the lodge. Civility is the lubricant which smoothes the interaction of the lodge members.

What is civility? According to Merriam-Webster, civility is polite, reasonable, and respectful behavior – behavior that we should be able to expect from our family, friends, fellow employees and our Lodge Brothers. One would hope that we could see more civility in local politics, national politics and on the world stage. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. What has gone wrong?

There are many factors which lead to the lack of civility or the deterioration of polite, reasonable or respectful behavior. In general, the lack of trust in those around us and the failure to seek a common ground or solution ultimately results in uncivil behavior. Impugning the motives of others, or a general suspicion of others, does not lead to communication or cooperation. Assuming that most people are untrustworthy or that the “other side” is inherently malevolent does not contribute to a healthy dialog or solutions to our pressing problems.

As noted at the National Civility Center, there are four key components to civility: people, process, dialogue and trust. People need to be motivated to start the process of dialogue and ultimately trust those they deal with. The principles of engagement are:

- View everyone in positive terms
- Work on building common language
- Build strong relationships of trust
- Remember our shared humanity
- Value both the process and the results
- Look both inside and outside for guidance

According to the founders of the Institute for Civility in Government, “Civility is claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process.” We can disagree without being disrespectful and move beyond our own preconceived notions. Everyone has a right to be heard. The potential beneficiaries of changing the current civility paradigm are our public organizations. If Oregon Masonry has the opportunity to partner with other Masonic Jurisdictions in the civility effort, we all will benefit.

Sometimes it is necessary to have a “constructive confrontation” (for example standing up for your rights), but carried to an extreme confrontation becomes destructive. According to Guy and Heidi Burgess, Co-Directors, of the Conflict Research Consortium at the University of Colorado, in *The Meaning of Civility*, we can utilize “conflict processes, dispute resolution, and advocacy strategies to help disputants better advance their interests.” They recommend that we “separate the people from the problem”, or separate the merits of the argument from the personalities.

The principles of civility which apply in the public sector apply to us as individuals. Individually, we all need to demonstrate civility with our family, friends, associates and with those whom we work. Before the age of 16, WB George Washington in a school exercise wrote “Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.” Obviously the concept of politeness and respect is not a new idea.

Let us proceed in the coming months with a new outlook in our interpersonal relationships. Truly listen to the thoughts of others without a preconceived notion about what they are trying to say. If you do this, maybe those who disagree with you can hear what you are trying to say and you can come to a new understanding. Every effort at dispute resolution does not succeed, but not making the effort will certainly fail.

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