

## Civility - May 2020

I had an opportunity last month to delve into the Masonic Closing Charge. To me, this is one of the most important, basic and meaningful elements of Masonry. In this charge, we are admonished not to forget our duties to our Brothers. We are further reminded that we have an obligation to the rest of humanity. I sincerely hope that we would include CIVILITY in those obligations.

Most definitions of Civility are limited as “acting with courtesy and politeness.” The next sentence says, “See incivility.” Civility is a noun, even though it has no physical aspect, as in you cannot buy a pound of civility. Civility is seen, felt and heard, but cannot be taken, wrapped or painted. It is as ethereal as thought. No wonder there is confusion.

Here is what I know about Civility. Civility is the compilation of the several attributes that comprise a person of good character. It is a concept where people are receptive to the thoughts and opinions of others, without necessarily, capitulation. We are born with it! Studies have shown that children, even infants, are more respectful, tolerant, concerned, and compassionate of others, regardless that the ‘others’ may not be human, but toys or animals (soft puppy dog ears and cat tails are excepted). We lose it! As we age and become more self-aware and self-reliant (independent), and without daily reinforcement otherwise, we have the tendency to become less trustful, honest, considerate and compassionate. It is complex, very complex! Civility is not just one thing; nor can it be described by a single word. It is not merely politeness and good manners, but it must also include respect (of self and others), tolerance, and honesty. Civility is more an attitude, a conscious effort, a social presence that can be affected by environment and effected by circumstance. Beyond doubt, civility is that one thing which defines us as a society of humans. You can see why it is so difficult to put a ‘one size fits all’ definition on civility. Dr. P.M. Forni, in his book Choosing Civility compiled more than a half a page of the words that people have included in “Civility.” In short, I accept that civility is good; civility is an elemental and inseparable part of morality, virtue and ethics; and that civility is a conscious choice that each of us must make.

Pre-human hunter-gatherers, as they began to exploit the benefits of grouping together quickly determined that many aspects of civility were absolutely essential. Those not complying with the rules were driven from the group and left to be eaten by something bigger and faster than they were. Later, un-civil people were shunned and ostracized. They wore labels as being un-couth, uncultured and just plain mean. As a youth, being uncivil guaranteed you a visit to the wood shed, where the board of education was applied to the seat of learning. On the other hand, Dear Abby made a living by giving advice on civility to millions of people, while Miss. Manners, Judith Martin, added a veneer of etiquette to civility in her book A Citizens Guide to Civility.

Most will agree that the world is less civil today that in years past. And it’s small wonder. As a rural population, you relied on your neighbors. You had better be nice (civil) to them if you expected their help building barns, gathering crops, if you got hurt or whatever. People were more or less required to be civil to each other as they left the farms and moved to the cities. In the cities and neighborhoods, life was conducted on the streets and the front porch. Everyone was watching. You didn’t need your neighbors for survival, yet you heavily relied on them and their family for moral and social support. The source for all this was the houses of worship, schools, social and charitable clubs and organizations. But then, we moved to the back yard, and enclosed ourselves behind fences to keep people (and family)

OUT. What we gained in privacy we forfeited in a requirement of civility and close interpersonal relationships. More privacy, less need of civility... resulting in fewer memberships and less active participation in those organizations (sound familiar?). The older supporting members passed on and we have taught the youth that they cannot be denied anything, and that everything is possible, instantly. Armed with #ME, many, if not most are more protective of their time and energy than ever. Social media has not only given us solitude, but also anonymity, where civility is a meaningless word.

Perhaps wounded, battered and bruised, more and more people are calling for a return of civility, finally recognizing that with a loss of civility comes a corresponding loss of humanity. I believe that people, the common man, is waking up to the fact that there is no benefit to being uncivil, but that the opposite is true. I believe that we are on the verge of demanding (by our ballots) that our political leaders relinquish the rude, hurtful and (in many cases) unfounded comments in every public and social venue. I hope that the corporate, clerical and commercial leaders decide that there is social and financial benefit to being (by example) civil and requiring the same from their associates, employees, members. The people on public and social media who hide behind anonymity to pollute, berate, and belittle should be held accountable by the old tools of being shunned and ostracized until they can find civility in their fingertips.

I believe that civility is good and has huge benefit for all of humanity; just as incivility is bad and comes with a high moral, spiritual and financial cost for our society. I accept that civility is an elemental and inseparable part of morality, virtue and ethics, and that without it, moral decay and social anarchy is inevitable. I know that civility is a conscious choice that each of us must make, every day and in every way.

Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth are the very foundations of a Mason's principles. Referring to the many attributes of civility, be reminded that there is a core of civility in each of these hallowed principles. In these words, "These generous principles extend further (beyond our Lodges and our Brethren), for every human being has a claim upon your kind offices. Do good unto all."