The Decline of Civility and Why It Matters

What happens when a nation forgets its manners?

by: Barbara Basler l from: AARP Bulletin l Updated September 16, 2009

When Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., shouted out, “You lie!” during President Obama’s speech on health care to Congress and the nation last week, the frozen faces of his colleagues mirrored their shock at his behavior. By the next morning, the outburst was a major topic in the media—and at breakfast tables across the country. Republican leaders demanded that Wilson apologize to the president. He did. The apology was accepted. Yesterday, the House voted to censure Wilson. But that hasn’t quelled the stormy debate about the meaning of the insult. Has America abandoned civility and good manners? And if it has, should we care? AARP Bulletin Today asked P.M. Forni, a professor and cofounder of the Civility Project at Johns Hopkins University, to talk about the Wilson brouhaha. Forni studies and lectures on civility and is the author of two books on the subject—the latest, The Civility Solution: What to Do When People Are Rude.

Q. What was your reaction to Rep. Wilson’s outburst during the president’s speech?

A. I thought, “This is good because it will cause an outcry.” I knew the words he shouted would make Americans stop and think. That’s important. Civility, after all, means being a good citizen. Civility and good manners are not about which fork to choose for the salad. They’re about how we treat one another in everyday life. And how we treat one another determines the strength of our society.

Q. When did the widespread decline in civility start?

A. Boomers were the first generation to be fed oversize portions of self-esteem and self-entitlement. But our studies show that in their teens boomers still had enough training from their parents to care what neighbors or their community thought of them. As they aged that started to change over the next 20 years. More and more we became obsessed with “I,” with “me.” Now, we instill plenty of self-esteem in our children—but not self-restraint. People today are so self-absorbed they don’t know the value of restraint, and yet you cannot have a healthy society without it. To survive, a society needs an amount of goodwill—people willing to treat others with respect and to give of themselves to the community. Civility is the lifeblood of a society.

Q. And we move naturally from being self-absorbed and self-interested to being rude and uncivil? Because we don’t care what others think, just about having our say and getting our way?
A. Yes. The Internet has depersonalized our relationships. We e-mail, instant-message and make anonymous comments online. We react quickly and don’t censor ourselves. We live in a time when anyone can say anything about anybody. The shrillest voices are the ones that get the most attention. We shout our opinions because the media seems to tell us that’s the way to be heard. Pundits screaming at one another—this is part of our everyday life. We see this as normal and acceptable.

Q. Are we a less civil society today than in years past?

A. Yes. A number of studies prove we are at an all-time low when it comes to being civil, to caring about what others think of our actions. Studies have compared students in the 1960s and ’70s and students today and found that students today care much less for society’s approval of their behavior than they did a few generations ago. They are detached, self-interested. And that’s not good news for society. In fact, civility has become a real issue in America. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have spoken about the importance of restoring civility, as has President Obama.

Q. So we really can’t have reasonable debates about issues?

A. No we can’t. And yet bipartisan conflict is part of democracy. It’s healthy. It’s important. But you must leave a space for the other’s opinion. And you must argue civilly. The heckling heard around the world was, as the ancient Romans said, “ad hominem,” about the person. Rep. Wilson did not attack the presidential plan, he attacked the president.

Today some politicians use nothing but tactics of attack or obstruction. Too often we have rigid adherence to a party line. Common sense, compromise and goodwill are vanishing.

Q. What does that mean for America’s future?

A. If we cannot be civil, our quality of life deteriorates, society itself begins to fray and democracy is weakened. We get to the point where incivility escalates and crosses into violence. There are now some 1.8 million acts of violence in the workplace each year, the government reports—from one worker shoving another to actual fights and even killings. Many began because of a perceived slight, a small act of rudeness that spiraled out of control. We all have an incentive to foster civility because the higher the level of civility, the lower the level of violence in a society.

Q. The Republican as well as the Democratic Party called for Wilson to apologize. Was that a hopeful sign?

A. It was a very good sign, a correct response. A gathering of members of Congress to hear an address by the president should be marked by respect and decorum. Behavior should be impeccable to set an example to the nation and to our young people. When it is marred by something like we saw, we need to demand an apology. If this incident had been shrugged off, it would mean we were inured.

Q. Who can help change our uncivilized behavior?

A. This is a battle that should be embraced by Americans age 50 and older. When we are young we pursue beauty, success. As we grow older, our interests switch to ethics. Generally, as we age we care more about giving back. This would be a great project for older Americans; they could teach
civility to their grandchildren and even visit schools to talk about why good manners matter.

Q. How do you foster civility?

A. In the past few years, hundreds of civility projects have sprung up across the country—in community colleges like Oakton in Chicago to medical centers like Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles. Even government agencies like NASA have tried to foster civility through special projects. NASA, for example, has regular “civility cafes” where employees talk about behavior and hear speakers—all to increase their awareness of civility. And more school districts are including manners and civility in their lesson plans. These are all attempts to improve the quality of life by increasing the quality of human interactions. They are small but important. After all, how well we treat other people is the basis of every ethical system.

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