Opinion

Civility Lost: Where Can It Be Found?

This month, my brain has been supersaturated with thoughts that revolve around how people are relating to one another these days. Those thoughts seemed pretty random until I tried placing a small nidus in their midst to see whether they crystallized around this notion: civility. Derived from the Latin *civilis* (for relating to a citizen, civil—also affable, courteous), civility is politeness, the art of showing regard for others, even if in a merely formal way. Behaving with civility, a speaker may be seething with opposition but treats the opponent with deference and respect, even while rebutting his or her assertions.

Of course, disagreement is necessary in a democracy. So is impassioned advocacy. Being passive or complicit may be the path of least resistance, but it was not the path followed by the founding fathers of these United States. Their heated arguments over representation led to the formation of a bicameral Congress, one house in which states are equally represented, and the other in which the population is equally represented. So the recent acrimony over health care reform had plenty of precedent, and yet the debate seemed more polarized this time around. The bills that passed the House and Senate last year showed that few legislators were willing to compromise until the very last minute, and then it was more like equine bartering than a settlement.

I attribute the recent polarization of politicians and of their constituency to the communication media that surround, even envelop, us 24/7. With the evolving demise of print media, the news has devolved into a series of sound bites that have time to give only one side of an issue, or it presents neither side but shows video clips of a public shouting match. Negative campaign advertising does not have to convince anyone to support a position, merely to cast seeds of doubt in 30 seconds or less. Talk shows espouse extreme viewpoints laced with invective, such that I cannot stand listening either to those from the right or the left.

Social media are certainly not immune from polarization, either. When I researched the Internet for instant messaging abbreviations useable for last month's Opinion, I found that roughly 50 percent of them were pejorative (another 40 percent were sexual and only 10 percent suitable for *EyeNet*). So it is really easy for the electronically empowered to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. I do have some good news to report, however. On the ophthalmic e-mail listservs to which I subscribe, discussions of medical topics are mostly respectful. Only when the discussion strays into political topics does it become shrill and uncivil.

So what can those of us who mourn the loss of civility do to restore it? Certainly manifesting humility is a good place to start. Like yawning, humility can be contagious to other participants, but even if not, it commands more respect from others than hubris. Active listening is another; if we do not take the time to understand an opposing position, we are likely to misconstrue it. As they say, when the mouth opens, the ears slam shut. It would also help to avoid personalizing disagreements with character attacks and false accusations of imputed motivation. To wit, I humbly admit that I'm not an expert on civility, and I'd really like to hear your views because I respect you as a colleague. (Offer or read responses to this Opinion at www.eyenetmagazine.org.)

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