

Steps to a More Civilized World

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By Daniel Darling

MOUNT JULIET, Tenn.—It’s a conversation I have almost weekly with a friend or colleague. Can you believe how nasty our politics are?

Incivility seems to be an epidemic. Many of our leading thinkers are telling us that our inability to get along seems to be inhibiting our ability to govern well. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has said that our national dysfunction is a threat to our national security.

As a student of history, I realize our age is not the first to experience the darker elements of civil discourse. The American experience has always been shaped by an intense collision of ideas and personalities.

- Two of our revered founders, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, empowered allies to engage in vicious mudslinging in the presidential campaign of 1800.
- Teddy Roosevelt personally attacked the appearance of William Howard Taft, a fellow Republican and his own former secretary of war.
- Andrew Jackson blamed John Quincy Adams for the death of his wife after a brutal 1828 campaign.

And these are just a few examples.

I’m also aware, as a believer in the Christian gospel, that the basest passions of men are not confined to the 21st century. Since that fateful moment in the Garden of Eden, humankind has found new ways to savage each other, both physically and verbally.

But there is something about our time that seems to incentivize incivility and make it harder for people who disagree to live alongside each other in peace.

Today easy access to communication platforms enables us to spew our thoughts without thinking. We can rage against ideological foes. We can insult celebrities for no reason. We can serve up fresh rage to hungry tribes.

Many are mourning this new reality and wondering what can be done. But, if we were honest, we’d admit that, while we lament incivility, we also are tempted to engage in the very mudslinging we claim to hate.

So perhaps the first step toward a more civilized world is to start at home—to follow Jesus' words and love our digital neighbors as ourselves.

If you, like me, want a more civilized public square, here is where each of us can start.

1. Remember that even your ideological foes are humans.

That person on Twitter who just doesn't seem to get it? He may (in your view) have dangerous or weak or dangerously weak arguments, but he is a human being.

As a Christian, I believe that every single person was created in the image of God. Every single person bears unique dignity and worth. You may not believe the Bible as I do, but you have to admit that this isn't a bad idea to put into practice.

The person with whom you are arguing isn't an avatar. He's a person with a family and friends, with hopes and dreams, with strengths and weaknesses. Before you release a killer tweet, imagine sitting across a table at Starbucks with him. Perhaps that might soften the rhetorical blow you are about to deliver.

2. Resist confirmation bias.

Resist that juicy headline that confirms what you already believe to be true about that politician or celebrity or religious leader you are already predisposed to dislike.

Resist posting or spreading it until you have time to confirm its veracity. Before we join a digital lynch mob, we should gather more information.

I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't speak out against injustice or evil, but that we should slow down.

I'm suggesting we should refuse to automatically believe every bad-news story about people we don't like and refuse to automatically accept every good-news story about people we do like.

If you write off negative stories about your heroes and positive stories about your enemies as fake news, you help build the tribalized echo chamber that makes civility difficult.

3. Give others the benefit of the doubt.

We live in a cynical age, born out of disillusionment with major institutions of public life. This disappointment is not unwarranted, as it seems leadership at all levels has let us down at some level in the past few years. Many are wondering who, if anyone, in public life they can trust.

But before we pile on, before we self-righteously tweet, we should ask ourselves: How would I like to be treated if this story were about me?

Would I want people to wait to confirm the details before believing the worst about me?

Remember this: One day you might be piling on to “crush” someone; the next day you may be the target of a smear campaign yourself. So let’s give the benefit of the doubt that we hope people would give us if we were the target.

4. Don’t just criticize the other team.

Be consistent.

Ask yourself: If this behavior were exhibited by someone outside my party/movement/tribe, would I defend it?

Am I covering and defending because I want my guy or my girl to win an election or be proven right in this moment?

Are you willing to criticize those whom you are most allied with, or do you get up every day raging at “the other side”?

I’m amazed at how easily partisans are able to shift political positions based on who is in power. It’s one thing to change your views after careful reflection. It’s quite another to change them because of the politician now wearing your team jersey.

5. Understand that you don’t have to comment on every single news story.

We have convinced ourselves that we always have to say something whenever news breaks. But think back to a time, not so long ago, before we had social media and before every person had a public platform. Few of us felt compelled to release public statements on every breaking news story.

So why do we think we have to opine on everything today?

There is no law that says we actually have to comment on every single news story all the time. We can sit out some controversies.

We can hold our digital tongues. Just because someone wants you to be as mad on the Internet as they are doesn’t mean you have to give in to that silly peer pressure.

6. Resist whataboutism.

This is the childish form of argument that says, “Yes I know my guy or my girl did this bad thing, but the guy or girl on their team did it too and did it worse.” We should stick to our principles and stop excusing bad behavior from our own side.

Whataboutism is the same tactic my kids use when I catch them doing something they shouldn’t be doing. They deflect to some other action a sibling did earlier. I don’t fall for that as a parent, because in this moment, at this time, what this particular child did is the problem.

And so it should be with our online debates. Whataboutism is a vicious hamster wheel that exhausts only those who keep it spinning.

7. Listen to and learn from those who don't agree with you.

It's important to have core convictions. But there are a lot of topics about which good people can disagree.

We should resist the partisan echo chambers that keep us from learning and growing. We should listen and learn. Not all good ideas come from our side of the aisle.

By listening, we respect the humanity and the dignity of the other person and we begin to recognize the complexity of many of the problems that animate our public debates.

We can listen, learn and have a dialogue without sacrificing our ideals.

8. Don't let the constant news cycle steal your joy.

It's important for people of influence and power to speak on behalf of the vulnerable. I've devoted much of my public life to this.

At the same time, we must resist the temptation to let the unhealthy flood of information, available at all times at our fingertips, to make us into angry rage-bots.

Sometimes it's good to step back, to get away from our screens, and live outside the news stream. I admit that I struggle to make this a reality, but those who love us the most—our friends and loved ones—deserve our real presence.

Let's give them our full attention, rather than the back of our heads, staring like a zombie into Twitter.