“Declining Civility Polarizes America”
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By Dr. John Roush, President, Centre College

“Civility costs nothing and buys everything.” —Mary Wortley Montague (1689-1762)

The nation's colleges and universities are no exception. (Though I must, even if it seems self-serving, exempt Centre College's campus, where civility is the norm.) I will cite two academic illustrations that continue to inflame passions on both sides of the political spectrum.

First, Ward Churchill, faculty member at the University of Colorado, who described victims of the World Trade Center attacks as “little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers.” His equating of murdered civilians to the Nazi architect of the Holocaust was publicized when he was invited to speak at Hamilton College. After protests and death threats, the invitation was withdrawn. To say that many of the comments of both his critics and defenders -- not to mention his own -- have been uncivil is an understatement. And much of this has occurred on America's campuses, where, of all places, a spirit of reasoned discourse and collegial debate should prevail.

Then there is the case of Lawrence Summers, president of Harvard, who, in a supposedly "unofficial" talk to a gathering of students and faculty, speculated that the primary reason for the low percentage of women in high-end scientific professions might be “intrinsic” differences in advanced math and science ability between the sexes.

Acknowledging that this is a strikingly different situation, Summers' remarks displayed not so much incivility as a lack of understanding of his role as a high-profile leader. The president of Harvard may speak unofficially to spouse and family and close friends about such charged matters, but not to a gathering of faculty and students. Again, the debate that was ignited would more aptly be described as an exchange of blows than an exchange of views.

The main consequence of this turning away from civility is an increasing polarization of our country — a dichotomy of red state/blue state, liberal/conservative, us/them that has only your side and my side and no place to meet in the middle. It leads to legislative gridlock, nasty political campaigns, and the alienation of citizens, who grow weary of the shrillness.

The solution? We must begin to balance what we have the right to do with what we have the duty to do. Both professor and president had the First Amendment right to express themselves, reinforced by the principle of academic freedom. But we must look beyond our right to speak to see the person in the firing line of our position. Did Summers envision the discouragement his remarks could bring to a talented 18-year-old woman (perhaps someone as talented as University of California Professor Alice Silverberg, summa cum laude, Harvard, mathematics) trying to decide between majoring in physics
and a more “traditional” field? Did Churchill consider the son of a World Trade Center victim he would have likely addressed, had he been allowed to speak at Hamilton?

I don't believe in either case, they did. If so, they might have expressed themselves differently (and in Summers' case, in a different venue). And they would certainly have avoided much personal turmoil. Churchill's speaking calendar is not nearly as full these days, and Summers has issued so many apologies, some have suggested he include one in the outgoing message on his answering machine. As retired dean Stanley Fish recently wrote of them: “...[T]he constitutional freedom [of expression] they enjoy is freedom from legal consequences, not from consequences in general.”

Civility is the key ingredient in the grease that allows civilization to inch forward without grinding itself to dust. We must remind ourselves that life is reality, not a reality show—a contrived spectacle in which harsh language, humiliation, and absolute winners and losers are the order of the day. In real life people continue to interact indefinitely; they don't pack up and go home after the six-week segment is filmed.

Civility implies a certain formality and restraint, and we would do well to follow more closely the definition most of us learned in junior high, “to refrain from rudeness” and “practice consideration for others.” We can express our views forcefully and clearly while still maintaining a baseline respect for the humanity of those with whom we disagree. This would diminish the amount of “good” material available to those in the media who revel in the sensational, and, more importantly, would cause the level of our national conversation to rise, even as our blood pressures decline.

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