

Where Has All The Civility Gone **By Bob Chromy**

Apologies to Peter, Paul and Mary, but I've taken the liberty to modify the lyrics to that Sixties song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone". Bear with me as I am not the world's finest poet or lyricist, so one stanza goes like this:

"Where has all the civility gone?
 Long time passing
Where has all the civility gone?
 Long time ago
Where has all the civility gone?
Lost in the public discourse by every one
 When will they ever learn?
 When will they ever learn?"

When I read the comments people submit to the various Blogs and opinionated writings published on the internet, it rams home to me just how uncivil our public discourse has become. Many of these comments by readers who either agree or disagree with the writer's opinion piece or are reacting to another's comment on the piece, are full of invective and hateful words. As an example, I've recently read one comment where the person was responding to another reader's comment with (and I am paraphrasing), "You f***ing a**hole, right-wing idiot, you totally missed the point – but I guess you have never gotten beyond the bible thumping lies of your obvious redneck education. People like you make me want to puke".

And that is mild compared to some other repartee people submit in their response. I find it is often the case that just because someone disagrees with some statements that they feel compelled to reply with the vilest words and disparaging remarks. Such personal attacks and vicious comments come from people who appear, judging from their comments, to be from both a "far left" and "far right" political persuasion – it is not the sole domain of one ideological bent or another. In many cases the "attacker" who is commenting does not posit a logical, thoughtful argument to support his/her opinion to dissuade the "attacked", but merely strews cruel and hurtful rhetoric for the entire world to see.

This incivility has permeated the American public discourse in practically all human endeavors. We used to call the swearing aspect "the language of the streets", and many of us can still recall the threat of having our mouths washed out with soap by our parents if we uttered a four letter word. It is not just about the use of foul language – it is much more than that – it is an insidious baseness and immorality that has invaded and corrupted all our dialogue and exchange of ideas. More and more it has become prevalent in the media, in our schools, in our political bodies, in the workplace, and in our homes.

Perhaps one of the most obvious breakdowns in civility is demonstrated practically every day in the area of politics. The things we hear our representatives at all levels of government is at times shocking. There are the accusations tossed around by Florida Congressman Alan Grayson, suggesting that Republicans want older people to die. There are too many examples to delve into here, but these ad hominem attacks come from both sides of the aisle – e.g. Republican S.C. Sen. Jake Knotts called Republican candidate for Governor, Nikki Haley, an Indian-American woman, a "rag head" several times while explaining how he believed she was hiding her true religion from voters. "She's a f#!king rag head," Knotts said.

Such behavior is shameful. A couple of years ago I was doing some consulting for the Illinois State Police in Joliet, IL. In the evenings after work I would take my customary 2-3 mile walk around the area in which I was residing. One of my frequent pathways took me past an elementary school that was named for one-time U.S.

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Republican Senator from Illinois, Everett Dirksen. He served in the Senate from 1950-1969. He was known for his decorum and use of flowery, but very civil speech. When political discussions became tense, Dirksen would lighten the atmosphere by taking up his perennial campaign to have the marigold named the national flower. Walking past that school I recalled the TV news reporting of the Fifties and how much more civil the discourse was back then between members of both parties. Arguments were always it seemed based on honest debate with nary a verbal attack against the other side in a debate. When I took a college course in speech I was conscious of how to debate in a civil manner using Dirksen and others in congress back then as examples of good civil discourse.

As a child of the Fifties, I have witnessed this ever increasing tendency toward incivility over the past six decades; it has been as if some dark, foggy atmospheric weather front had been closing in on us until it is now completely overhead and we are immersed in an ugly, cold, pea green soupy overcast that brings out the worst in people.

"Where has all the respect gone?
Long time passing
Where has all the respect gone?
Long time ago
Where has all the respect gone?
Ancient history like Rodney Dangerfield's "none"
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?"

Rodney Dangerfield was known for his famous line, "I get no respect. The way my luck is running, if I was a politician I would be honest". So, what has happened to us Americans? We see the lack of respect in so many venues today. Children show a lack of respect for parents, teachers, one another, and for any authority. Yet it is not simply a loss of respect by children - parents have increasingly shown disrespect for their children, by spoiling them, not disciplining them, or mal-treating them.

Adults often display disrespect for one another and frequently for themselves by their behavior. We used to yell, "Hey, no cutting in line" at the movies or in other queues when someone tried to slip ahead in the line. I was reminded of this on a recent road trip when on an interstate highway I encountered a road construction sign stating that the right lane would be closed up ahead. As I approached the point where the traffic in the right lane needed to start merging into the left lane, like a good driver I followed a semi-trailer truck into the left lane. Within seconds a few of the autos in the right lane coming up behind me continued to drive in the right lane attempting to get in the merge further up the road. Like the truck in front of me I tried to move partly into the right lane figuring the drivers coming up would get the message and merge further back. But one fellow in a pickup truck moved over onto the shoulder and passed me, giving me the middle finger salute. After getting passed the five mile construction, I could see that that pickup was no more than 15 cars and trucks ahead of me. So, what was the hurry and how far did he get? How much time did he really save? I asked myself why some people think that rules don't apply to them; why do they lack respect and consideration for others.

Don't get me started on drivers who feel obliged to tag along on your back bumper. One of the things we learned in Driver Ed class in my high school was the rule that you should keep a distance of one car length for every 10 miles of speed – thus if you are driving at 50 mph you should be at least 5 car lengths behind the driver

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in front of you. Yet many drivers think their reflexes are so good they can stop in time even if they are 2 car lengths behind you at 60 mph. Stupid? Emphatically, yes!

Many of us can remember it being drummed into us to “respect your elders”, which comes indirectly from the Judeo-Christian teachings of the bible. This diminishing respect for others had to start somewhere, but where? Some have laid it on the mantle of the 1963 Supreme Court case removing prayer from the public schools. Some have written extensively about the breakdown in the family and attribute that to a number of our society’s ills. This lack of respect did not occur overnight, it seems to me that it has been a steady encroachment over the last six decades. Did it start with the anti-Vietnam War protests, the flower power, hippy, free-love movement of the Sixties? Was it the spoiled “Me Generation” that came out of the Seventies? Perhaps it actually started with my generation who were the first to experience the affluence our parents provided in that initial move from city life to the charmed life of suburbia. My parents, like most of my generation, wanted me to have a better life. They worked hard to provide me with the opportunity to advance my station in life. I wish I had more answers than questions.

Yet it seems apparent that respect for others rights, property, and pursuit of happiness has diminished substantially. As an example, there have been more and more news stories about teachers having sex with their students. I believe that this probably occurred in earlier times, but I seriously doubt that it was nearly as frequent as it has been of late. Then there is the increase in the number of instances of confrontation between police and traffic violators. Yes, it is now being filmed by cameras in the police cars as well as by bystanders with camera phones, but the main reason for cameras in the police cars is directly related to the increase in the lack of respect shown and antagonism toward an officer of the law who stops someone for a violation.

I’m sure you can think of other examples – there are many to choose from, both major and minor. A minor one that bugs me is when I am walking down a sidewalk and am approached by two or three others strung across the walk, younger than me, coming from the other direction – invariably it is I who move aside onto the grass or curb, when it becomes apparent that it does not enter the vapid mind of any in the approaching group to drop back and make room for a solitary pedestrian to pass. At times like that I want to cry out, “I don’t get no respect”. Of course I only verbalize it internally – don’t want to show disrespect toward the others. Well, OK I confess I do give them a bit of a stare.

“Where has all the courtesy gone?
 Long time passing
Where has all the courtesy gone?
 Long time ago
Where has all the courtesy gone?
Vanished for selfishness within every one
 When will they ever learn?
 When will they ever learn?”

Indeed courtesy may be considered as related to respect and/or civility – perhaps a milder, more genteel and sometimes less personal aspect of those, but the lack of it resulting mainly from pure selfishness. One of my pet peeves is the “Left Lane Louie” – the person who drives in the left lane on a highway that has two or more lanes in a given direction. These are people who invariably stay in the left lane for miles on end, doing just under or about the speed limit, and never move to the right to allow someone else to pass. A line of cars could be stacked up behind them, but they seem to be oblivious to the fact – do they ever look in the rearview mirror? I venture that this is an aspect of uninhibited selfishness. Despite the fact that most states have a law

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that requires a driver to move to the right at the first available opening, these left-lane dwellers seem to be ignorant of the law or just too much into the “me” thought process – “I got here first and I’m staying because it’s my right and everyone else doesn’t count”.

Another courtesy that seems to have gone by the wayside is the simple task of holding a door for someone immediately behind you. I guess this is one thing I have always done regardless of the sex or age of the person immediately behind me. Yet there are those who are so into themselves that they are oblivious to anyone else. Even if you are in a hurry, it does not take but a fraction of a second to reach an arm back and hold the door ajar for a fellow human being. Perhaps they will even respond by doing the same for the next person following them.

It seems to me that Americans have become entirely too self-absorbed and self-interested to unclog their self-centered thoughts and extend a bit of politeness to others. Another behavior that bugs me occurs at the supermarket. It doesn’t matter whether you shop at Wal-Mart, Jewell-Osco, Shop-Right, Piggly Wiggly, Albertsons, Ralphs, or any of hundreds of others across the nation. It is a fact that some people have become too darn lazy to return their shopping carts to the cart return locations. It’s not like it takes a huge amount of time and effort to do so. But so often I see people leave their empty cart along-side, or in front of their car, when the cart return is a mere 15-20 feet away. I mean they have walked through most if not every aisle in the store with that cart and now they can’t walk 20 feet to put the cart in the nearest return slot?

The stores provides these carts as a convenience to their customers – as a customer you typically don’t have to pay for the use of the cart and you don’t own it, it’s not yours beyond the time you make use of it. Well, Shop-Rite in New Jersey has instituted a system that forces you to put a quarter in a slot to unhook a cart from a train of carts connected to one another by chains. That forces you to return the cart to a cart return stall in order to get your quarter back when you re-hook the chain to another cart at the return stall. So, here’s a technique to modify people’s behavior and encourage them to return the carts they use. Shop-Right went to the expense of rigging their carts this way in order to somewhat protect their carts from theft, but also to keep their carts from being banged up against peoples cars or left in harm’s way of cars driving through the parking lot. It also makes it easier on the people hired to go out and collect the carts for stacking back into the store entrances – the cart gatherers become more effective in their time and effort. It would not surprise me if Shop-Rite also decided to do this because someone sued them for a cart that damaged their auto or one that was wind-driven out into the parking lot and caused damage.

So, if you are one who is guilty of this laziness, the next time you go to the supermarket, have a little courtesy and don’t be so lazy – return the darn shopping cart!

“Where has all the responsibility gone?
Long time passing
Where has all the responsibility gone?
Long time ago
Where has all the responsibility gone?
Departed to dependency, “victimized” by every other one
When will we ever learn?
When will we ever learn?”

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Recent news has pointed out that America is approaching the unheard of rate of 50% of the populace that are dependent on government in some form or other, whether for employment or as a recipient of a federal, state, or local government entitlement. This is bad news for the country that was founded on the principle of equal opportunity and equality under the law, not as the progressives and secular-socialists trumpet the cry of equal justice, which are code words for redistribution of wealth. Once people become completely dependent on government they lose their sense of self-responsibility and self-reliance. Our Federal government has been growing steadily over the last six decades and the pace seems to be accelerating even faster in the last 18 months. With our rapidly rising national debt, we are headed for serious trouble, economically and culturally.

Increasingly we have seen more and more of the populace endowing themselves as victims – they have been conditioned to believe that they have a right to own a home they can't afford, an income stream that they don't have to work for, one that enables them to have all the minimum luxuries that others who work for and earn the goods they buy.

How is it that we have become a society where nearly half the population has given up control over their lives to an increasingly more powerful federal government? We are currently in the throes of a protracted economic recession and yet too many people continue to look to a big central government for answers, when history shows that government can't solve most of the problems they attempt to solve. Indeed in most cases government and is either the source of the problems or it exacerbates the problems they attempt to solve because of ineffective measures that are adopted that do not address the root of our problems, only attack the symptoms.

Yet, we seem to continually re-elect the same ineffective politicians every election cycle. Even when control of congress changes hands, we still get more of the same old futile leadership. Our politicians spend most of their time getting re-elected. Over the past six decades we have witnessed increasing corruption and immoral behavior from our elected officials. We have seen the attitudes of the majority of those in office turn from the ideal that they are our servants to the demonstrative behavior of an elite group of people who think they know what is best for the public and the public be damned! How can we justify electing someone to public office over and over again, when things don't get better, but only worse? Take Robert Byrd for example; who recently died yet set the record for number of years in the Senate. Then there was Strom Thurmond a few years back, who remained in office oh so many years.

One can argue that a person who is doing a good job deserves to be re-elected as long as the voters agree to re-elect them. But history points out that there are few, if any at all, who have not been affected by the corruption that has increasingly infected D.C. Special interest groups have become way too influential and wield an inordinate amount of power and money (way more than the average voter) without which politicians cannot continue to get re-elected time after time. It is a fact of human nature that such power and monetary backing exacts a price and conditions politicians to return the favor.

A problem that has been gnawing at our nation's ability to come together in a unified way is the divisions that threaten to tear us apart. We are constantly being driven apart by internal threats couched in epithets hurled against one faction or another. Charges of racism are just one of the insidious wedges driving us apart. Politicians seem only too eager to insert such charges into the national dialogue, and in some cases play the "race card" to instigate dissention. We have also become divided over the issues of religion, political ideologies, man ordained vs. God given rights, moral behaviors, sexuality, majority vs. minority opinions and beliefs, among others. It seems as if we are unable to resolve our differences in a proactive manner – this I think

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is due in some respects to the loss of civility, respect, courtesy, and self-responsibility highlighted in this essay. In addition I would add a diminished moral fiber and a lack of patience in our dealings with one another.

An even bigger problem is the overstuffed bureaucracy where more and more people are working and owe their reliance to the political establishment, and not to the voters. More and more power is being centralized in the hands of these expanding government departments and this is a danger to the American way of life that once made us the greatest country in history – a grand experiment that was initiated and brought to life through the courage and wisdom of the founders. One can imagine a tear falling from the eyes of each of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, as their spirit looks down on us.

The day after September 11, 2001 we witnessed a coming together that showed the world what pride and resolve we all had in ourselves and our country. America is still the most compassionate country in the history of the world – look at how much we give to other countries that suffer catastrophic events – Haiti, is one recent example among so many over the years. Look at the volunteers who went down to help after Katrina and now with the oil spill. Americans still have that heart of gold that permeates our national conscience. No,

America has not been perfect, we have made mistakes and will very likely continue to make some; but no one should doubt that throughout the history of mankind, America has indeed been the greatest, most exemplified source of freedom and human inspiration the world has ever seen. America has been and can still be that shining city on a hill, that promise and example to the rest of humankind that there is a better way for the human race.

We can and must resolve our differences and re-unite the spirit of America. The responsibility is as much ours, each and every citizen, as it is those we have elected to office, ours even more so. We need to take our responsibility as serious as those founders did or we will be the generations that witness the demise of this great nation and its promise of freedom and God given unalienable rights as stated in Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,---That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

The last original line of that song is both a challenge and intrinsically a new call to action. “When will we ever learn?” So, here is my last use of poetic license:

“Where has all the unity gone?
Long time passing
Where has all the unity gone?
Long time ago
Where has all the promise gone?
Asleep; ready to awaken with help from every one
When will we ever learn?
When free we yearn to re-learn!”