

# EARLY BIRD WEEKLY



NewbergRotaryEarlybirds.org

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Last week was **Ron Mock**, Professor Emeritus and Director of [The George Fox Civility Project](#).

Ron graduated George Fox College in 1977, has a masters in communication from Drake University (Iowa), and a law degree from University of Michigan.

His wife, Melanie, is a professor of writing in the English Dept at George Fox. They have four children and two grandsons.



The Civility Project was founded in 2020 in a conversation between Ron and [President] Robin about what kinds of things needed to be done in the community to address the declining culture of civility.

How increasingly difficult it has become to have a civil conversation with differing political and social opinions without hurting each other.

From the National Conference of State Legislatures (the first place you look for quotes of inspiration ... wink wink) Ron found some useful insights on civility.

Disagreeing without disrespect, seeking and finding common ground, listening past one's preconceptions and teaching others to do the same.

He had a chart illustrating the correlation between Reconciliation & Trust ... Non-violence & Discernment ... and Justice & Needs. In the hub of that diagram is labeled simply Civility / Shalom.

Disagreement without disrespecting is simple personal civility.

See and respect your opponent as a person, not just an annoyance.

Being kind to one another, showing empathy ... the kinds of things we do to help one another through our days.

Taking it to another level, to make sure civility isn't suppressing ones self but how we can use our disagreements as a tool or an opportunity.

To do that we need a level of stewardship to make that disagreement a way for ourselves and our communities to grow and learn. Treat that disagreement as a gift: an opportunity to learn, enhance justice, and heal relationships.

Show grace to your opponents and keep them in the game.

"How many of you learned to drive?" [majority of hands up] Did you do that without anybody yelling at you? [many hands still up] And when they did that, what were they doing? Saving your lives. If they hadn't challenged you, you or someone else, may not be here today.

The third level, more broad, is taking care of our political culture. Think beyond the immediate for a stronger, more effective political culture that is more resilient and robust and trust-worthy. Improve the quality of information decision makers and voters get during conflict. Teach listening, empathy, trust, hope and problem solving.

We are trying to accomplish a culture of civility in a variety of ways.

George Fox has programs going on. Ron is teaching classes on justice and on conflict resolution. Last Fall was a class on civility and American government.

Ron is working with people here promoting civility in the community at large to come to agreements and with better understanding.

One project has been making some proposals to the school board on how it might approach topics suffering from lack of civility.

Another has been approaching active community members like us, a fruitful audience already of like mind, willing to invest in the energy in change.

It is hoped we can have a candidates' forum in place before the general election to give candidates a voice in a setting of civility.

Q: Is the problem of not listening because we're just so wound up about being right?

A: There are habits we have to develop and "I stand before you as a success case. I am not, naturally, a good listener. I have to flip my switch and turn it on." But these are skills you can learn.

He's worked in mediation for decades. Mediators have to be able to listen to teach others the same. "You're right. One of the problems we have is that we have a natural response to deal with the problem we disagree with. So we tend to respond viscerally and immediately.

In an approach to discernment is to take the time to listen and something we are trying

to develop in our political culture at every level.

Q: What defines civility and how do we get there? What's different today than twenty or forty years ago?

A: It's been pretty well documented. Take Congress as an example. Relationships between members of Congress have changed.

It used to be common, as late as the 1960s, for social friendships and political alliances to be formed and kept across party lines.

Starting around the 1980s we began to see a disconnection. So for the past generation we have seen a waning of social connection and very little cooperation across those lines.

He's not saying Congress is causing this' but it is something that's feeding back into the culture. They're human and respond as such to social cues and media attention and more openly attack and demonize one another.

Another influence is the rise of social media and our ability to isolate ourselves into little bubbles of like-thinking which is much easier to do now than used to be. It's a natural thing to be drawn to and comfortable with so our thoughts and opinions are inbreeding [my word, not his]. So we are likely to lose track of the merits of any opposing opinions.

Research shows that if you take a group of people and isolate them from outside opinions they will become increasingly extreme in their views. More so than even the most extreme member was in the beginning.

Q: What are things we can say or do to deescalate?

A: Switch to a mode of listening. "I'd like to know more about why you feel that way."

Try and detach from the immediacy of the issue. Practice reflective listening and keep listening until the other person knows they have been heard, when you can state their point of view to their satisfaction.

It's not surrendering yourself but respecting them enough to understand their position. Often, when people get anxious, it's because they feel they're about to be railroaded.

Take them out of confrontation mode by being a good listener. Once a person feels "heard," they don't feel as threatened as they used to be. -end