

Civility in Public Discourse

Glen Kezwer earnestly advocates respect and dignity for each human being, based on the recognition of the one Divinity within all of us and epitomised by the Indian greeting, 'Namaste'



Recently, I was watching a Congressional hearing in which a member of the US House of representatives was questioning a well-respected expert, who was a witness. The questioner was aggressive, intimidating, harsh, bullying, combative, and regularly interrupted the witness, treating him as if he was some sort of an evil person and, possibly, even an enemy. Throughout the process, the witness himself remained reasonably calm and stuck to his testimony and area of expertise.

As I watched, I began to think that the witness, even though he was appearing publicly before Congress, did not have to accept such a behaviour. He had come to present his understanding of a certain situation and had the right to be addressed in a civil manner.

I imagined a response he could have given:

“Congressman, I would like you to consider the fact that I am a human being just as you are. We both breathe the same air, view the world with a pair of eyes, live on the same planet, and are members of the same family of humanity. As such, I believe I am entitled to the same dignity and courtesy that I will accord to you. “You have addressed me in an intimidating and hostile manner and have continually tried to put words in my mouth. People will hear the words you are attributing to me, and even though they are not mine, by mere juxtaposition, they will conclude that these represent my views. This is definitely not the case. In addition, what you have attributed to me is the kind of thing that has caused people to send death threats to me and my family. Your inferring that these are my ideas will exacerbate this situation. Is it your wish that members of my family or I be harassed or even killed?”

“I have come here to testify on matters that fall within my area of expertise—nothing more and nothing less. I am a servant of the people; my only desire is that the people of this country should be healthy and safe. I serve with this as my goal. I have no other agenda.

“I am happy to answer your questions, but if you cannot address me in a civil manner with the same dignity with which I will speak to you as a fellow human being, then please pass your queries on to someone else who can speak to me in this way. I will be happy to respond to your questions as asked by your proxy. “Thank you.”

I know my idea that the witness should have responded in this way is optimistic, even naive. But at the same time, I believe that this is worth saying. If just one person reads this article and thinks it is worthy of consideration, then that is a good thing. Public discourse—and indeed all of our interactions with one another—should be based on a concept I call ‘life-supporting.’ No one can deny that we are living, conscious beings. We see things through our eyes, hear through our ears, smell fragrances through our nose, taste food and drink using our tongue, and touch objects with our hands. The life in each of us ought to be considered first and foremost, and given dignity.

The philosophy of Non-Violence

In Indian philosophy, an important aspect of *yoga* as elucidated in Patanjali’s *Sutras* is *ahimsa*, non-violence (II:30, 35). Non-violence was a cornerstone of Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy, and he demonstrated its power by the eventual success of his freedom movement. There are three means of committing violence: *manasa* (by thought), *vacha* (by word), and *karmana* (by action). The questioner in the above scenario was certainly committing violence upon the

witness by his words and, most likely, by his thoughts. These can be equally as harmful as violence by action.

In India, people greet—and also take leave of—one another with the word ‘*Namaste*’ while folding their hands together. *Namaste* has also gained popularity in other countries. This greeting has the traditional meaning of ‘I honour you,’ which is most respectful. Or, more expansively, it means ‘the Divine in me honours the Divine in you.’ Once again, this gesture points to something higher that is common to all. I would like to take this a step further and break the word into ‘na’ meaning ‘not,’ ‘ma’ meaning ‘me,’ and ‘te’ meaning ‘you.’ (Admittedly, I have used a little poetic license here.) So *namaste* would mean ‘not me or you,’ and pointing the folded hands upwards symbolically indicates the highest, infinite essence which is the pure consciousness within each of us. This consciousness is the element that deserves respect and honour.

The example cited at the beginning of this article is just a small incident. I am talking more generally about civility and respect in all human interactions. Examples of incivility abound: road rage, improper behaviour at sporting events, racism, berating a subordinate or a co-worker, texting during a presentation, use of demeaning language, and incidents on airplanes. This list is just the tip of the iceberg.

The need for civility

But why should we concern ourselves at all with incivility? Simply put, when we interact in a civil or respectful manner, we create feelings of ease and a connection with the other person, through which they know that we value their presence as a fellow human being. It makes the person feel their own intrinsic greatness, which is the essence of their existence. George Washington, the first president of the United

States, wrote “Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.” (Nicole Billante and Peter Saunders, 2002, “Why Civility Matters,” *Policy* vol. 18, no. 3, p. 32, Centre for Independent Studies, Australia.) Evidently, the Congressman cited above was not aware of the sentiments of his nation’s founder.

Civility involves consideration for others and, to my mind, takes priority over the idea of personal freedom. To quote the author Stephen L. Carter, “*The corollary of personal freedom is personal obligation. You get what you give. . . . Once you go into a public place, you have to accept a reasonable level of public protocol.*” (Billante and Saunders, p. 33). You cannot, for instance, shout “fire” in a crowded theatre, even though you may feel that, as an individual, it is your right to do so.

Billante and Saunders (p. 33) define civility as follows:

Civility is behaviour in public which demonstrates respect for others and which entails curtailing one’s own immediate self-interest when appropriate. Defined in this way, civility is clearly a demanding public virtue. To be prepared to sacrifice one’s own self-interest out of respect for people one has never met is a ‘big ask.’

Yes, it is a big ask, but it is made easier when we focus on what truly deserves respect.

We are connected to one another by an inner consciousness, which is the same in everybody. In verse X:22 of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells Arjun “*bhutanam asmi chetana*” (“I am the consciousness which resides in all beings.”) Krishna resides in every one of us as our inner Self. When people sense we are respecting this consciousness in them, they respond in kind.

I don't mean that we should lose our discrimination or awareness of who is before us or what situation we are in. We can still distinguish an enemy from a friend or a good situation from a bad one. As my *guru* would say, "I am never insulted, but I know when someone has insulted me." Acting and interacting with civility means that our starting point is oneness, that intangible quality which unites us all. The life within everyone is one. When we look into the eyes of another person, we see a light shining. That light is the same in every living being.

Admittedly, this inner being is subtle. It cannot be perceived by any of the senses, but it can be known in a tangible and palpable way through meditation.

The all pervasiveness of consciousness

We are aware of our own existence. I would like to reverse Descartes's famous maxim "I think, therefore I am" to "I am, therefore I think." We must exist before we can think. This existence is the life in each of us, which is to be supported and nurtured.

It has been my personal finding that the consciousness in all beings is the same. Such an understanding should be our first consideration in how we relate to one another.

Civility is not just a matter of tone or style. It is of crucial importance. Dealing with others in a respectful manner can remove some of the rancour that plagues humanity, not just in government but also in every area of life. Let's focus on what brings us together rather than on what divides us.

The following well-known Sanskrit verse summarises the respect and dignity that, in my opinion, should be accorded to all human beings and indeed every living creature:

*Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha
Sarve santu niraamayaha
Sarve bhadraani pashyantu
Maa kaschit duhkh bhaag bhavet*

The following is my loose interpretation of the meaning:

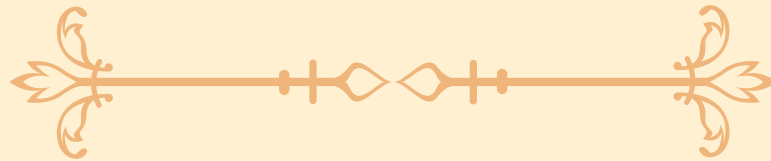
May all on Earth be blessed

May all remain healthy

May all see goodness and auspiciousness in every being

May all be free from suffering

Glen Kezwer is a long-time meditator and teacher of meditation, its philosophy, and practice. He is the author of *Meditation, Oneness and Physics* and *The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita*. He holds a PhD in physics. He can be reached at gkezwer@gmx.net.



We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.
Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net