

Civility: Fulfilling the Idea of America?

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I was asked to give a talk in July to Seattle's major Rotary Club that would frame the whole year which was intended to focus on civic engagement and civil discourse. I dug deeply, read widely, thought fully, and gave a talk entitled "Civility: Reclaiming the Idea of America". No talk I have given gave rise to as much appreciation and comment. I thought, "That talk would be good for The Diet." I have continued to read and to think about that subject and have revised or updated the talk and so present it to you as "Civility 2.0". I am less convinced it is about "reclaiming" the idea of America, and is the more challenging need—almost for the first time and in a very new context of our country—about at last fulfilling the idea of America. So I retitle it "Civility: Fulfilling the Idea of America?", which ends with a question mark. If at times this sounds like a call to conversion, remember that I am a priest.

My subject is America. Let me start by saying to you what I often say to others: "Every once in a while it is good to leave Seattle and visit America!" You don't have to go far: Spokane, Walla Walla, Yakima, The Tri-Cities, Ellensburg will do. Seattle is to America something like what the moon is to the Earth. Perhaps "Seattleite" is a misspelling of "Satellite". We orbit America.

So what is America? I love the statement of a political scientist of the last century (Carl Friedrich): "To be an American is an ideal, while to be a Frenchman is a fact." Our country is constituted not because we live in the same space or have a common ancestry among us; rather, it is constituted by an ideal, an idea. We are who we are as Americans because we are striving, struggling, fighting, disagreeing with one another, in pursuit of an idea. The realization of that idea has not been settled; our history is the story of that idea, as much its failure of attainment as its fulfillment. This makes us unique as a nation; it is our glory, our strength, but it also makes us precarious as a nation because if it binds us together, that idea must be known and retold and renewed, and what has been left out of the idea must become part of it. We are a curious people in our history in that while other countries are "nation states", we are a "state nation" (Lepore, This America). Others had a common language, ancestry, and place and only then became a state. We had no common language, had no place but came here, formed a state or a federation of states, and then only gradually and over fifty years after our Declaration of Independence began to seek a national identity, to become a nation.

Part of my thesis today is that we have a fractured identity as a nation and hence our hostility and incivility, because the very idea of America is fractured, not commonly held, or at least badly needs to be updated, especially by incorporating those whom the idea claims to include in the story of America but who have not been included.

We are constituted less by the idea which the whole Constitution with all its provisions and structures of government represents and more by just its first three words, "We, the people..." The idea of America is that we are a people who belong to one another, depend on one another, know one another, pull for one another, even love one another. The idea of America is a

relationship among us, a kinship, a connected people agreeing on our equality as persons and citizens, agreeing to equally share in the governing of ourselves, and to live under the laws we agree upon, but able to disagree about all of the issues within these fundamental agreements. The idea of America is, “We, the people...” The idea is fractured when some of the people have been, or are still, left out of this “We”: for instance, slaves, blacks, women, gays, indigenous peoples, new immigrants especially more swarthy or of color, anyone considered other than ourselves, those on the right, those on the left, the rural, the urban. Does this very simple but powerful idea which constitutes America hold today, the idea simply that America is a “We”, not an “us and them”? This is my subject.

Where did you and I get our idea of America, the one that needs to be fulfilled today, the one that calls for civil discourse, civility in conversation, inclusive citizenship? We got it less from civics texts and more from movies, books, songs, and symbols. I got it as a boy of ten on a rainy Saturday morning in Juneau in the Territory of Alaska, when listless, I asked my Dad if he had a book in his den which I might enjoy reading. When he came back from the den, he handed me Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. I went upstairs, put my pajamas back on, got in bed, started reading, and have never stopped reading. Soon I was on the Mississippi with Tom, Becky, Huck, in America. There for me was the beginning of the idea of America. I followed it up with The Red Badge of Courage, The Last of the Mohicans, My Friend Flicka, Paul Bunyan, and anything about Abe Lincoln, and later on The Grapes of Wrath, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and much later Moby Dick and Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, and so forth. Here was the idea of America taking shape in me and this was how it was formed through reading. How did the idea of America, the “We, the people...” which holds us together, what we struggle and fight for, and fight with one another about, how did this idea form in you? Where did your idea of America come from, your felt idea?

The idea of America is a great one, an attractive one, an inspiring one, an idea that gives us our glue as a people, our belonging to one another. Was the history we imbibed or studied the true history of “We, the people...”? Does the idea of America formed in us, and like our DNA as Americans, still work? Not very well, because it left out blacks, women as equal, persons of other gender identities and expressions, native peoples with their own legitimate nations, certain immigrant groups, and any we still consider not “real Americans”.

I recently read a book by Joseph Esposito called Dinner in Camelot about that famous dinner hosted by President John F. Kennedy and Jackie at the White House when the president made the remark:

“I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

What struck me most about that dinner and another dinner, both of them in the spring of 1962, was who were the literary people invited, how many of them I read and are still known and read, and were, in effect, the tellers of the idea and the story of America:

James Baldwin
 Pearl S. Buck

John Dos Passos
 Robert Frost
 Katherine Anne Porter
 William Styron
 Lionel Trilling
 Ralph Ellison
 E. E. Cummings
 John Hersey
 Archibald MacLeish
 Reinhold Niebuhr
 J. D. Slinger
 Carl Sandberg
 Upton Sinclair
 John Steinbeck
 Thornton Wilder
 W. H. Auden
 Arthur Miller
 Tennessee Williams
 Truman Capote
 Robert Penn Warren
 Saul Bellow
 Eudora Welty
 Lillian Hellman
 Samuel Eliot Morrison
 William Faulkner

What these names ask me is, first, was there enough of a unified story and idea of America in 1962 that it could be told by so few persons all of whom we read and all of whom we remember—in effect, that we had a unified circle of storytellers around the American campfire; second, was it the full and true story and idea of America that they told; and three, is it now impossible in 2019 to have such a circle around the American campfire or are there many campfires so that we don't all tell or hear the same story?

Here is where the fracture of the idea of America occurs and the fracture of our national identity, and hence our hostility and incivility. The issue of America is, fundamentally, do we belong to one another, all of us? The idea of “We, the people” is still there and we are fighting over who belongs, but we are in a period of intense pressure, friction, heat because of the challenge to include all the people for the first time in “We, the people”. Our history is a glorious one and a shameful one. We need to know our true history and write its continuation with an updated story of the new people we now are, but how can we?

Benjamin Franklin loved to say that a lie stands on one foot, but truth stands upon two. Our history as most of us learned and loved it stood on one foot and was essentially a myth, even a lie. We have the chance, if we will take it, to stand on truth if we will stand on the two feet of our true history and the truth of who all of us are today who belong to one another.

I like to think of this as going to what I consider the most sacred place in America. For me that is the walk down the Mall from the Capitol in Washington, DC, past the National Gallery, the Archives, Smithsonian, Washington Monument, the war memorials, and up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to look up at Abe seated so peacefully gazing out over America. This is the most sacred place in America because here is its idea in Abe himself, flanked by his Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural, which express that idea that America is a nation dedicated to the proposition of the oneness and equality of all the people seeking “a more perfect union”. No place is as much the heart, the altar, of America as “We, the people...”, one people, the idea and the ideal. There I can pray for America. But it is not complete, for now I must turn and step back out of the sanctuary and look for and find the circle marked in the marble floor of the platform where Martin Luther King stood. He, too, like Abe, looked out on America and an immense crowd around a reflecting pool, on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, and proclaimed a dream of the fulfilment of the idea of America as one people belonging to one another with the full inclusion in the “We” of African-Americans who were not yet in truth emancipated. His dream was the evoking of a true future history of the idea of America, not just for blacks, but for all oppressed, excluded, unfree, not included or invited or belonging by right. Perhaps what really makes this the most sacred place in America is not only Abe seated with arms resting on his chair, or Martin Luther King sweating in the sun, but the third part of this scene, the people themselves around that reflecting pool, reflecting the hopes and the commitment to belong to one another as equal, free, and together governing the nation.

There is a way in which one good part of the idea and the story of America obscures another harder part of the idea and story. An example of this is the Statue of Liberty. It too is a sacred place of our common story. It has become the symbol of the welcoming of immigrants to America, a proud, and good, and threatened part of our idea as a nation of people who welcome and belong to one another. But that was not the original idea of the Statue of Liberty. It only became that later on while obscuring the first harder part of the story. The French inspirer of the gift to America was Édouard René de Laboulaye who, in 1865, founded the French Anti-Slavery Society. The statue was a tribute to the Emancipation Proclamation, the abolishment of slavery in America and everywhere. On the tablet she holds is the date July 4, 1776, and lying at her feet is a broken shackle and chain as she walks forward fulfilling the emancipation. It is not accident or coincidence that the original challenging meaning was obscured by another more pride-giving one. W. E. B. DuBois wrote that, sailing back from Europe, he could not feel the same sense of hope he knew immigrants, seeing Lady Liberty, felt because of the bitter irony of America’s professed identity as a just and free society for all people regardless of race. Has the hardest part of the idea and story of America ever been fulfilled?

What is the role of civility in fulfilling this idea? Civility can be seen as a matter of etiquette, or good manners, or politeness. These are important. George Washington wrote down 100 rules of civility but they were a school exercise based—God bless them—on the 100 rules of civility composed by Jesuits in France. Those Jesuits show up everywhere! All 100 are essentially about good manners. James Madison got more to the deeper importance of civility in his own five rules of civility, such as focus on the idea of the person rather than on the person, and push the state to the highest version of itself. I like the definition of civility as “claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process” (Spath & Dahke). I would propose more simply that civility be defined as “the conversation of citizens”. That is what is needed, what we have a responsibility to one another for because of our

belonging to one another. We sometimes hear the phrase “speaking truth to power”; civility is “speaking truth to one another” because we care for one another.

Civility does not mean agreement. Rather, civility as equal citizens means agreeing on how we deal with disagreements rather than agreeing about issues. The example of both Al Gore and George W. Bush, strongly disagreeing with one another about the decision of the Supreme Court on the winner of their contested election, is telltale. Gore said, “Now it has ended resolved, as it must be resolved, through the honored institutions of our democracy.” Bush was just as gracious and principled in replying, “Americans share hopes and goals and values far more important than any political disagreements. Republicans want the best for the nation. And so do Democrats. Our votes may differ, but not our hopes.” That is true civility, the conversation of citizens who disagree on issues, but agree on how their disagreements are resolved.

There is a challenge to civility among us which is caused fundamentally by not wanting or even being able to know one another. A University of Michigan study showed, for instance, that college students today score 40% lower than those in the 1970s in their ability to understand what another person is feeling and that the biggest drop has occurred in the years since 2000. (Brooks, Road p.284) This is a drop in empathy, being able to enter into the experience and feelings of another in order to appreciate how they see the world, in our case, the nation. I am sure it applies to more than college students. What we need as citizens is conversation, not unbudging debate between us when we are together, or denigration of one another when we are apart. These attitudes are so deeply grooved in our ideology that we cannot listen to and appreciate the experience of others. Civility is not politeness; it is the empathetic conversation of citizens who care for one another and want to know one another’s experience, with no one being left out of the conversation. Our nation has been shaped by its citizens fighting with one another but it must be a disagreeing and a fighting within belonging to one another as “We, the people...” Jill Lepore, the author of the best and most recent true and full history of the United States, says it well in her little book This America: The Case for the Nation.

“Americans are bound by our past, but even more powerfully, we are bound to one another... This America is a community of belonging and commitment, held together by the strength of our ideas and by the force of our disagreements... The nation, as ever, *is* the fight.”

Civility is this agreement and disagreement of citizens in conversation, speaking two-footed truth to one another, even fighting, while agreeing on how disagreements are dealt with, resolved in our democracy. A false civility is one that appeals to propriety in order to veil or suppress listening to the voices of others with empathy.

Did you read as I did that a recent poll of citizens in our state and Oregon showed that 40% said it is not important for them to make new friends, and that 49% said they don’t even want to talk briefly or to interact with people they don’t know? No civics lesson or course on checks and balances will change this. It is an issue of belonging, care, empathy, of who belongs in the “We” of America. It calls for true listening. A good example of this is what Fred Pestello, president of St. Louis University, said about engaging in the disruptions on his campus after Ferguson:

“At the outset, we simply talked and listened to one another. We worked to find areas of understanding and agreement—and not dwell on our differences. Throughout those discussions, we in positions of leadership strove to speak using the poetry of compassion, respect, and dignity, rather than the prose of fear, power and threats.”

That’s civility; that’s speaking truth to one another and listening to one another’s truth. It is the kind of civility of citizens in conversation that alone has the chance of fulfilling the idea of America itself and holding the nation together. We need this civility more than any nation because America is not a fact; it is an idea which alone binds it together as a nation.

I wonder how America today can live the idea which is meant to hold it together of “We the people” who belong to, pull for, and care for one another. If America has never fulfilled this idea for all of its people—which is undeniable—how can it do so in an increasingly multi-racial, multi-culture, multi-gender, multi-identity, multi-economic people? Is the primary cause of the tension, the hostility, the incivility, the segregation, and even hatred of our day that those who have been suppressed in the “We” of the people, have come to the fore, stand in the light, demand inclusion and full respect and liberty as American citizen? I think we have to admit that in practice we have required that the inclusion of diverse groups of people in America in the past has been the requirement that they be included into what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls “Majoritarian America”. That can no longer be the case. “Majoritarian Americans” need to be converted out of being the majority, out of what in practice today it means to be “White”. There is that word “conversion”. Is there anything less that will work: conversion which will allow civility as the conversation of citizens which can give birth to the new story of at last fulfilling the idea of America?

The first expression of the idea of America came very early indeed. In 1630, in Salem Harbor, before landing in America, John Winthrop, the first Governor of The Massachusetts Bay Colony, said to his fellow Puritans still aboard ship: (Reich, Common Good p.41)

“We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes... our community as members of the same body.”

There’s the germ of the idea of America before we were a nation. It is still alive and being fought for today. It is worth being fought for, being fulfilled, being told by all of us of this nation in the civility which is the conversation of citizens we this time want with and owe to one another.

I end where I begin each day, with poetry. This one is called “On Freedom’s Ground” by Richard Wilbur. It says something of the cost of the idea of America, of betraying it, of our confession of wrong-doing, and of our now learning how we might, at last, fulfill the idea of America. Richard Wilbur:

Mourn for the dead who died for this country,
Whose minds went dark at the edge of a field,
In the muck of a trench, on the beachhead sand,
In a blast amidships, a burst in the air.

Grieve for the ways in which we betrayed them,
How we robbed their graves of a reason to die:
The tribes pushed west, and the treaties broken,
The image of God on the auction block,
The immigrant scorned, and the striker beaten,
The vote denied to liberty's daughters.
From all that has shamed us, what can we salvage?
Be proud at least that we know we were wrong,
That we need not lie, that our books are open.

Praise to the land for our power to change it,
To confess our misdoings, to mend what we can,
To learn what we mean and to make it the law,
To become what we said we were going to be.