

Civility: Reclaiming the Idea of America

*- Rotary #4
- July 10, 2019
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

I have been asked in this inaugural talk of this new year of Rotary #4, under the leadership of Kim Moore, to introduce us into an emphasis this coming year on civic engagement and civil discourse. In a year in which the wind-up to the presidential election is already underway, and our local council races are heating up, this subject of civil discourse is especially pertinent. I have decided to frame the year with a talk whose title is “Civility: Reclaiming the Idea of America”. Perhaps for no talk I have given have I so enjoyed and found enriching and enlightening the preparation through width and depth of reading, conversation, and thought. It has been very helpful for me—so I thank Kim for the invitation—and I hope it will be helpful for us all not just for today but for the whole year together as Rotarians.

My subject is America. Let me start by saying to you what I often say to others; that is, “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 famous 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 and agreeing to equally share in the governing of ourselves, 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. 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”?

Where did you and I get our idea of America, the one that needs to be reclaimed 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, was soon on the Mississippi with Tom, Becky, Huck and have never stopped reading. 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 so forth. Here was the idea of America taking shape in me and this was how it was formed through reading. Students today—and maybe you—get the idea more from movies than from books. 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 gave us the glue of our 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, persons excluded such as Chinese (when nine out of 10 who built the transcontinental railroad were Chinese), and any we still consider not “real Americans”.

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 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.

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. 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 in addition 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.

If this is the idea of America, then what is the role of civility in reclaiming 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. 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. Civility does not mean we don't fight. Married people fight. 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. It is because we believe that the idea of America is worth it, that the nation is the fight itself, not free of the fight. A false civility is one that appeals to propriety in order to veil or suppress listening to the voices of others with empathy—i.e., seeking to feel and to understand from the side of another rather than to put another in their place.

As some have noted, we have models of civility in persons who have died recently: John McCain, George H. W. Bush, Paul Allen, Charles Krauthammer, Billy Graham. (Ryan Lambert, PSBJ, Dec. 21 2018, p.32). I learned of civility from a great public servant and model of civility, Dan Evans, who said things have always been partisan because there are two parties, but the difference is that in his day they expressed differences over issues, whereas now it's over persons and personalities.

Did you read as I did that a recent poll 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.

Maybe there is a reason why the French Jesuits wrote up 100 rules of civility (which George Washington dutifully copied in his school note book) because a fundamental rule of Jesuits—though we too fail—is always to put the best interpretation on the statement of another person, giving them multiple opportunities to explain it, until after presupposing their good will, we see that the statement cannot be defended. A good example of this is what Fred Pestello, president of St. Louis University, said about engaging in the disruptions on his campus after Fergusson:

“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 reclaiming the idea of America itself and holding the nation together. We need this civility because America is not a fact; it is an idea which alone binds it together as a nation.

What I have said so far about the idea of America and how civility can reclaim it relates closely to our own Rotarian “Four-Way Test”. “Is it the truth?” asks is the idea of America that we belong to one another our truth and that we need to speak truth to one another? “Is it fair to all concerned?!” asks who has been left out of the history of “We, the people...” and who have we not included today in our common care. “Will it build goodwill and better friendships?” gives us hope that the realization of the idea of America will restore good will in the land and bring the enrichment of having friendships with those from whom we are currently separated. And “Will it be beneficial to all concerned?” is itself almost a perfect statement of the idea of America reclaimed by truth-telling conversation of its citizens. Nothing could be a better fostering of our 4-way test and nothing is more pertinent for it than our proposed year of focus on civic engagement and civil discourse. May the year be for us a series of conversations as citizens who speak and relate with civility because we belong to one another as Americans. A very good way to enter into that conversation would be for all of us to participate actively in the two-hour forum in Town Hall on August 21 with Jeff Robinson who will speak on “Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America”. If I were able to add one more test to our four-way test of engaging our subject of the year, making it a five-way test, it would be “Is it done with humility?” Civility requires humility.

I place before you this challenge of reclaiming the idea of America through civility as what can keep us moving ahead together as a nation of citizens. I am reminded in this regard of what I am told that when an elephant roams from left to right, swaying all over the place, does not keep on track, if you place an iron ball in its trunk, it will no longer veer but will walk straight ahead. I am proposing that the si and truest idea of America of “We, the people...”, one people belonging to one another, is the iron ball which can move us straight ahead where we so clearly need to go together.

I end with perhaps the very first expression of the idea of America. 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 reclaimed, being retold by all of us of this nation in the civility which is the conversation of citizens we owe one another.