The Importance of Civility in Modern Society

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the first known use of the word *civility* was recorded to be in 1533, finally giving a label to the diverse moral codes that are now regarded to as "civilized behavior." The concept of behaving respectfully towards one's peers is the foundation of human cooperation and the birth of modern society. This is the reason incivility remains a looming threat to the human condition; once you have declared your enemy uncivilized, they are no longer capable of being treated equally, as your peer. Such destructive potential is the power that gives birth to magnificent revolutions, as well as petty wars. The civil state is what that remains of the United States of America's representative democracy today. The civil state is an existence built upon pillars of fear, empty trust, and invisible hope, without any real promise that it can, or will, protect the very citizens granting them their prestige. The existence of these governments contradicts the idea that people can treat each other with civility without being commanded to, giving the governments ample reason to fear a savage uprising against authority in the name of the people. "Civility" is the fabric that holds together our individual societies, our hope as the human race, for better or for worse.

One of the most important benefits in the unwritten rules of civility lies in the network of trust that it can build across a community. When a higher level of respect is both shown and expected out of a social group, via its citizens setting a standard of behavior, it encourages a sense of loyalty and belonging among its participants. Alternatively, when an authority figure attempts to intrude into such delicate human interactions, the spirit behind true civility is lost; it's no longer a free choice made by civilians, therefore the integrity behind that individual's respect is lost. Fortunately or unfortunately, the reality is that no law can force any individual to feel

kinsmanship with their fellow man. Brotherhood is a deep bond, one that none but the individual can decide for themselves, and the intimate forging of these connections on a day-to-day basis over the course of years and generations has allowed our societies to flourish. The lack of such respect has been the downfall of countless exquisite empires, notably the example set by the Roman Empire. Roman poet Juvenal metaphorically describes the squalor of everyday life in the beginning Roman Empire in the poem *On the City of Rome* (Gallwey, *Reading About the World*), later establishing the idea that the Romans, the prime example of the time's simplistic masses, are interested solely in *"panem et circenses"* – bread and circuses. Juvenal argues that these desires drove them to care less and less for the squalor that they were subjected to by the negligence of their rulers, because their base needs – entertainment and nutrition – were supplied. The downfall of the Roman Empire parallels Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* in a multitude of ways: both use the method of hyper-indulging civilians until the overwhelming majority are too content with their bread and circuses to fight authoritative regime. The power of our 21ˢᵗ century representative democracy lies within the safety of its mythos as a force of control – we, just as the Roman civilians, and the caste system of *Brave New World*, are too content with our own soma and circuses to truly be bothered.

Like the infamous gladiatorial battles of the late Roman Empire, the United State's consumer habits have begun to reflect the darker interests of the general population, with prime-time television running amok with blood, guts and sex, and the ratings for these shows displaying our affinity for such vulgar entertainment. Our technologies have expanded to allow hyper-realistic scenarios to play out before our eyes, with only the creator's imagination as a limitation. A post-apocalyptic reality drama about zombies with obscene violence and gore gained the attention of 12.4 million viewers (AMC's *The Walking Dead*), and a series about a

loving father becoming a cold, menacing methamphetamine dealer (AMC's *Breaking Bad*) reached 10.3 million people on its finale. (Carter, *New York Times*) Pandering to the public's addiction to media about everyday civilians retract back into a carnal, savage version of their former selves, has become so prevalent in our society today that it appears to have become the status quo of how to receive network funding in the 21st century (*Law and Order*, *Dexter*, and *NCIS*, *Bones*, etc.).

What caused this sudden shift in the public's desire for storytelling revolving around such negative themes, as opposed to the generally positive attitudes shared in earlier generations? Possibly, it's because we've lost our desire to watch the heroic figures we loved so much in the past, because we are so comfortable in our surroundings that we don't need an escape to a better, fairer world that the movies of yesteryear provided. Our desires have morphed from escaping to a pleasant reality, and mutated to releasing the violent desires we stifle on a day-to-day basis in order to competently co-exist with our peers in the etiquette-infused world around us. The pressure felt by suppressing these urges motivated us to create globs of pixels to maim and torture that provide the illusion of suffering. Digital voyeurism in the form of watching a fictional being writhe in agony has become normal, the act of vicariously living out the taboo with no real-world consequences transforming from a sign of psychopathy, into a typical phenomenon experienced by well-adjusted people. No matter how normal such behavior has become in our society, studies have shown that the viewing of violent material causes mental stimulation in the brain similar to actually behaving in the malicious ways portrayed on-screen, directly influencing the behavior exerted in the multiple examples of children becoming more violent when exposed to violent images, and this stimulation can be as hard to break as any other behavioral addiction. (Murray, *Media Psychology*),

It has also been scientifically tested and proven that those who experience sustained exposure to violent media are less inclined to assist someone they know is injured or otherwise in need. (Bushman, *Psychological Science*) These studies inadvertently proved what every concerned mother had known for the past two decades: violent games and movies can actually influence you to behave poorly in the real world. With the entire Western culture hell-bent on making the "next big thing" more bloody and gory than the last, it's little wonder why the Western population is becoming more individualistic and less empathetic as a whole. Civil, interdependent traits are necessary for a society, not to mention its government, to survive. Those who control the power behind the offices that keep our society running don't want a group of slovenly, lethargic civilians in the position to bring down their entire operation with a collective shrug of their shoulders.

Corporations have done by way of suggestion what authority has yearned to do by law for centuries: directly impact the way their citizenry views itself and its governance. This conflict for those in authoritative positions has led, historically, to "behavioral codes" being forcibly (and ineffectively) integrated within the framework of a nation's laws, such as the religiously contextual anti-abortion and marriage laws in the United States. As recent times have highlighted, this kind of legal tightrope is nigh but impossible to walk, if for no other reason, because of the very nature of civil behavior versus that of legally binding ethical codes. When an ethically-charged law is created, it's accepted that it is both justified and fair, and will have a specific desired impact on the population it intends to affect while interfering with the opposing side's personal comfort as little as possible; for example, the anti-segregation laws were technically interfering with personal expression, but these laws interfered with the official racial labeling of public institutions, rather than attempting to dictate an individual's feelings towards

the subject. However, unlike general codes of conduct, when concerning civil behavior among individuals on a personal level, there are no true "umbrella rules" concerning human interaction due to the inherent complexities behind every relationship. When behavioral regulations are in place, the tensions from these laws create barriers in relationships. By altering the unspoken cultural norms into legal requirements, the undesired effects may include the undermining of the intended meaning behind these social exchanges, thereby completely negating their cultural importance and impact. The very existence of civility is to show respect towards a fellow man, and there is no true way to cheat or jumpstart this phenomenon, other than the individual in question truly deserving that respect.

This is a phenomenal time in the US's history, when the United States populous as a whole has decided that the values of rebellion, individuality, and betterment of the self, reigns supreme over the concern for the well being of society. The collective responsibility for your fellow citizens that the government and media pushed so passionately for in the tattered remains of morale in a country following both World Wars, has now given way to a philosophy of indulgence in an era of debt-supplied gratification. Advertising campaigns and the general overhyping of useless luxury products is perpetuated by corporations and lobbyists, drastically re-shaping the way Americans think about what they chose to consume, by virtue of their shiny new business model of individualism versus the old model of using propaganda to exemplify collective responsibility for your kinsmen. In the same way, by commercializing rebellion and individualism through corporate propagation, the act of insurgency has become almost "main-stream," to the point where a truly impactful total cultural revolution with this generation of apathetic, acquiescent citizens, appears all but impossible.

If you were to take a moment to listen to any talk radio station or 24 news television broadcast, there are hundreds of professionals and self-proclaimed experts who can drop a hat list thousands of reasons to despair over the direction our country is going, and how quickly we're spiraling into a debt-riddled, decentralized nation of lazy slobs, before that hat hits the ground. Nonetheless, there are at least an equal number of reasons to rejoice over the direction of our nation; if for nothing else, the growing discontentment, and desire to change things for the better, exists in every facet of the US population. No matter what disputes individuals may have over the specific way to fix our problems, no matter who we chose to blame for everything that's wrong with our culture, our country, our entire world, there is one thing that can be agreed upon: there is absolutely a problem.

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