

Civility Can Restore Our Institutions

By Orrin G. Hatch | Monday, September 9, 2020

Long ago, on the eve of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln made a heartfelt plea to the American people: Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory ... will yet swell ... when again touched ... by the better angels of our nature.

In a nation as divided as ours, how can we answer Lincoln's call? How can we bridle our political passions and heed the better angels of our nature?

We can start by practicing civility.

Without civility, there is no civilization. It is the indispensable public virtue — the protective wall between order and chaos. But that wall has weakened in recent times.

Consider the steady disintegration of our political discourse. We live in a media environment that favors anger over reason and feeling over fact. The loudest voices, not the wisest ones, now dictate the terms of public debate. For evidence, simply turn on the TV — but be sure to turn down the volume.

The media deserves some culpability in creating this environment by adopting outrage as a business model. But we are complicit when we join the fracas, especially when we use language to unnecessarily belittle the other side. Whether it's online or in person, all of us should be more responsible with our speech. Our better angels call on us to persuade through gentle reason. They call on us to inspire and unite rather than to provoke and incite. In short, they call on us to embrace civility.

I issued this call for civility during my farewell address on the Senate floor last December. There, I bemoaned the gradual loss of comity and respect among colleagues that I observed over my 42 years of public service. In the last decade alone, the culture of the Senate has shifted fundamentally — and not for the better. I know because I watched this transformation take place before my very eyes.

There used to be a level of congeniality and kinship among senators that was hard to find anywhere else. In my early years in office, it wasn't unusual for Republicans and Democrats to count each other among their very best friends. In fact, it was encouraged. There was a general understanding back then that you could spar on the Senate floor and then break bread together later that evening. Leaders fostered cross-party friendships in hopes of kindling compromise on difficult-to-pass legislation – and it worked almost every time. From this unique workplace culture was born my unlikely friendship with Teddy Kennedy.

As a legislative duo, Teddy and I were often referred to as “The Odd Couple,” and indeed, we could not have been more different. He was a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat; I was a resolute Republican. But in time, we came to embody the ethos of goodwill and camaraderie that defined the old Senate. And by choosing friendship over party loyalty, we were able to pass some of the most significant bipartisan achievements of modern times.

Now, years after Teddy's passing, it's worth asking: Could a relationship like ours even exist in today's Senate? Could two people with polar-opposite beliefs from vastly different walks of life come together as often as Teddy and I did for the good of the country? Or are we too busy vilifying each other to even consider friendship with the other side?

I worry that the toxicity of today's political environment precludes an odd couple relationship like Hatch-Kennedy from ever taking root. And I worry what this might mean for the future of our country. That's why I have devoted my post-Senate service to restoring civility to its proper place in our society – to cultivating the pluralistic spirit and bipartisan solutions that should be at the heart of American democracy.

To that end, I am pleased to host Justice Neil Gorsuch for a special conversation on civility at Brigham Young University on Sept. 20. In true odd couple fashion, Justice Gorsuch (a Trump appointee) will be sitting down with his longtime friend Judge Carolyn B. McHugh (an Obama appointee) to discuss the important role civility can play in revitalizing our institutions. The two of them represent the ideal we should strive for in their ability to stand on principle but also disagree with grace and dignity.

My hope is that the odd couples of this world can inspire all of us to look beyond partisan differences to find common ground. We can begin by choosing compassion before enmity and patience before impulse. May we all work together toward this noble goal. Today, and every day, may we strive to heed to the better angels of our nature by embracing civility.

Orrin G. Hatch served in the U.S. Senate for 42 years and is chairman emeritus of the Orrin G. Hatch Foundation.