

Interfaith Voices GT Column: Civility Matters

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During a visit to Mt. Vernon, I learned of the respect that George Washington had for a code of civility. As a teenager, he copied in beautiful penmanship the 110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation, based on a set of guidelines composed by French Jesuits in 1595. The 4th rule offered practical advice:

In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

The 58th rule dealt more with interpersonal relations:

Let your Conversation be without Malice or Envy, for 'is a Sign of a Tractable and Commendable Nature: And in all Causes of Passion admit Reason to Govern.

Though drumming with ones fingers may not make or break a society, these rules caused me to reflect on civility today. Did Washington's interest in civil discourse result in a personal behavior that Thomas Jefferson later described in an 1814 letter as, "...on the whole, his character was, in its mass perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent; and it may truly be said that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great."

Two centuries have passed since Jefferson penned that description of Washington. In many ways our citizenry is stronger, more experienced, and educated in attitudes and world perspectives. But have we increased or decreased in our civility toward one another? Do we honor the time tested formula given to us by the Savior Jesus Christ in Matthew 22: 36-39, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Gordon B. Hinckley, a modern-day prophet and fifteenth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, lived from 1910-2008. His life spanned nearly a century of amazing change, but he pondered the demise of civility in these remarks,

"Civility is the root of the word *civilization*. It carries with it the essence of courtesy, politeness, and consideration of others. How very much of it we have lost in our contemporary society! All of the education and accomplishments in the world will not count for much unless they are accompanied by marks of gentility, of respect for others, of going the extra mile, of serving as a Good Samaritan, of being men and women who look beyond our own selfish interests to the good of others."

A year from now we will be entering into the final stretch of a presidential election. Elections don't tend to represent hallmarks of civility, but we can still exercise a respect for others in our personal conversations, writings and postings about candidates and issues even if we disagree. I grew up in a home with a father who was a registered Democrat and a mother who was a registered Republican. They often commented that they cancelled out each other's vote on the ballot. But they set an example of two individuals with a deep love and admiration for one another, who were still able to differ respectfully on certain political issues.

George Washington Carver, wrote, "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these." Civility is a positive force for individuals and society today.