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THE PARK RIDGE CENTER

Bulletin

MAY/JUNE 1999



Civil Discourse

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Bulletin

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The Park Ridge Center explores and enhances the interaction of health, faith, and ethics through research, education, and consultation to improve the lives of individuals and communities.

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A Tale of Two Languages

philip j. BOYLE

The stage was set: two embryologists, a hospital chaplain, and protracted conflict in the making over fetal tissue research.

The embryologists, using the language of science, insisted that the research was absolutely essential for medical advances and patient well-being. The chaplain, using language based on revelation, asserted that such research promotes abortion and, therefore, murder. The outcome was predictable: heated exchanges, adversaries talking past each other, bad blood. In other words, a conversation to be missed.

This is a familiar story, sometimes with issues like euthanasia or homosexuality, with a variety of belligerents, and always a plot line that goes nowhere. In confronting these exchanges, some propose practical solutions to avoid the incivility—avoiding derogatory language, respecting the opponent, and the like. But these solutions can cause additional moral problems. Some wonder whether agreeing to civil discourse could signal abandoning deeply held beliefs, and in the process moral integrity. So why even engage in civil discourse with so much to lose?

The necessity for civil discourse in a democracy is fairly evident: where there is no authority in a position to resolve conflict, a civil forum and procedures must be available to resolve differences. While civil discourse is a condition for a democracy, it does not settle why or how persons

with strongly held religious views should be involved in civil discourse. This uncertainty is why the Bulletin takes up this issue. Ample public conversation about civility now blankets the nation— from the halls of Congress to local PTAs. However, for persons interested in the relationships among health, faith, and ethics, it is less clear and less discussed whether or how persons with faith convictions should be involved in civil discourse. If you have a deeply held religious belief, why fraternize with the enemy?

Informing the debate about the place of religion in civil discourse is a tale of two languages. One language is authoritative, informed by revelation and/or ideology, a language of assertion with little toleration and certainly no cooperation. The other language is one where faith seeks reason. This language is malleable, open to transformation, and could be described as a clumsy, overburdened bellhop fumbling to keep up with, and make sense of, modernity—scientific advances in particular. For the first language there is very little room for civil discourse; it is a one-sided conversation of pronouncement. For the second, civil discourse is a risk. It could require that the participants change language and modify their theology—its views of the transcendent and human nature. As most of this issue's contributors describe, involving religion in civil discourse might not change the fundamental moral convictions of a person, but the process has the ability to generate understanding, create heretofore unimagined options and perhaps transform the people involved. ■

Religion in the Public Square

The Voice of Faith Makes Achieving the Common Good More Likely

martin e. MARTY, larry GREENFIELD & david e. GUINN

Today's American "culture wars" tend to be at base and at heart religion wars. If the image of war is a bit too strong, let religious conflict do.

There have been few dead bodies as a result of the current controversies, yet the time has come for efforts to address situations in which words have become the instruments of incivility.

When people of religious faith enter public debate, they draw on their deepest beliefs—and sometimes express themselves with a passion and vehemence that can quickly turn conversation into argument, and argument into rhetorical meltdown. In 1994, believers made their presence felt on all sides in a stunning encounter in Cairo where, at the United Nations-sponsored International Conference on Population and Development, people of conviction shocked each other and a watching world as they clashed over some of the most volatile topics of the day: family planning and the nature of the family; the rights of women; gender and sexuality; and abortion and birth control.

It is hardly possible to take up such subjects in any forum without risking dissension. In a setting where profoundly convinced believers speak up, as in Cairo, what can easily occur is intense conflict and communication breakdown, resulting in deep frustration and a legacy of con-

tinuing misunderstanding and combat.

Ironical, isn't it: most major religions advertise themselves sincerely as agents of reconciliation, advocates of love and shalom. Yet many institutions, professions, and communities do what they can to keep religious voices away from the table, precisely in order to promote the very reconciliation that was supposed to have come with expressions of faith.

Persistent questions

Yet people who ground their commitments in faith have the resources to promote understanding and good will, resources that can be found in their religious texts, traditions, and experiences. Religion can enable believers to combine reasoned advocacy with concern for the voices and convictions of those with whom they disagree. The questions remain: How can believers consistently advance understanding and make progress in dealing with profound issues of the sort that surfaced at Cairo? Should religions and religious people be represented at local, national, or international forums where there are certain to be controversial issues of public import? If, as they all claim, their faith traditions include resources that make it possible for them to speak and act out of conviction while hearing and conversing with those outside their traditions, how do we bring these resources forward? Can there be what we might call "rules of the game" for serious public conversation involving people of faith?

"Religion is a private affair" has come to be a slogan, almost a shibboleth, of

many citizens. They believe that if only matters of faith or viewpoints based on it could be sequestered in the sanctuary or tucked into cubbyholes and closets, all would be well. Let America be a privately religious, publicly secular society, and the situation would improve.

It won't. If for decades some citizens have gone about creating the impression that democracies might make basic decisions without reference to spiritual and religious expressions, they were not reading the signs of those times well. In the civil rights cause, the movements for women's rights and human rights in general, debates over population and development, war and peace, the record shows that religious forces played overt and often constructive roles.

If this record is forgotten, or if a new generation has not learned it, then this must be said: around the world the forces of faith, be they mild or fanatic, benign or murderous, are on the front lines in most conflicts, and the prospects for seeing religion pushed back into the private zone are rather slim. At the turn of the millennium, more people in the world and more citizens of this nation find it valuable, necessary, and even urgent to act upon the premises of faith.

Why? First, while many people in a society that is called secular and pluralistic are able to develop and express their ethical and political views without reference to any kind of transcendent order, many more ground their moral choices and social views in profound views of reality that include God, the sacred and the like. They could not refrain from

doing so even if they were asked.

Second, from time immemorial, many kinds of human groupings have derived from religious bases and displayed religious intentions. Sometimes these groups include nations, at other times parties, causes, caucuses, or coalitions. The rich diversity of American culture has led many of these to find ways to cooperate and creatively coexist. But the people who make them up are not always able simply to “park their religion at the door” when they enter the public arena.

More voices, not fewer

If some participants in public debate suppress their most profound convictions for the sake of peace and quiet, they will simply yield the platform or the floor to the more strident voices that will in such cases be addressing a kind of void. The entry of more voices, rather than fewer, into the public conversation helps assure that the community will be aware of the diversity and, quite possibly, enriched by it.

This is a decisive moment, as the calendar turns from the end of the second millennium C.E. to the beginning of the third. This momentous if admittedly arbitrary transition symbolizes the roiling changes engulfing so many religions and cultures today. Around the globe, people of faith are dealing with urgent questions about the environment, war and peace,

justice, community, economics, and precisely the kinds of issues the Cairo Conference took up. Religionists do so at a time when instruments of destruction—whether wielded by terrorists, tribal warriors or nation-states—are more available and more threatening than ever before. Such tools of violence loom in the background of the earnest efforts to use words to address grave issues, and those tools are too often put to work when such efforts break down.

Civility helps avoid such breakdown in the first place. It is an attempt to find ways to ensure that civil discourse will, in fact, be civil. In this age of media sound bites and talking heads who shout more often than they talk, far too frequently the public square devolves into a verbal battleground from which only losers emerge, bloodied but unable to see that there is another, more helpful and more edifying way to communicate. Civility suggests a way of embodying that new mode of communication, and although these ideas are inspired by and drawn from the some-

times ancient roots of a wide variety of major religious traditions, together they constitute a new form of civil discourse.

That term, “civil discourse,” includes all modes of public communication, from a politician’s televised speech to a letter to the editor, from a United Nations conference to a demonstration featuring non-violent protest. Civility is not a lack of passion; discourse is not only a string of words. Providing the foundation stone of the new public conversation, civility is appropriate to all modes of communication, both constructive and critical. Most important, civil discourse is geared toward action, toward working together to achieve a common good, and toward achieving real-world goals. ■

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Subversive Civility

*Finding Common Ground in the Abortion Debates
Inspires Hope, Healing, and Practical Solutions*

frederica MATHEWES-GREEN

Medical controversies hit close to home; in fact, they drop a cherry bomb right through the mail slot.

Our bodies are our homes: they are where we live. For this reason, discussions relating to medicine can take on a desperate tone.

When one person feels another is asserting the right to meddle with his home, he justifiably feels anxious and even angry. The addition of a faith component makes every detail of the controversy feel even more absolute. Tempers flare, voices proclaim dramatic stands, toes trample other toes.

In the most controversial medical issue of our day, abortion, I have been on both sides. Many years ago I was strongly in favor of it and fought against abortion laws. Later I came to see abortion as a form of violence and began to oppose it. Whatever the legal status of abortion, I feel strongly that the loss of so many unborn lives is a horror. Rather than duke it out in the political arena, I have worked to combat unwanted pregnancy and to support pregnant women with alternatives to abortion.

My feelings on this subject are strong. Why, then, would I want to sit down for a chat with people on the other side? Why

should pro-life and pro-choice partisans have anything to do with each other, when the stakes are so high and our convictions so deep?

I can bear witness from my own life because for six years I have been involved in Common Ground dialogues on abortion. The peacemaking organization based in Washington, DC, "Search for Common Ground," has had much experience facilitating international dialogues between people in conflict, for example Arabs and Israelis, or (during the Cold War) Americans and Russians. In 1993 they began their first domestic initiative, bringing together pro-choice and pro-life advocates for respectful dialogue.

In introducing me to the possibility of civil discussion on a contentious medical issue, Common Ground has brought healing and hope to me and many other men and women. It's not for everyone; certain personality types would be frustrated by the emphasis on process over product and by the slow pace of some meetings. Yet in light of the typically deadlocked, rancorous quality of this debate, I believe the kind of dialogue Common Ground fosters is a sign of hope for combatants in many issues.

Does being civil mean compromising? No. On some issues, compromise is not possible; the alternatives are too stark. Civil discourse on abortion does not mean meticulous negotiation whereby one side gives up partial-birth abortions while the

other side gives up RU-486. The confusion is understandable, because in some contexts the phrase "common ground" does imply compromise, but not here.

In this case, the term means something more like a demilitarized zone, a safe space where conversation and exploration can take place. It can even mean something further: unexpected areas of overlap, places where both sides discover they actually agree. Imagine two overlapping circles of conviction. Each circle is complete and has integrity, but there is a space of overlap where some beliefs coincide—for example, that no one should be forced to have an abortion against her will, or that unwanted pregnancies should be reduced. That space is common ground.

While the Common Ground Network is an organization with a specific focus, the larger principles it implements can be applied in any number of controversies. Here are ten reasons why I participate in civil discourse on abortion.

Curiosity

Don't you ever wonder, "What are those people on the other side thinking?" Sometimes questions like that are rhetorical and angry, but sometimes they are evidence of sincere bewilderment. In the Washington, DC, group participants take turns asking questions like, "Will contraception and sex education reduce the numbers of abortions?" and "What are the

acceptable limits of protest outside abortion clinics?” In fact, two members of the national Common Ground steering committee, an Operation Rescue leader and the administrator of an abortion clinic, have just finished writing a joint paper on that very question.

Curiosity, part two

This is a response to frustration. I am frustrated by the deadlock on this issue, by the intractability of it, and simply want to take a crack at a new angle. Now, this could be like the toddler sitting at a computer keyboard and thinking, “I wonder what will happen if I push this button?” Sometimes just trying something new because you’re frustrated with the old can lead to disaster, but I cannot see any danger in dialogue. Neither side has anything to lose by merely talking.

Eliminating misunderstandings, reaching genuine disagreement

I’m not naive enough to believe that divisions like these are superficial, or that we could chat them away and be all hugs and kisses. But misunderstanding—genuine confusion about what your opponent believes and what motivates her—is a waste of time. I know I get weary of being told I’m pro-life because I’m anti-sex or want women to be restricted to breeding and prohibited from the job market. This fantasy of what motivates me is just that, a fantasy. When pro-choicers understand what truly motivates me, I don’t think they like it much better, but at least they would have accurate information. Likewise, pro-choicers must get weary of being told they’re “pro-abortion” because they don’t care about children and families. I’d like to diffuse our absurd misunderstandings so we can get down to grappling with the honest disagreements that lie underneath.

Data block versus “ideo” block

Sometimes our conflict is honestly based on different beliefs or ideologies: we are looking at the same reality (for example,

the abortion of an infant with Down syndrome) and simply disagree about what constitutes right and wrong.

In other cases, we disagree about the facts—our communication is experiencing a data block, not an ideology block. For example, one side tends to believe that better sex education and access to contraception will reduce the number of abortions. The other side tends to believe that, under a principle of unintended consequences, these policies actually increase the likelihood of unwanted pregnancy. Which is true? Each side can marshal a barrage of facts to support its

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theory, but it’s like swimming in soup: too many details, not enough certainty. If one theory or the other could be proved true, the dissenting side might be persuaded.

One project that the Common Ground Network has discussed is establishing a database of facts on which both sides agree. We could start with the basics: how many abortions per year, when the fetal heartbeat begins. Trickier questions we could refer to organizations on both sides of the issue, and wherever we discover agreement, add it to the list. This would serve as a resource to journalists, students, and other researchers, and contribute somewhat to clearing the air. Such a project proposed by either side would be immediately suspect, but coming from a coalition of both sides may actually be successful.

Areas of agreement

Common Ground allows us to scout out areas far from the hot center, where agreement may already exist. We’ve found, for example, a common interest in making adoption a more accessible option, and raising the profile of that alternative. We’ve agreed on the urgency of reducing unwed teen pregnancy, and that it’s wrong to use violence outside clinics.

When we are able to identify areas of agreement, we may be able to identify projects that can make a practical difference. There’s no sense being starry-eyed about this; the role of abortion in our culture is a complex one, and pro-lifers can’t expect to simply pull the plug on it and have everything else continue as usual. If abortion is to be reduced or eliminated, many elements of our social treatment of women and sexuality are going to have to change.

If this were easy to do, someone would have done it by now. It’s not easy. By putting our heads together in Common Ground, I keep hoping we’ll find fresh ways of understanding the problem.

One image that I’ve found helpful is that of a timeline. Imagine that a line exists from the time a young girl, or boy, is a barely pubescent virgin, and then extends forward: to the decision whether to have sex, the decision whether to use contraception, the decision whether to have an abortion, whether to place for adoption, whether to continue or quit schooling, to marry or separate. All along that timeline there are points of decision, and each one could be a point of intervention, where someone might be able to prevent an abortion. Even after the abortion has taken place, grief counseling can help a woman make decisions that will prevent a second abortion. There are many possibilities for intervention, and I find pro-lifers are more drawn to some and pro-choicers more drawn to others. In this time when we’re all searching for answers, the whole timeline deserves consideration, and no one’s motives should be questioned as they explore those

areas that appear to them most hopeful.

Role modeling

Common Ground gives the public an example of civil discussion on a difficult topic. This is rarer than you might think. Just the existence of these dialogues shows that it is possible to de-escalate hostility and defensiveness, without compromising the truth. In Common Ground we express the same heartfelt convictions we've always had, but do so in a safe atmosphere of mutual respect. If we did nothing else, I would say that we have done well.

The power of working together

Informal and friendly links forged across the great divide can grow, over time, from rope bridges to giant trestles linking continents. The power of networking is astonishing. All of us together have resources that none of us has alone.

For example, a few years ago the Reproductive Health Services clinic in St. Louis was faced with an extremely young client who was too far along to have an abortion. This girl needed to be on complete bed rest to safely finish her pregnancy and needed someone to stay with her all day while her mother worked. The clinic did not have the resources to collect a roster of volunteers for this duty. The clinic administrator, a member of the local Common Ground group, then phoned a pro-lifer in the group, a woman who had been arrested leading protests outside that very clinic. This pro-lifer was able to enlist volunteers from the pro-life community, and the girl completed her pregnancy safely.

If the pro-choice and pro-life communities had been locked in the sort of armed warfare they are in most cities, the side that had the resources—in this case, the pro-life side—might never have known that the other side had a need. The more we get to know each other, the more suspicions can evaporate, and the more likely we are to find opportunities to make a difference.



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Personal healing

I come now to some personal points. Being in Common Ground has eased my heart. When I read combative descriptions of the abortion conflict, I don't feel energized and angry, I feel hurt. I am overwhelmed and sad at the immensity of the problem and the cruelty of the players. I have found that having a pro-choicer listen intently to my beliefs, then repeat them back to me accurately, is healing. I've learned as well that I can safely listen carefully to them in return, without imply-

Looking to shared goals:
Two Heads by Alfred Henry Maurer

ing agreement. It's safe to just listen. And listening is the first step to understanding.

Empathy

I believe I now have a much better understanding of how things stand from the pro-choice point of view. My views haven't changed; I still believe that their position

is wrong. But I can see, for example, how much a phrase like "abortion kills babies" hurts them. To pro-lifers it's just a forceful statement of fact, but I've learned that pro-choicers almost inevitably hear, "I think you personally like killing babies." They reflexively take it as a personal insult. I've learned to express my feel-

ings on this without implying that those who disagree with me are callous or depraved. They're not. They're just wrong.

Likewise, the phrase "anti-choice" hits me like a slap in the face. I am in favor of a vast number of choices; I oppose repression. I simply don't believe that taking someone else's life is in the range of just choices. When I'm called "anti-choice" I feel like I'm being told that I don't believe in any choices at all, that I oppose the very principle of freedom. I feel like I'm being stuck with a caricature: that if I had my way the government would dictate every detail of life, down to what make of car people drive and what they eat for supper. My pro-choice friends, who use the term "anti-choice" interchangeably with "anti-abortion" and "pro-life," probably don't realize what a profound and communication-destroying insult this is. Seeing things from the other's point of view is one of the advantages of dialogue.

Peace and justice

Lastly, I do this because I am committed to valuing human life and rejecting violence as a means of solving social problems. This doesn't mean only opposing abortion, war, and the death penalty. As I continue to root out of my life a spirit of violence at deeper and deeper levels, I come face to face with Jesus' command to love my enemies. When I became a pro-life activist, for the first time in my life I had enemies. Realizing that I had them, I knew what I had to do with them; the Scriptural instruction is not vague. Another scripture says that you cannot love your brother whom you have not seen, so I think that the least I can do is go see 'em on a regular basis. I'm pleased to say that I don't find them all that hard to love.

In case this is all sounding too dreamy, the glum news is that people being nice to each other is never news. Most of our media thrives on argument and controversy, and that's a context the average citizen has come to expect. A movement to bring civil discussion to issues of medical controversy is not likely to become the

Winner Take None

How 'The Argument Culture' Damages Health Care

deborah TANNEN

In her 1998 book The Argument Culture, linguist Deborah Tannen analyzes the ways incivility affects America's ability to pass effective laws and help the less well-off. In these passages, she points out how health care has deteriorated as a result of the tendency to polarize.

The rise of malpractice litigation, while prodding doctors to be more careful and providing deserved recompense to victims, has also made the doctor-patient relationship potentially more adversarial. At the same time, physicians are finding themselves in increasingly adversarial relationships with HMOs and insurance companies—as are the patients themselves, who now need the kind of advice that was offered under the headline “When Your HMO Says No: How to Fight for the Treatment You Need—and Win.”

—■—

[To the list of problems caused by incivility] we could add the demise of the family doctor who came to your home, replaced by an overworked internist or family practitioner—if not an anonymous emergency room—and, if you're unlucky enough to need them but lucky enough to get to see them, a cadre of specialists who may not talk to each other or even much

to you, or surgeons who may spend hours saving your life or limb but hardly ever see or speak to you afterward. . . . In all these domains, wonderful progress has been accompanied by more and more anonymity and disconnection, which are damaging to the human spirit and fertile ground for animosity.

—■—

The defeat of the Clinton administration's attempt to provide universal health care coverage is a dramatic example of the politics of obstruction (as well as the failure to seek compromise). . . . In analyzing why efforts toward health care reform failed utterly in [President Clinton's] first term—a failure they call “one of the greatest lost opportunities of our time”—journalists Haynes Johnson and David Broder dissect a large number of interacting forces, one of which was that “The journalistic culture—both its professional mind-set and its commercial, competitive pressures—nudges the coverage strongly to emphasize conflict and dissent rather than clarification of alternatives and the search for consensus.” ■

From *The Argument Culture*, by Deborah Tannen. Copyright ©1998 by Deborah Tannen. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

next hula-hoop fad.

But it is a subversive movement, and though quiet it may be effective. It can begin to subtly disrupt entrenched patterns of mistrust and loathing. If we rip off the scary Halloween masks we impose on our opponents, we discover that underneath there are sincere people who mean no harm. In fact, astonishingly, they may even have the same goals we do, but just believe that an alternative means of reaching it will be more effective. I find that most pro-choicers agree with pro-lifers that four thousand abortions a day is shockingly high. We agree in our desire to bring the numbers down. We can harness that agreement and use it for positive change, leaving those areas where we disagree for action within our own sides.

I say to my pro-choice friends, "By working together, maybe we can find ways to bring the number of abortions down. We may someday reach a point you feel satisfied that the numbers are low enough. At that point I'll shake your hand and say, 'Thanks for your help. Now I'm going to keep working.' But until then, can't we go along this road together, as long as we can, as far as we can go?" ■

Children's Health, Children's Rights

A Clash Over Cancer Treatment Demonstrates the Difficulties in Dealing with Religious Families

edwin r. DuBOSE

Until last October, Tyrell Dueck was a normal eighth grader living in Saskatchewan, Canada, hoping that his favorite hockey team, the Detroit Red Wings, would win a third Stanley Cup.

Then, on October 1, he slipped climbing out of the shower and discovered a lump on his leg. Eventually, Tyrell was diagnosed with bone cancer.

After receiving two rounds of chemotherapy, and after being told that further treatment would include amputating his leg, Tyrell said he wanted to stop treatment. With the support of his fundamentalist Christian parents, he was going to leave his health to God and seek treatment at a Mexican alternative health clinic. This decision sparked a pitched court battle with Saskatchewan's health officials, who sought a court order compelling Tyrell to have his leg amputated and the chemo restarted. That battle ended in late March when doctors said the bone cancer had spread from his leg to his lungs and there was nothing more they could do for him.

This sad development spared his doctors the ethically dubious duty of amputating his leg against his and his parents'

wishes. But it has spared no one else, particularly the Dueck family, the fallout from four months of legal wrangling over questions of children's rights, alternative medicine, and religious freedom.

In some ways the story is a familiar one, whether involving Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Hmong Buddhists. When children are in medical crisis and clinicians feel that the parents are making bad choices in the name of religion, those caregivers frequently seek help from government authorities.

Judges in these cases often intervene to protect the child, basing their decisions on some understanding of the child's best interests, the demands of informed consent, and the seriousness of the child's condition. As the ethicist Loretta Kopelman writes, "Parents who, even for religious reasons, endanger their children's health or well being may find the courts willing to take custody temporarily or permanently to serve the best interests of the child."

Caregiver's frustration

Physicians, nurses, even hospital chaplains can become frustrated when patients and families make important healthcare choices based on religious beliefs. Healthcare practitioners frequently don't know how to respond and feel torn between a desire to respect the patient's religious beliefs and an impulse to do what they think is right. It may be easier to engage the legal system to settle the issue.



Public debates, private consequences: *Sketch of Two Barristers*, by Honoré Daumier

Yet such showdowns can sometimes be avoided with careful diplomacy in the clinical setting. It is important to pay attention to religious language and symbolism, as they frequently convey vital information about patients' and families' inner experience, what they are going through emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

Ideally, there would be adequate time for conversation between the parties, to reach a plan of treatment agreeable to all. Often, however, these cases erupt because death may be imminent: the child's fever is dangerously high; the bone cancer may spread if not treated quickly. Recommending that participants in these disputes create an atmosphere conducive to cultivating trust seems easier said than done. Some rules of thumb for keeping the conversation going:

Set aside intellectual judgments about the truth or falsity of the patient's religious claims. Make the assumption that if you shared their life experiences, you might embrace such beliefs. Rather than argue that medicine knows best, clinicians can present their knowledge and expertise in

a way that accommodates the patient's beliefs and builds the common ground on which to base a mutually agreed-upon care plan.

Treat religious assertions or requests as code or symbolic communications. A universal human tendency is to cry out for supernatural help in times of extreme distress. However a 13-year-old like Tyrell understands cancer and survival rates, what child wants to lose a leg? Relying on parents and a belief in God's protective power in these circumstances seems, in one sense, completely natural. Rather than challenge Tyrell's belief system in court and remove him from his parents' care, is there a way to enlist these resources to strengthen Tyrell's hope?

Speak to the other person's religion, not your own. Asking questions to further your understanding is a good way to keep the conversation going, as it conveys respect and an interest in maintaining the connection. The primary purpose of conversation is not to win an argument, but to learn, grow spiritually, and help the other person. While Tyrell's parents and the clinicians may have espoused his best

interests, the participants used different vocabularies and manifestly have not understood each others' language and motivation. A willingness to talk, no matter what, signals a commitment to the therapeutic relationship. ■

Congregations, Health, and Healing

Mining the Traditions' Untapped Potential

david b. McCURDY

Long before the rise of modern medical science and technology, religious traditions held deep wisdom about health and healing.

They recognized that healing was connected to sources beyond the individual self, and they understood that health concerned the well-being not of isolated individuals but of persons in community. Attending to a tradition's rituals, scriptures, and prescribed practices (such as dietary restrictions or quarantining of the sick) helped to sustain health and promoted healing, both individually and communally. In addition, religiously based aid societies cared for the ill and the poor.

Despite the resources that these traditions contain, however, the contemporary dominance of science and technology has often relegated religion to the margins of medical attention. Spirituality and religion have often been devalued or simply gone unrecognized in contemporary health care. At the same time, congregations and their leaders have often lacked the benefit of in-depth education about their tradition's perspectives and historic practices in health and healing. Sometimes, believers know of their tradition's historic involvement in medicine, but lack a contemporary vision of what that interest and involvement could look like or how it could be rekindled.

Building on its years of research in this

area, and with financial backing from the Chicago Community Trust and Wheat Ridge Ministries, the Park Ridge Center has inaugurated a two-year project titled *Congregations, Health, and Healing* in conjunction with five congregations in the Chicago area. This initiative, which involves both Jewish and Christian congregations, will turn to the traditions to examine anew their understandings of the relationship between faith and health. Equipped with the findings of this fresh exploration, Center staff will work with congregational representatives to educate clergy and lay leaders about the resources that their tradition offers in the area of health and healing.

This educational effort will then extend more widely as working groups develop a nationally distributed, comprehensive educational program which will include a

trainer's guide, student workbooks, and an educational handbook. This will provide a concrete model for congregations to emulate in retrieving their tradition's healthcare legacy.

The time seems ripe for a project such as this. A renewed interest in religion and spirituality as factors affecting health has emerged in many quarters. The public, hungry for healing, is struggling to understand what health is and where it can be found in all its fullness. ■

A Safe Place for Unsafe Ideas

The Park Ridge Center announces the re-creation of its academic journal *Second Opinion*. A peer-reviewed, scholarly approach to the role of faith in health care and ethics, featuring:

- ◆ Original research
- ◆ Essays
- ◆ Perspectives on the arts and humanities,
- ◆ Social Science and Policy
- ◆ Narratives and case studies
- ◆ Trend watching
- ◆ Book reviews

To submit material for publication, please contact Dan Perreten at (312) 266-2222, ext. 245.

Public Health, Private Belief

Illinois parents may soon opt out of required vaccinations for their children based upon a "conscientiously held belief" if they do not wish to subject their children to procedures they consider risky. The Illinois Senate recently passed a controversial bill that expands exemptions to the mandate that children be vaccinated, according to the Chicago Tribune. Currently, parents can decline only if vaccination poses a medical risk to the child, or if they submit a written statement objecting on religious grounds.

Working to defeat the bill in the Illinois House are public health officials, members of the Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and immunization proponents who say that the risks of vaccination do not outweigh the public health benefit. Supporters say that a "philosophical exemption" does not pose a threat to public health, because so few

people exercise it. They point to states such as California, where a similar exemption has been in place for more than 30 years, with little ill effect.

With immunization rates in Illinois at 75% overall—with even lower rates in minority neighborhoods—there is no shortage of Illinois children who go unvaccinated. Not, in most cases, because their parents object but because they simply do not have access. Ultimately, this is a far greater public health threat than conscientious objections.

Legislative Deus ex Machina?

As a result of the death last year of 11-year-old Bo Phillips, Oregon lawmakers are considering "two bills that would require faith-healing parents . . . to seek medical care for their sick or injured children or risk criminal charges" reports *The Oregonian*.

Bo's parents, members of a church that believes in the sole reliance upon prayer for healing, did not seek medical attention for his diabetes. His death sparked a long legal debate on whether or not the couple could have been brought to trial on homicide charges, illustrating the legal conflict between a parent's religious freedom and a child's right to life. If the bills become law, Oregon lawmakers will have effectively decided that the state must intervene when God does not.

United Nations v. The Vatican: Contraceptive Crisis in the Balkans

In response to reports of the systematic rape of ethnic Albanian women in Serbian army camps, the United Nations Population Fund began providing emergency reproductive health kits to the refugees. The kits contain equipment to deliver babies without medical facilities, pictorial instructions, and a variety of contraceptives—including the so-called "morning after" pill.

The Associated Press reports that the UN's announcement was followed by a strongly worded statement from Monsignor Elio Sgreccia, vice president of the Pontifical Academy for Life. Opposing the aid, the Monsignor called the pill a "real abortion technique." When reporters raised questions about the distribution of contraceptive pills to nuns in the Congo in the 1960's, the Vatican official rejected any comparison, describing the Church's action in the Congo as a "legitimate defense."

—Kirston Fortune

The Park Ridge Center will hold a series of intensive courses on a variety of topics in the bioethics field:

- Retrieving Spiritual Traditions: Training the Trainers
MAY 21 OR SEPTEMBER 15
- Care at Home and in the Community: Ethical Insights and Practices
JUNE 24 - 25
- Organizational Ethics in Faith-based Institutions
AUGUST 18 - 20
- Spiritual Wisdom for Parish Nurses: Stories and Strategies
SEPTEMBER 18
- Theological Reflection in Faith Based Organizations
SEPTEMBER 23
- Organizational Ethics Intensive
OCTOBER 18 - 22
- Ethics and Alzheimer's Disease: Attending the Person and the Spirit
NOVEMBER 4 - 5

To register contact Bernice Chantos at (312) 266-2222, ext. 255, fax (312) 266-6086 or via E-mail bmc@prchfe.org

The Park Ridge Center 1999 Intensive Courses

Voices from Left Field

Civil Discourse from the Edges

martha HOLSTEIN & steven ELLINGSON

Many arguments for civility and civil discourse are persuasive; if nothing else, lowered decibels, some direct talk, and real listening are desired ends.

As we understand it, moral suasion, employed rationally and even passionately, but without demonizing, may succeed in bringing together groups from disparate ideological positions to work toward solving seemingly intractable social problems—if not today, then over the long haul.

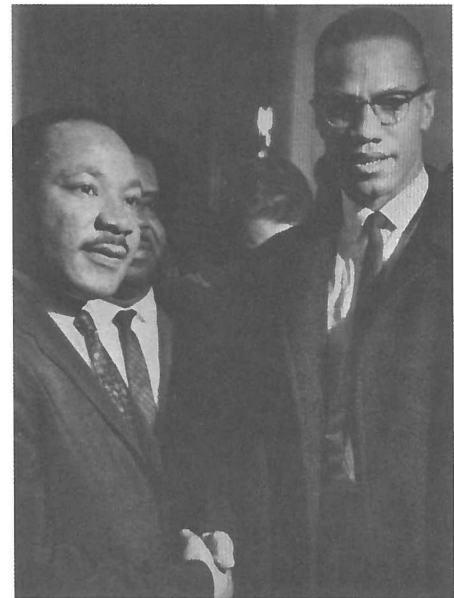
To achieve those ends, many advocates of civil discourse include peaceful demonstrations and public speeches as long as they do not trample on important religious or cultural symbols. Perhaps it is even acceptable to demonize the few whose behavior is beyond any known pale. Yet even this potential for good does not persuade us that the civility movement can achieve widespread social change; nor has it yet proven itself to be a potentially transformative force in American society. Instead we fear that it can lead to self-satisfaction, complacency, and the politics of co-optation.

The most immediate problem we have is with the movement's essentially procedural goals. Procedural goals are content-free; they direct participants to construct a conversation about issues large and small in a way intended to develop trust, deepen understanding, and

perhaps draw some conclusions. If homophobic members of the religious right would tone down their anti-gay rhetoric by, for example, not comparing homosexuality to bestiality, violence against gay people may diminish. But such an achievement, won by procedural goals, neither addresses the source of deep disagreements, nor solves the urgent problems that devastate America.

Deeper changes, such as guaranteeing greater civil rights for gay men and lesbian women require compromises that few are willing to make. Nor are we sanguine that civil discourse can advance the conversation on deeply divisive social and political issues to the extent its advocates claim. That goal escalates the stakes of civil discourse by holding out the hope that larger scale social change is an achievable end without accounting for the cultural and structural constraints that make change so difficult. It suggests that procedural goals—do not demonize, keep talking, earn trust—can overcome problems created by vast inequalities of wealth, deeply held moral and religious positions, widespread discrimination, or the power of vested interests. This view is troubling on four counts: it offers a particularly optimistic reading of how social change generally occurs; it adopts uncritically a pace for change comfortable to those whose health and well-being do not face immediate threats; it ignores the realities of power and vested interests; and it does not confront the attitudes fostered by inequality and hopelessness.

The process of social change is complex. The civil discourse model seems to



CORBIS/Bettmann

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s success came in part because of the threat of force wielded by both his followers and by other black leaders like Malcolm X

be one of talking change into existence, accompanied occasionally by polite acts of civil disobedience. This position ignores many lessons of history. Few, if any movements to transform societies have succeeded due to the tactic of moral suasion alone.

Efforts to end slavery and win civil rights for African-Americans during the past two centuries bear witness to the reality that kind words and mutual understanding did not mobilize support and the force of collective protest against injustice. The abolition and civil rights movements relied on uncivil rhetorical strategies—creating enemies and drawing lines in the sand—and on the violent

responses of their opponents to achieve their goals. Because members of these movements believed slavery and racism to be morally repugnant and in violation of their deeply held religious and political convictions, they were willing to label the actions of Bull Conner evil or expose the brutal practices of slave holders.

This willingness to confront power and be uncivil rather than engage it in conversation placed the slavery and race issues onto the national political agenda. This stance forced the country to address these problems, not by temporizing, but by dismantling the legal systems that supported racist practices. Martin Luther King built his non-violent campaign on the violence and rage that preceded and paralleled it; a rage manifest on the streets of Selma and in the actions of men such as Malcolm X. Moral suasion worked in part because the streets erupted and burned. With their eloquence,

these men seized the imagination and fueled the dreams for a radically different social order.

The role of power

More practically, civility advocates underestimate power. While everyone may have a seat at the table, some individuals or groups have the power to define what counts as acceptable and unacceptable conduct and speech. Dominant groups rarely recognize the values they uphold are partial rather than universal. As a largely middle class phenomenon, civility or civil discourse incorporates norms that reflect this dominant position. Individuals and groups with different norms, especially about means of communication or social action, are marginalized. Even the injunction "do not demonize" is driven by those in power: inevitably, exceptions to this rule will be made, and someone must decide who is so bad that demonization is acceptable. For one it may be Louis Farrakhan; for another it may be the New York City police who shot Amadou Diallo.

We can say the same for trust. To trust one must have experienced trust. Few have earned the trust of people who are poor, disadvantaged, and members of ethnic and racial minority groups. A commitment to trust is foolhardy if the people one is trusting will turn on you the first chance they get—and that is the historical and contemporary experience of the very people whose problems civility advocates hope to resolve. Similarly, middle-class supporters of civility may encourage moderation for the community's good, but who defines the community or the common good and will this definition, if enacted, safeguard everyone? Problem or need definition, itself an attribute of power, has consequences for the direction of civil discourse and the daily lives of many.

Civility is not the language of urgency. It is not the language of people struggling to put food on the table or to stop the violence in their communities. It is instead

the language of relative privilege, available to people who can afford to wait until some common areas emerge from ongoing conversations. Even if by some miracle, people of all different backgrounds—race, ethnicity, class, gender—manage to become participants in civil conversations, what is the likelihood that the non-English speaking mother of six from East Harlem in New York will be an equal participant in a dialogue with a college educated criminal defense attorney? As long as her point of view, expressed in her idiom—which may have to be strident and uncompromising simply to be noticed—is not allowed to be heard because it fails to conform to the rules of civil discourse, then civil discourse will not effect significant change. It will continue to privilege the voices of the well-educated and well-intentioned; people like us who have learned, through decades of training to speak our "native tongue" artfully.

Civil discourse has become the understandable defensive position of those saddened and disillusioned by the vitriol that marks American politics. Somehow if the temperature can be reduced a little, they suggest, perhaps trust can grow and problems can be solved. Our chief complaint is that civility offers a rhetorical solution for problems deeply embedded in American politics and society. As the civility movement gains support, it seems essential to attend to its limits and find new forms to articulate the radical discontent of the disenfranchised; even if it means allowing for uncivil discourse. ■

New Education Program in Spirituality & Aging

Retrieving Spiritual Traditions is an innovative education program designed for those who minister to the elderly. Challenging contemporary cultural notions about aging, this program retrieves the wisdom of the religious traditions, encouraging the elderly to explore their aging as a spiritual journey.

Training Package

- ◆ *Religious Perspectives on Aging* Handbook
- ◆ *Leader's Guide*
- ◆ *Participant's Workbooks* (10)
- ◆ 2 videotapes
- ◆ Cost is \$229 plus shipping. 10-day money back trial period.

A workshop to train group leaders is scheduled on May 21 and September 15, 1999. Cost is \$150. To register or to order the program, please contact Bernice Chantos at (312)266-2222 or via e-mail, bmc@prchfe.org. Continuing education credits available.

Across the Divide

How to Remain Civil while Facing Threats to the Civil Order

dan PERRETEN

The fundamentalist objected. He objected to being called a murderer, and he objected to being told to keep his deeply held religious commitments under wraps.

The issue was homosexuality, the place was a Park Ridge Center sponsored roundtable discussion among political activists who spend most of their time fighting each other, and the problem was this: Bob Patterson, an official with the Family Research Council, felt that liberals were telling him that it was uncivil to say that homosexuality was immoral and that homosexuals themselves were "a threat to the civil order." How could he make those arguments and still be a good participant in "civil" discourse?

The gays in the room, Christian and non-Christian, argued that the religious right's rhetoric contributes to a hostile atmosphere in which gays and lesbians are beaten and gay teens commit suicide at much higher rates than straight adolescents. The Christian right's words were, they believed, a public health menace.

Yet Patterson's plaintive plea—he wanted to be considered respectful of civility, yet he needed to express his most deep-seated beliefs—remained unanswered. How do conservatives say publicly that homosexuality isn't OK without signaling to young thugs that gay people are so bad that it's all right to beat them to death, as

happened to Matthew Shepard in Wyoming last year? How do liberals say publicly that, for instance, the government's early response to the AIDS epidemic was criminally neglectful without implying that ACT UP protesters should take the law into their own hands?

No thoughtful proponent of civility would seriously argue that these passionately committed activists should censor themselves. True civility requires full, free and open dialogue. It requires that participants share their true convictions, often religiously based convictions, even when those ideas may offend other folks in the public square.

So are there times when a belief is so dangerous that civility must be thrown out the window? Perhaps. There's nothing wrong with demonizing your opponent when your opponent really is a demon. Not to call Hitler or Pol Pot or Slobodan Milosevic a menace to humanity is to soft-pedal the truth and commit a verbal injustice to the victims of their evil.

Fellow citizens

Still, most of the time in a healthy democracy we do not face totalitarian threats to life and liberty. Most of the time we simply face other Americans with whom we disagree, often passionately and deeply, but fellow citizens nonetheless. We still take the train with one another, vote in the same elections and read the same newspapers. After the debate, we still have to live together. Words do have lasting effects, and one of those effects is how we treat each other, often manifested in issues relating to health care.

So how do the activists on either side of the abortion and homosexuality and AIDS debates express themselves while remaining civil? For starters, by being conscious of the likely effects of their words and carefully circumscribing the exact meaning of those words. At the roundtable discussion with Bob Patterson, the most dramatic moment came when he casually listed homosexuality along with pederasty and bestiality. A lesbian activist in the room nearly burst out in tears, she felt so hurt. Patterson was clearly taken aback at this display of emotion; he had no idea his words could sting so badly and vowed to modify his rhetoric in the future.

After the meeting, Patterson and the tearful lesbian, activist Donna Red Wing, committed to get together for lunch, encountering each other as humans and not as opponents, the first time each of them would sit down and actually talk with someone from the other side. Two opponents' willingness to meet for lunch may not seem like much, but it's surely progress toward a world in which people can disagree with being disagreeable, a world in which fewer people are unfairly demonized, a world in which more of us see each other as fellow humans worthy of respect and dignity. ■

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