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Improving Online Civility

One of the most difficult aspects of life is learning how to develop quality relationships with other people. This is so difficult that George Washington transcribed and studied 110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation to carry with him throughout his life. More significantly, the Savior indicates that loving others is the second greatest commandment of all, and “like unto the first”—that of loving God.

In the age of computers, especially in the last decade, the manner in which we develop interpersonal relationships with others has morphed dramatically. Web 2.0 technologies allow anyone with a computer, regardless of technical expertise, to create and publish to a worldwide audience through blogs, Internet forums, microblogging, and social networks. For many people, communicating with others through the Internet surpasses their actual in-person communication. Every day people send 55 billion non-spam e-mails, 50 million Twitter updates, and 1.3 million blog posts. Similar to Internet communication is texting, something that happens over 150 billion times a month in the United States.

Yet the ability and desire to communicate effectively online has not kept pace with technological advances. Instead, an astounding lack of civility overflows the Web like a tidal wave. According to polling by KRC Research, two in three Americans believe civility is a major problem, and three in four believe it is getting worse.¹ Half of those surveyed believed blogs to be a main culprit. Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, and Andrea Weckerle, president of CiviliNation, stated what many feel: The Web is overrun with everything from “the carelessly rude to the intentionally abusive.”²

Challenges of Online Communication

Online communication by its very nature presents many challenges to virtual relationships. For example, nonverbal gestures account for much of the meaning in our conversations, but these are missing online. In addition, many online conversations happen behind a shroud of anonymity, which encourages more aggressive talk than would normally be acceptable. Finally, online communication is instantaneous, which promotes quick reactionary responses that are sometimes not clearly thought out. It is also permanent, since even deleting an e-mail or blog post may not completely remove it from Internet archives, and this can magnify the message’s potential to be harmful.

However, the real issue of online communication is the same as it has always been: a lack of respect for others. In many cases there is a lack of respect for relationships both online and offline.

Respect for Virtual Relationships

We can show respect for our virtual relationships by abiding by the following tips:



> **Respect the timing of a conversation.** In offline communications, when we make a comment, we expect to hear a response. Online we should show this same courtesy by responding promptly. Even a simple “Thanks for the message. I’ll read it and touch base with you in a week” provides closure to the conversation loop and keeps the sender of the original message from wondering what has happened. Many times lack of a response can lead the first message sender to wonder if the recipient is angry, disinterested, or intentionally rude. If responding to all of the virtual communications you receive is too difficult, then you might let your contacts know that they should not necessarily expect prompt responses from you through that medium. One example was a professor who informed his students that he would attempt to respond to e-mails within 24 hours, except on weekends.

> **Carefully monitor the tone of your message.** Without nonverbal gestures, it is easy to misunderstand the tone of an online message. In general, avoid sarcasm, as it often is misinterpreted when a recipient cannot discern your meaning. Also avoid making controversial or cutting remarks. If you need to give a message that may be hurtful or critical, consider doing so face to face so you can “soften the blow” and communicate your concern for the person. Likewise, realize that the tone of messages you receive may not be communicating the sender’s true meaning. Assume the best of intentions until you can verify with the sender in person.

> **Accept others’ perspectives.** The beauty of the Internet is that it can provide everyone with a voice and a forum to share his or her opinion. While you do not need to agree with others’ opinions, you can prevent hurtful conversations by being respectful and understanding of other points of view.

> **Intervene to protect the civility of the conversation.** The Internet belongs to all of us, and we are its best police force. If you notice cyberbullying or abusive comments, turn in the offender to the blog or forum owner and protect the victim. Let the victim know that not everyone in that online space supported the abusive comment. If someone attacks you directly, address the issue with that individual

privately, as public debates can quickly escalate. Support online forums that do not allow anonymous posting, as this is often the source of the most destructive dialogue. Finally, be the strongest link in the chain, or the person with the strength to refuse to pass on gossip, to block or “defriend” abusive people, to stand up for civility, and to break chains of abusive message wars.

> **Forgive by not reciprocating.** Try to avoid becoming offended, even if offense was intended. The most destructive online conversations become flaming wars of words that tear down all involved. Forgiving and moving on is the best approach.

Respect for Real World Relationships



In addition to showing respect for our virtual relationships, online civility implies respecting our “real-world” relationships that may be harmed by our online activity. For example, remember that there is a time for online communication and a time for face-to-face communication, and these are not usually the same time. Our real-world relationships can be harmed when our spouses, children, friends, and associates feel they are being ignored and replaced by the chime of a new text message or the allure to check Facebook. Like many things, virtual relationships and technologies can become addictive and should be used in moderation. Elder David A. Bednar, in the June 2010 Ensign, encouraged us to remember “things as they really are” in real-world, offline relationships.³ With the right focus, online communication can enhance instead of detract from these offline relationships.

George Washington and other founding fathers could not have envisioned e-mail, blogs, or Facebook. But their conduct while helping to form this nation assures us that they would have used these modern communication tools to promote civil dialogue. Likewise, we cannot imagine what new modes of communication will be invented in the next 20 years. The best preparation we can make is to emphasize the need to continually reflect and discuss how we can be more civil in all of our communications, no matter what their medium.

George Washington’s Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior

As a young man, George Washington copied by hand 110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior

based on a set of rules created by French Jesuits in 1595. Unlike our focus today on self-interest, these rules focused on others. Here are some of our favorite extracts.

The Rules:

1st—Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

3rd—Show Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.

5th—If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh, or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkerchief or Hand before your face and turn aside.

6th—Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop. 7th—Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Dressed.

15th—Keep your Nails clean and Short, also your Hands and Teeth Clean, yet without Showing any great Concern for them.

22nd—Show not yourself glad at the Misfortune of another though he were your enemy.

24th—Do not laugh too loud or too much at any Public Spectacle.

44th—When a man does all he can though it Succeeds not well blame not him that did it.

50th—Be not hasty to believe flying Reports to the Disparagement of any.

51st—Wear not your Cloths, foul, ripped or Dusty but See they be Brushed once every day at least and take heed that you approach not to any Uncleaness.

56th—Associate yourself with Men of good Quality if you Esteem your own Reputation; for 'tis better to be alone than in bad Company.

65th—Speak not injurious Words neither in Jest nor Earnest Scoff at none although they give Occasion.

73rd—Think before you Speak pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your Words too hastily but orderly and distinctly.

76th—While you are talking, Point not with your Finger at him of Whom you Discourse nor Approach too near him to whom you talk especially to his face.

82nd—Undertake not what you cannot Perform but be Careful to keep your Promise.

89th—Speak not Evil of the absent for it is unjust.

92nd—Take no Salt or cut Bread with your Knife Greasy.

94th—If you Soak bread in the Sauce let it be no more than what you put in your Mouth at a time and blow not your broth at Table but Stay till Cools of it Self.

95th—Put not your meat to your Mouth with your Knife in your hand neither Spit forth the Stones of any fruit Pie upon a Dish nor Cast anything under the table.

97th—Put not another bit into your mouth till the former be swallowed. Let not your morsels be too big for the jowls.

100th—Cleanse not your teeth with the table cloth napkin, fork, or knife; but if others do it, let it be done without a peep to them.

110th—Labor to keep alive in your breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire called Conscience.

For the full list of 110 rules, see foundationsmag.com/civility.html

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