

Let's Be Civil: Talking and Listening Across the Political Divide

By Louis Finkelman - 05/30/2022 11:00 AM



Nolan Finley, veteran editorial page editor of the Detroit News, and Stephen Henderson, host of Detroit Today.

Rabbi Asher Lopatin sees the work of the Great Lakes Civility Project as congruent to the mission of JCRC/AJC because advocacy for the concerns of the Jewish community depends on relationships.

Journalist Stephen Henderson judges that “the political climate has worsened over the last decade or so.” Henderson, along with many other observers of American politics, finds it disturbing that “people have started to come apart” over their disagreements.

Friends and relatives do not know how to talk with each other across their venomous partisan divisions. Activists and leaders routinely break the norms of political behavior; ordinary citizens hear and use increasingly

violent language; protesters turn violent; we wonder if we can count on impartial elections or peaceful transfers of power.

People just cut their ties with former friends who hold opposing political opinions.

But Henderson has long enjoyed a close friendship with Nolan Finley, despite their political disagreements. About 15 years ago, when Finley was editorial page editor of the conservative *Detroit News* and Henderson had the equivalent position at the liberal *Detroit Free Press*, they often attended the same news events; program planners would invite them to discuss their disagreements in public forums. Finley and Henderson liked to rehash those events at the bar afterwards.

In the ensuing years, they have not drawn any closer politically. Both men say, “We strongly disagree about almost everything.” About that they agree. They also agree that Americans need to find a way to talk with and listen to each other, even about politics.

Finley says, “There is too much hate in America today, fueled by our politics.” Henderson agrees: “Confrontation happens when civility breaks down, and we’ve seen things turn increasingly uncivil and violent in the past decade. We’re fighting for our soul as a country, and we need to act now before it’s too late.”

So, they started, in Finley’s words, “my conservative friends and acquaintances, his progressive friends and associates, to bring them together in small groups over bourbon, in local bars, just to talk together.”

The two friends would model techniques for disagreeing respectfully. Finley and Henderson came to believe that they could help teach civility as an outgrowth of their own political dialogue. In the years of their unusual and unlikely friendship, they figured out how they had built a successful and productive relationship when they hold opposing perspectives on almost everything.

As more people angled for invitations, the meetings outgrew that informal structure. In 2020, Finley and Henderson started an organized Great Lakes Civility Project, to scale their efforts up to reach the general public. With the help of sponsors, Delta Dental Plan and Huntington Bank, the Great Lakes Civility Project has now conducted, in Finley's description, "54 programs at community groups, classrooms, civic organizations, churches." (For a list of upcoming events, visit greatlakescivilityproject.com.)

Finley identifies the operating assumption that makes civil discussions possible: "That all people, all good people, come to their opinions in the same way. They take the facts, the information, the data; they run it through the filters of their values and experiences; and they come up with their opinion.

"If it is different from yours or mine, that doesn't make them evil. It doesn't make them stupid. It doesn't make them sinister in any way. They just have different experiences or whole different values. Those values are just as valid as yours. You may never agree with them."

When we talk with people with other political commitments, he says, "We're not asking you to reach consensus, just to develop respect for the other person and their viewpoints. Agree with their right to hold their views."

According to Finley, that mindset reduces suspicion and saves us from assuming that "we know something about people ... based on what we think we know about their political views. And once you sit down talking, the more we talk to each other, the more we understand each other."

To have that civil discussion, we have to "check our self-righteousness," he says. We have to recognize we might learn something. "If you know that you have nothing to learn ... you won't learn anything," he adds.

The Civility Project in the Jewish Community

In that first year, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Civility Project did a Zoom program for the JCRC/AJC (the Jewish Community Relations

Council/American Jewish Committee). Rabbi Asher Lopatin, executive director of JCRC/AJC, said there were about 40 participants on Zoom, including their board and past presidents.



Rabbi Asher Lopatin

Lopatin says he feels grateful to the sponsors of the Civility Project, who made the program available without charge to participants.

Lopatin sees the work of the Civility Project as congruent to the mission of JCRC/AJC because advocacy for the concerns of the Jewish community depends on relationships. If we can develop some shared affection, some joy, then we can also talk frankly with members of other communities, he says.

“This works even when we disagree, and even when we do not have shared values.”



Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld

The Civility Project has invited Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, CEO of the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, to conduct a panel on the process of dehumanization. Mayerfeld sees this discussion for the Civility Project as directly relevant to his work with the HC.

“A piece of the history of the Holocaust really applies very directly toward how individuals treat each other and how when that devolves into a process of dehumanization, it allows atrocities to occur, including the Holocaust.”

He does not expect us to find exact parallels in modern America to the lead-up to the Holocaust; rather, he cites the saying that “history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.”

Mayerfeld maintains that “knowing the details of how these kinds of events occurred in the past can inform how we ought to behave in the present.”



Alisa Peskin-Shepherd

Alisa Peskin-Shepherd serves as principal attorney at Transitions Legal in Bloomfield Hills, a practice in collaborative divorce. She calls the Civility Project “such a unique opportunity to learn.”

In negotiating with a former spouse, as in negotiating with a political opponent, it is unrealistic to expect to win by convincing the other party. “I’m an attorney, so certainly I can argue a point. And not arguing a point is really what Civility Project is all about,” she says. “We can sit down; we can have a conversation; we can respect each other’s perspectives; we can ask questions.

“We’re not trying to convince the other person to come to our side of the table.”

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