

Vol. 92

April 2014

No. 4

The
**SHORT
TALK
BULLETIN**®



CIVILITY

THE MASONIC SERVICE ASSOCIATION
OF NORTH AMERICA

THE SHORT TALK BULLETIN

Published monthly by the Masonic Service Association of North America, 3905 National Drive, Suite 280, Burtonsville, MD 20866. Tel: (301) 476-7330, under the auspices of its member Grand Jurisdictions.

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Subscription Rates:

To U.S. Addresses (including
APO & FPO)\$12.00/yr.
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CIVILITY

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I believe we have a problem in today's society; that the world about us is becoming increasingly uncivil.

Polarized and hostile speech dominates the news media, our political arenas, and our everyday lives. This behavior has become epidemic. It is costing us money, our health, and our dignity, and is putting our democratic heritage in jeopardy.

We tolerate being talked at instead of talking with each other. Listening has become an endangered skill. We have allowed divisions to grow into chasms so deep that simply getting people into the same room to talk has become difficult, and at times impossible. We have allowed ideological intolerance to evolve into self-righteousness, condemnation and, ultimately, persecution — and we all know that's wrong.

And let's admit it: This incivility even makes its way into our lodge rooms. I have to believe that each of us has been witness to situations where brothers have disturbed the peace and sanctity of our lodges by bringing inappropriate and undesirable behavior and attitudes across the threshold.

I believe that if we don't address this state of affairs now, incivility will soon

become our “new normal.” And when this happens, we may be within just a single generation of it becoming so ingrained in our collective psyche, that our children and grandchildren may not know any other way. Do we really want to imagine such a world?

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” Thomas Paine said in his 1776 essay.

When we are uncivil to one another, we silence the other person; we take his or her voice away. This is not a Masonic value. As Masons, we are about allowing and perpetuating alternative voices and ideas. Masonic lodges have long promoted the democratic habits of generous listening and civil discourse.

My brethren, civil dialogue is the cornerstone that allows us to see things from a more enlightened perspective. This is not about avoiding difficult and complex topics. It is not about just “being nice” and keeping the dialogue on a superficial level. It does not silence those who wish to be heard. Instead, civil dialogue allows all voices to be valued.

And it can be achieved. We can restore civility back into our society.

Uncivil behavior often triggers a physiological response in us that perpetuates this dangerous cycle. It limits the ability to have complex conversations and stops learning in its tracks.

Masonry is different.

- The world is politically divided and antagonistic; Masons are taught to

be good citizens and to welcome the opinions of others.

- The world is often dominated by factions that are hostile, confrontational and rude; Masons learn how to be civil and respectful.
- The world is fractured by religious intolerance and bigotry; Masons respect all religions and welcome all believers in The Great Architect of the Universe—in whatever form that belief may take.

So if society hungers for a return to civility, and if we, as Masons, have the common language, tools, values and desire to create a better world, isn't it our duty to do all that we can to breed civility back into society? Aren't we uniquely positioned to tackle this problem?

When we first crossed the threshold into a Lodge of Entered Apprentices, our brothers impressed upon us the importance of learning to subdue our passions, and keeping our desires within due bounds toward all mankind.

While it is perfectly acceptable, and even encouraged, that we debate policies where we have disagreement, we must always respect the office that our representatives hold. The demonizing of others is the lowest form of human behavior.

Thomas Jefferson said to William Hamilton in 1800, "I never consider a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend."

And we can go further, my brothers. The need for safe and open dialogue about difficult and complex subjects has certainly not diminished. There just are fewer places and opportunities for this to occur. We need to communicate in more than 140-character sound bites and we need to return to real, face-to-face conversations; and we can provide the forums to do so.

As Masons, we can serve as catalysts for change and be facilitators of civil dialogue. We are well skilled and aptly qualified to teach those in our midst the means of treating each other with dignity and respect.

And perhaps most importantly, we can be instrumental in this effort because we have what I refer to as a perfect and unique “delivery system” to promote civil dialogue. In North America, we have nearly one-and-a-half million men who have each taken an obligation to support each other and our fellow citizens, utilizing a common language and a system of morals and values. For example, when we, as Masons, meet “on the level,” we set the stage for a dialogue where every voice matters. We can share this concept with others in an effort to improve our world. As Masons, we are stewards of the language of civility. But we cannot keep it hidden in our lodge rooms. Our communities need what we have to offer.

Together, as Masons, we can build a toolbox of resources that can be used

by Lodges and members throughout North America to engage in civil dialogue and create more effective communities.

Think about how we might take the working tools of Freemasonry to fill this symbolic toolbox with implements that can be used to create and demonstrate civil behavior. How might we utilize the plumb, square, level, compasses, and even the trowel to illustrate and explain to our non-Mason friends how to deal with each other from a point of enlightenment?

As the current and future leaders of our beloved Craft, one of our roles is to engage more of our members in our respective jurisdictions in the lifestyle of Freemasonry. Perhaps our circling the wagons around such a civility effort will mobilize some of our less connected members. Didn't we all become Masons with the ideal of making the world better, by making ourselves better men?

Freemasonry provides the opportunity for ordinary men, who hold a shared set of morals and values, to do extraordinary things. And each of us has been honored with this very special opportunity. We must not let our brethren down. We cannot let society down.

I therefore ask you, my brethren, if not us, then who? And if not now; well, I shudder to even consider the consequences of our inaction.

It is my hope that we, as the leaders of our gentle Craft throughout North

America, will have the courage to incorporate our Masonic tools and enlightenment to help to repair our world. Do we have the fortitude to take full advantage of this opportunity, to breed civility back into our society, and into our own communities, which so desperately need our leadership? If so, then we, as the Freemasons of North America, will be true ambassadors of civility in society. We can demonstrate our relevance in our communities. We can say, with conviction that, due to our efforts, our world is a better place.

And then my brethren, may harmony forever prevail!

(This presentation was delivered by the author at the Conference of Grand Masters of North America in Baltimore in February, 2014. Many of the delegates to the Conference have agreed to carry the torch to restore civility in our society. To join the effort, you may contact the author at rcharvoniam@freemason.org. In addition, information about the National Civility Center, created in 2000 to promote civility in America by engaging local communities in civil conversation, can be found at the group's webpage at www.civilitycenter.org.)