Civility begins at home

How “We the people” can foster a culture of respectful free expression

By Amy Uelmen

“Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech.”

Protection of free speech is enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. While the Constitution focuses on the actions of the government, it also sets a cultural tone. As citizens, we tend to be wary of any authority deciding which forms of speech and expression are acceptable and which are not.

What are the limits? On college campuses and public spaces, we struggle to discern the difference between robust but acceptable argument, and forms of speech that could incite violent action or dangerous disorder. As the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the 1919 case of Schenck v. United States, the Constitution does not protect dangerous speech, like shouting “fire” in a crowded theatre.

But what about that messy middle? How can “we the people” respond to offensive speech that does not cross the line into dangerous? How can we foster a culture in which speech is both free and respectful?

I remember an incident as a young attorney working in a law firm. Four or five lawyers had gathered in my small office for strategy session on an appellate brief, and a senior colleague began to use what I considered to be extremely inappropriate language.

In a brazen reaction, I challenged, “Do you talk that way in front of your four-year-old?” Shocked, he looked at me sheepishly, and I continued, “Then you can control yourself in my office.”

Then all of a sudden, I realized what I had done, and became afraid. I quickly tried to fill in the uncomfortable rift with a meek “That’s okay, don’t worry about it.” When everyone left the office except a trusted mentor, my friend looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Next time don’t back down.”

It was an important moment for me, not only because his encouragement meant so much, but also because I realized that I may not have been the only one who felt uncomfortable with our colleague’s choice of words.

Some cultural and professional environments seem to pride themselves on fostering the kind of toughness and thick skin that often includes rough language as par for the course. But I must confess that I have

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always worried about how such coarseness can damage our working relationships and lead to other forms of disrespect and incivility.

As a kid, I will never forget the day my mother found a strong curse word written on our playroom chalkboard. She addressed my sister and I with the glare and the tone she reserved only for tough discipline. “Do you know what this word means?” When she saw the blank looks on our faces, she realized that it must have been scrawled by an older cousin or neighborhood kid. Nonetheless it procured for us a very impassioned explanation of how certain words have the power to convey hurt and violence. And the upshot was that this particular word would never be welcome in our home.

What to make of the increasingly public prevalence of rough language and coarse manners? Regardless of the reasons, I wonder if we might interpret this trend as a kind of alarm that cries out for increased attention to civility in our daily human interactions.

Pope Francis has suggested that much of this work begins at home. In a February 2014 open dialogue with young couples preparing for marriage, he highlighted how in a world that is frequently violent and arrogant, phrases such as “please, thank you, and sorry” carry particular weight. “Please,” he explained, embodies “the polite request to enter the life of another with respect and care … True love does not impose itself harshly and aggressively.”

He also encouraged family members to openly acknowledge our own mistakes and limitations with gentle humility: “Forgive me if today I raised my voice.” “I’m sorry if I passed without greeting you.” “Excuse me if I was late.” “I’m sorry I was angry and took it out on you.”

Along similar lines, I have always been touched by Chiara Lubich’s strategy for where to start when we encounter something difficult or distorted in our relationships. Rather than lashing out at what seems to be wrong in the others, she suggests that we try first to heal the wound from within.

For example, in the wake of the 2016 campaign season, I was deeply disturbed by how tense and reactionary the cultural atmosphere in the U.S. seemed, even long after the acrimony of the campaign season was over. Upon reflection, I realized that the “wound” was not only in what I was seeing on television or the Internet, but that I too had become easily irritated and agitated with friends and colleagues in my conversations, not just about politics but in other topics as well.

I felt the need for a concrete focus that would help me to connect my physical reactions with my heart, mind and soul. Even though I have never been personally drawn to “penitential” practices, I decided to identify a “reactive” area in which I knew I could do better: to reduce that impulsive tendency to turn to sugary snacks when tired or agitated.

These almost daily and relatively small efforts to let my own “reactivity” be healed in this area in turn become a frequent reminder to be more reflective in other areas of my life too. The question “Why am I eating this?” also helped me remember to think before choosing my words. “Why am I saying this?” Rather than feeling restrained or repressed, the practice led me to a place in which I felt better able to respond with greater peace and insight even in tense and stressful moments.

And this in turn can lead to a deeper hope for healing in our polity as well. This is not because anything that I could do was impactful on a large scale, but because it felt like a standing invitation to let the real champion of civility enter the picture, with fruits that include “joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness,” as well as “gentleness” and “self-control” (Gal 5:22–23).

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