Civility and Civil Discourse in an Age of Divisiveness

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PRESENTED TO CONNECTICUT’S CIVIC AMBASSADORS
Today’s CT Civic Ambassador Presenters

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Land Acknowledgement

- We would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the occupied territory of the **Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett** and **Nipmuc** Peoples, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations. We thank them for their strength and resilience in protecting this land, and aspire to uphold our responsibilities according to their example.
Rounds

- **Round 1:**
  - What is Civility?
    - National Institute for Civil Discourse
    - Martin Luther King, Jr.
    - Lynn Itagaki

- **Round 2:**
  - What is Civic Discourse?
    - National Issues Forum
    - Myisha Cherry

- **Round 3:**
  - Challenges & Activities
What is Civility?

- “Civility is showing mutual respect. When practicing civility, you don’t have to agree; but when you do disagree you are doing so without behavior or words that are intentionally hurtful or disrespectful.” - National Institute for Civil Discourse

- “Civility is the way in which we should talk about important things; civility is also the way in which we do not talk about important things. Civility as a concept, political goal, and measure is also discursively constructed: what is one's civility is another's incivility.” - Lynn Itagaki
What is Civility?

- Civility as an *Ad Hominem* attack
- Civility as allowing for respectful dialogue
- Civility as cultivating an Atmosphere of Trust
- Civility as building Common Ground
- Civility as Decorum
- Civility as Deference
- Civility as the glue that holds “Us” together
- Civility as a way of healthily disagreeing
“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a ‘more convenient season.’ Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.
“But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the negro poor has worsened over the last twelve or fifteen years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.” -Martin Luther King, Jr.
“Civil racism often appears as a discourse of racial civility: what I define as the behaviors or practices expected of racialized subjects in order to assimilate into Whiteness or achieve the status and protections of U.S. citizenship” -Lynn Itagaki
## What is Civil Discourse?

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<th><strong>DEBATE</strong></th>
<th><strong>DIALOGUE</strong></th>
<th><strong>DELIBERATION</strong></th>
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<td>Seek majority</td>
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<td>Dig in</td>
<td>Reach across</td>
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<td>Express</td>
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The Structure of Dialogue

- Welcome
- Introductions
- Ground Rules
- Ice Breakers

**The Heart of the Dialogue**
- Questions: Construct an open-ended question that will lead to dialogue.
- Facilitation: The aim is to move the conversation forward, not control it.
- How many rounds of questions will you have?
- How long will you give for each dialogue round?
- Will people read/watch anything beforehand? During?

**Conclusion**
“In sales dialogue, communication is irrelevant and persuasion is king. What is spoken and interpreted is constrained by the goals sales dialogue aims to achieve: get others to trust what the persuader says, and then get them to do as he or she says. Instead of being open to gaining knowledge, being challenged, or trusting the contributions of others, the persuader is only willing to prove his point in hopes that others will accept it.” –Myisha Cherry

**Persuasion!!!**
Socratic Dialogue

- “Socratic dialogue is not without its flaws. Although the dialogue may spark critical thinking, the Socratic figure often hinders and disrupts true communication. She does this by presuming the ignorance of her conversation partner, and hopes that in the end, he will have learned something new. She presents a rebuttal for every response while offering up no contribution of her own. In other words, it is dialogue in name only. The other person speaks and is listened to only to the extent that his words will spark self-awareness of his own ignorance.” –Myisha Cherry

- Knowledge!!!
“In liberatory dialogue, all parties are subjects—talking and listening. As a result, each person is herself taught. No one person does all the teaching; neither can one learn without the other. Both subjects are needed for knowledge and that knowledge is not found above but between them. In liberatory dialogue, each person is a ‘critical co-investigator.’ This makes them ‘jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.’” – Myisha Cherry

Discovery + Humanization!!!
Dialogue Dialects

- “The discourse may be linguistic, like dialect. But it could also be emotional. Allowing space for and taking others seriously despite differences of expression is how we resist silencing. It encourages others to think and communicate ‘just as they are’ which allows liberatory dialogue to occur and thus, mutual humanization.” – Myisha Cherry

- What are some cultural differences you notice when communicating with others?
Encounters Dialogic Tips

It is often difficult to encounter people with different viewpoints or have conversations around divisive issues. Here are some tips to help:

- Actively Listen & Reflect
- Do not try to change the other person’s opinion
- Focus on a common source, such as a text, and have conversation around substance rather than on the person and their own personal qualities.
- Try to achieve “common grounding”
  - Contributing, Acknowledging and Clarifying
- Rinse and Repeat
The Aim of Civic Discourse

- We began with the question: Is civility necessary for civil discourse? **Yes and No**
- The goal of the conversation is just as important as the manner in which it occurs. If our goal is **Civic Health**, how well diverse groups of residents work together and with government to solve public problems to strengthen their communities, then we must be aware of cultural differences around communication and civility.
Challenges

- How would you handle a challenge to your own deeply-held beliefs?

- How would you handle someone being uncivil towards you?

- How would you handle wanting to be uncivil to others?
#RevivingCivility

Sharing concerns about the divisions in our community and our country (10 – 15 minutes) Move the conversation to explore more about your community - choose a few of these questions to discuss our divisions and differences.

- Why do you think our country is so bitterly divided at this time?
- How do you feel about our community--do we seem more or less divided than other parts of the country?
- What are the main ways that you think people in our community are uncivil and disrespectful to each other when it comes to political discussions?
- In what ways do liberals and conservatives stereotype each other? Do you ever feel stereotyped by those you disagree with on issues?
Exploring areas of agreement and possible ways to work together in our community. (10 – 15 minutes)

We can often find that there is more that unites us than what divides us. Take some time to explore areas of agreement and some hopes and dreams you both have. Here are a few questions that may assist you.

- What are your hopes and concerns for our community/and/or country?
- In spite of political differences, what do you think are some of the main things that a majority of people in our community agree on?
Resources

- Liberatory Dialogue by Myisha Cherry (2018)
- Unlikely Friendship Discussion Guide by the National Institute for Civil Discourse (2018)
- Revive Civility by the National Institute for Civil Discourse (2017)
- Civil Racism by by Lynn Mie Itagaki (2016)
- The Other America by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968)
- Letter from Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)
Additional Resource Links

- Revive Civility Resources
  www.revivecivility.org/resources
- Everyday Democracy
  www.everyday-democracy.org
- CT Civic Health Project (and Civic Ambassadors)
  www.everyday-democracy.org/CivicHealth
- UCONN Humility and Conviction in Public Life
  www.humilityandconviction.uconn.edu
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If you know someone who would make an EXCELLENT CT Civic Ambassador, or if you would like to learn more about the State’s Civic Health initiative, visit:

www.everyday-democracy.org/CivicHealth