

Not too long ago, one of my esteemed colleagues, wrote a piece decrying the loss of civility, especially in the realm of public discourses. I couldn't agree with him more.



As he got mixed reviews, from folks glad he made the point to folks who all but accused him of being a PR arm for a dozen different warring entities, I'd say he was pretty spot-on with his assessment.

However, I would also like to add that civility does not mean, "A studied and profound lack of honesty; sugar-coating."

The word matching that definition is "politics."

What I'm saying is, it behooves us, now more than ever in this the age of the lazy, incompetent, uncaring and coddled, that someone, somewhere, start telling it like it is. People need to really know where they stand so they can improve performance, find something more suited to their lack of abilities or go ahead and get used to the fact that they are, in fact, marginal.

That's why (although I despise reality TV, well, nearly all TV, really) when American Idol first came out, my favorite character was the "mean" guy, Simon Cowel. At least he could look some of these caterwauling nincompoops straight in the eye and deliver honest assessment in blunt terms.

The fact is, truth hurts, but it's still the truth, and the important thing is to learn from it, instead of wallowing in the perceived unfairness of it.

That having been said, I would also point out that blunt assessment and painful honesty do not necessarily have to be delivered in venomous packaging, which is where our society -- and this is reflected in nearly every media form to which we subject ourselves -- is headed. I'm proud to say I haven't seen any episodes of American Idol in a couple of years, and then only under duress, but apparently this year the judges stepped it up by making really vicious personal comments to the losing contestants.

On the other hand, there's an old saying that the best way to get a mule's attention is to smack him across the head with a two-by-four. Consequently, maybe there are some folks out there who need to know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that they are not only cow chip ugly but they also have voices like angels, if those angels were undergoing radical hemorrhoid surgery without anesthesia.

Well, that's fiendishly clever, of course, but what is the point, you might well ask?

Simple. What I'm getting at is this: At this our local level, our little world, I've been seeing a lot of this loss of civility and seeming inability to have adult discussions, especially in the public realm. And what we don't need right now is more shrill repartee. What we do need are plain speaking and honest dialogue.

You can be plain spoken and honest without being shrill. So in the spirit of promoting civil discourse, I offer the following ideas.

1 - Whether you are a government official, a righteously indignant and well-heeled person who does not find it necessary to be a part of the workforce these days, or just someone who -- between making mortgage payments, feeding, clothing, and educating children, and trying to get through each day without another mystery bill to pay -- is tired of hearing about yet another plan to codify pandering, meaningless drivel into unenforceable statute, always remember, it's not all about you. So shut your cake hole and listen to what others have to say for a change. You might learn something.

For those of you in public service, particularly elected service, I would strongly suggest

doing as much of that as possible, both among yourselves and in interacting with we, the people. That's just friendly advice.

2 - When you have a complaint to make, keep it short, to the point, and relevant to as many as possible. There's an old saying: "Don't go on about your troubles, because the only ones who are interested are people who think you're getting what you deserve, anyway."

3 - When someone says something you disagree with, however vehemently, don't offer up shrill interruptions to shout them down. I've been seeing that a lot lately, and I'm damned sick of it. Instead, take a deep breath and ask this simple question: "What do you mean by that?" Chances are, the person you believe to be honking a lot of hot pasture methane will have no answer, because he has spent his time, well, honking a lot of hot pasture methane instead of doing any serious thinking.

Thus, you are graciously allowing that person to prove to the rest of the world, once and for all, that he is, in fact, an idiot.

But there's also that remote chance he will stop, think a moment, and give a more clearly articulated answer, thus bringing the two of you that much closer to understanding. Not necessarily agreement, but understanding.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? Let's see if it actually works.