

The Fall from Graciousness

Editor's note: This is a special guest op-ed from BernardGoldberg.com Premium Member, Michael G. Frankel.

It wasn't that long ago when graciousness was expected: at home, at school, in the workplace, and even on athletic fields. Unfortunately, those days are gone, and I fear they'll likely will never return.

One of the hallmarks of graciousness was showing respect to others, even when there was a significant difference of opinion on an important issue. At the end of a heated debate or a hard-fought game, the opponents shook hands to demonstrate that respect. And the winner was typically gracious in his or her victory – no gloating, shaming, or overly exaggerated fist pumps. The loser, likewise, was gracious in defeat – praising the winner and looking forward to the next opportunity to redeem himself or herself.

A winner who did not act graciously was viewed with disdain and sore losers were likewise shamed.

Graciousness began to disappear long before the 2016 presidential election, but the downward societal shift has clearly accelerated during the ensuing three years. Even the most ardent supporter of the president would find it impossible to categorize him as a gracious man. Similarly, those who voted for Hillary Clinton would be hard pressed to call her gracious. Over the past three years, she's been blaming "sexism" and making sundry other excuses for her election loss.

Mr. Trump was not a gracious winner and Mrs. Clinton was not a gracious loser.

They have plenty of company, and it's not just in the political arena. The decline in graciousness reflects and

represents the decline of our society. It also begs the question as to why or how this has occurred and whether the trend may be reversed. There is no clear answer to either of these questions, but there are some societal developments that likely are contributing factors.

When most of us were young, we were taught at home that, "if you don't have something nice to say, then don't say anything at all." When's the last time you heard someone utter those words, especially in the public square?

Underlying that adage was the notion of graciousness: if you have a negative comment to make that might be hurtful or boorish, keep it to yourself. That, of course, requires some self-control and self-discipline – concepts that seem to have went out the window with the Internet and social media.

Today, the more outlandish and nasty the comment, the more likely it will go "viral" (an interesting term that connotes an infection or illness). Cases in point: recent award ceremonies where celebrities try to outdo one another with their crass and graceless comments and gestures.

Perhaps it is a good sign in terms of future trends that viewership of these shows keeps declining.

A word is also in order regarding the coarseness of language, whether in movies, television, schools, or on the street. When I grew up in the 50s and 60s, there was plenty of cussing but only sparingly was the "F" word used, especially when children or women were present. Today, of course, in our more equal society, there are no limits or boundaries, and so-called "F Bombs" are dropped so often on the street that the intended shock value is pretty much gone. Coarse language can be used to express frustration in the heat of the moment, but nowadays it is used just as much to get snickers, or to show one's counter-cultural bona fides.

The word "graciousness" is derived from the word "grace." As

our language is constantly being manipulated to undo commonly understood meanings that have been present for centuries, it's important to remember that "grace" has religious roots. And given the fact that Americans are increasingly straying from religious beliefs and values, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the rise of the secular has contributed to the fall of graciousness. Likewise, as the presence and importance of the American family unit has diminished and become less respected, it makes sense that the lesson of yesteryear to "keep it to yourself" would also be less valued. People coming of age are being inundated with messages, conversations and experiences that more often than not lack graciousness.

Let's hope things change, because at a time when society is intent on reducing each of us to our race, gender, religion, or other groupings, there's a desperate need in our culture for a unifying force that values individuals by how they comport themselves, how they talk and act, and how they treat others.

Pride and Prejudice



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The beauty of words is their power to succinctly convey deep feelings and emotions. Professional writers labor over the use of a particular word or phrase. George Will is a master in this regard. When you read one of his articles, you can tell that he has carefully chosen a certain word or phrase to make the reader fully appreciate the point he is trying to make.

Unfortunately, in our brave new world of sound bites, acronyms, and emojis, the craftsmanship of words and writing all too often has been decimated in the quest for speed and brevity of expression. More depressingly, some words are used without that much thought or feeling. This is true in both the personal and political arenas.

One of the words that has been overused and lost some of its importance and power is the word "love." The phrase "I love you" has become used very cavalierly during the past decade. Its usage has become ubiquitous, which has diminished the depth and specialness of its meaning. This possibly began in 1977 when Milton Glasser coined the phrase, "I Love NY," which in 2009 became the official slogan of the State of New York.

Now we have the heart symbol pretty much everywhere to demonstrate how much everyone loves everything.

Accordingly, the expression of love has become depersonalized and banal. By specific illustration, the expression of one's "love for America," has become somewhat superficial and trite. This has relevance when we try to discern how someone seeking political office feels about our country. Perhaps a more accurate reflection of one's attitude about America can best be gleaned by inquiring, "Are you proud to be an American" rather than, "Do you love America?"

In contrast to love (which is a gut emotional feeling), pride requires something more than mere emotion. It is a given that parents will love their child. It is not a given that parents will or should have pride in their children. Pride typically requires thinking and reasoning. When politicians are asked, "Are you proud to be an American," they will not be able to give the knee jerk answer, "Of course I am," because they will then be forced to explain why they are proud, and more importantly how the reasons given for their purported pride can be reconciled with their negative views of America with respect to a number of issues, most notably that of race in America.

And that leads us to the word "prejudice," a prevalent term used in the 1960s to indicate that one was not a "bigot." The words "prejudice" and "bigot" have become relics of linguistic history, as they are no longer strong enough for today's social justice warriors who need to prove their bona fides and the strength of their convictions. Thus, whereas in the old days, one was labelled a bigot or prejudiced to make it clear that they were unworthy of societal respect, eventually these words were deemed insufficient to make clear how truly evil and hateful the target of scorn really was. And those benign terms were replaced first by the term "racist," and more recently by the term "white supremacist." These terms of derision and disgust are now thrown around much like the

word love, except that these derogatory words are used to access power through demagoguery and to discourage dissent.

The point of all this is that words matter, and people, especially politicians (and the media) need to be held accountable for what they say and write and be compelled to tell us how they really feel about issues that are important to millions of us. One of those issues is pride in America. This is not about blind pride or an attitude of "America: Love it or Leave it;" but rather a balanced view of the history of our country and the pride that millions of us take in all that America is and has done for almost two and a half centuries.

One of the beautiful things about America is that no one is forced to love her or be a proud American, and, in fact, they can shout from the rooftops their disdain for America if they so choose, and without fear of retribution. But one cannot have it both ways: if you constantly attack American values and American traditions and history, and believe that "America was never really that great to begin with," can you also be proud to *be* an American?

We all know the answer to that question.

When Lovers Become Haters



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Reading Bernie Goldberg's column this week, [Who's Worse – Trump or His Enemies?](#), I was inspired to comment in more than a cursory manner.

Think back to the summer and fall of 2016, when we were inundated with signs, slogans and angry voices telling us that "LOVE TRUMPS HATE." At that time, it was a forgone conclusion to millions of Americans (not just Hillary supporters, but also those of us resigned to voting for Trump because he wasn't Hillary) that we were about to have another Clinton in the White House. And with her victory would come another four years of the Obama quest to fundamentally transform America. (The concept of fundamental transformation is interesting unto itself. Try telling your spouse that you really do love her and are proud of her but that she needs to be fundamentally transformed and you are the one to oversee that transformation. Then duck!)

I went to bed early on Tuesday, November 8, 2016, because I was feeling tired and depressed, particularly as I contemplated that in a few hours America would choose Hillary

to be our next President. I arose early Wednesday morning, had a cup of coffee and began a long walk to help me come to grips with the numbing reality that our president for the next four (or, God forbid, eight) years was a person who would finally have the awesome power she had lusted for so long.

That's when my son called as he was on his way to work and asked me if I could believe that Trump had won the election. My reaction was quick: *ha ha, nice joke*. When he told me that the networks had all confirmed Trump's victory, I had goosebumps and more spring in my step – not because Trump won, but because Hillary's lust would be unfulfilled and the transformation of America would at least be slowed down.

At the same time, I felt compassion for friends of mine who were Hillary supporters, or at least Hillary voters who voted *against Trump* more than *for Hillary*. I tried to put myself in their shoes and feel their disappointment and depression. But I also believed that, as in past years, our political differences would be set aside to some extent and we would all move forward as Americans whose love of, and pride in, our country would reemerge.

Boy was I naïve.

As we moved forward into December and January (before Trump had even taken office and done anything as President), it became clear that the purported Lovers were in fact Haters. It was one thing to hate Trump because of his language and behavior (past and present). It was another thing to extend that hatred first to those who ardently supported him, and then to anyone who voted for him, and finally even to life-long Democrats like Alan Dershowitz who were not willing to sacrifice their principles and fidelity to the Constitution and the rule of law.

One can understand, to some extent, why someone might project their hatred of Trump to nameless, faceless others out of

frustration and fear. (Note that understanding such reactions is not justification, but rather mere acknowledgement of how people can work themselves into an emotional frenzy – especially when seeing things through a highly emotional lens in which identity politics, labeling and hate-filled rhetoric is omnipresent.)

But what about the animus directed by Haters towards their relatives and lifelong friends who have the temerity to espouse different views regarding Trump or a controversial political issue?

I have spent countless hours trying to understand how family relationships and close friendships have been torn asunder and offer the following observations:

1. In almost all cases, it is the Hater who has no tolerance for his or her former friend/relative who sees things differently. The Hater in many cases will not or cannot even have a civil discussion. The hatred simply overwhelms the Hater.
2. As noted by Bernie, in many instances, the Hater views himself or herself as morally superior to the subject of their scorn. Smugness becomes a communal badge of honor.
3. When asked, the Hater (if honest) will admit that their morally superior ends justify the means chosen to serve those ends. This is how someone like Professor Dershowitz, a leading guardian of Constitutional values, is disparaged and demeaned by those who pretend to be proponents of American values and fret about “existential threats to our democracy.”

Can the tide of hatred be reversed, and if so, how? It should be obvious that the hatred did not begin in 2016 and will not dissipate easily or anytime soon. It also should be obvious that there are strong forces from multiple directions that revel in their hatred.

But there are millions of us across America who still believe in all that America is and will continue to be. This American middle, as has always been the case, is not monolithic in its political views. Some lean left while others lean right. We will always have differences as to our viewpoints. What's critical is that respectful and civil dialogue occur at grass roots levels. It is unlikely that mutual respect and civil discourse will emerge from the political class, the media or academia. Perhaps our houses of worship or other community organizations could take the lead by trying to foster dialogue and civility among their congregants and members who have diverse views on important issues.

Let's hope the dialogue begins before it truly is too late.