

The Coarsening of America

Ever since the Tucson shootings, we've heard about civility *ad nauseum*. Everyone has been calling for civility including the President at the memorial service in Tucson and during his State of the Union address.

We heard a lot about civility after 9/11 as well. People were kinder to each other – more polite, more courteous. I remember asking my husband, “how long do you think this will last?” Not very long. Eventually, people went back to their old ways and those who were kind and polite before 9/11 continued to be kind and polite. Those who weren't, couldn't maintain the façade.

A very good example are the recent remarks by MSNBC's Ed Schultz who called former Vice President Dick Cheney “an enemy of the country” who should go “to the Promised Land.” In my world, wishing someone to be dead no matter how much you might dislike that person is uncivil. Not according to actor-turned-someone-who-wants-to-appear-relevant-in-today's-society, Richard Dreyfuss, who said Schultz's remarks were not “uncivil” but rather “beautifully phrased civil discourse.”

So, if you're a liberal, you can say whatever you want and it's “beautifully phrased civil discourse,” but if you're a conservative, you're a hateful racist, homophobe, sexist, or whatever else liberals coin the label-of-the-day.

In any given week, they'll be dozens of statements made by national media personalities and pundits which are downright rude, crude and hateful. But over the years, I've seen the coarsening of human behavior in my personal dealings with others almost daily.

✘ Not that long ago, you'd never hear someone drop the “F” bomb in public. Now, waiting on line anywhere, it's a common occurrence with no apology from the user even when your

head snaps around to see who used that expletive in public.

It's commonplace for people to invade my sense of privacy and peace and quiet by speaking loudly on their cell phones in public areas. People will move forward in an airplane trying to get out earlier instead of waiting at their row to exit in an orderly fashion.

My husband and I have a continuing debate about all this. I say people are "rude." He says they're "just stupid." He says being rude requires a conscious recognition of one's behavior. Being rude means one doesn't care about the needs of others. Being stupid means the person is just oblivious to his surroundings. I don't know who's right. But does it really matter?

I live on a beautiful island in the Puget Sound. There are the old timers who have lived here all their lives; there are people like us who have lived here almost twenty years, and then there are the newcomers. The old timers are old; people like us are in their 50s and 60s, and a lot of the newcomers are in their forties. It's the forty-somethings I don't get.

I could walk down the street and someone my age or older will pass me by and say "good morning." When I'm leaving a store, I'll hold a door open for the old guy behind me and he'll, no doubt, say, "thank you, young lady."

Something happened to the people raised after my generation. Perhaps they were raised in a barn or under a rock. I'm not sure, but when I'm leaving a store and hold the door open for a younger person, I seldom will get a "thanks," "thank you" or even a grunt to acknowledge my courtesy.

Several years ago, I decided I just can't let this "incivility" go unchecked, so, I decided whenever I held a door open for someone, I'd wait a second, and if I received no response, I'd just say, "you're welcome." Only one guy, who was on a cell phone and far too busy and far too important to

initially say, "thank you," actually seemed genuinely embarrassed when I said "you're welcome." He immediately took the phone away from his ear and said, "you're right, I'm sorry, thank you." Other than that one man, no one has ever acknowledged a simple courtesy with a reciprocal kindness of saying, "thank you." I can only imagine how little the fortysomethings have taught their own children and how that next generation will display their civility.

The internet has made us faceless and anonymous with people saying whatever they please without consequence. Recently, after tweeting an article of mine to about six people who were interested in the topic I wrote about, I received the following tweet from someone to whom I didn't send my article, "Stop Spamming stupid old bitch. Say something once and only once, What do you studder or something. Next time I report you." This is what I'm talking about. (By the way, his punctuation and spelling, not mine.)

Unfortunately, no matter what President Obama suggests, I think we'll continue to see incivility in the public arena. It's the nature of the beast. But when I see the absence of any manners in the people I deal with in my private life, it all becomes very disturbing.

I don't get it, but if you do, God bless you.