

"Civility as the Practice of R-E-S-P-E-C-T"

A Response to : "Resisting Politics as Usual: Civility as Christian Witness"

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I was eight years old in 1967 when Aretha Franklin, "the Queen of Soul," recorded her hit version of the Otis Redding song, "Respect." As a young African-American male raised in a working class family on the South Side of Chicago, I was unaware of the broad cultural significance that this song would claim for the feminist movement of the late 1960's. Franklin sings of a strong, confident woman who knows that she has everything that her man wants. She never does him wrong and is willing to give her all in the relationship; but she **demand**s his "respect." I never knew all of the lyrics, but, within the context of the broader cultural social movements of the late 1960's the chorus of this R& B "anthem" made a lasting impression on me:

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Find out what it means to me

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Take care...TCB [an abbreviation in black idiom for "Taking Care of Business"]

As I grew in my social awareness of the historic struggle of African-Americans for respect in the broader society, I was also socialized into culturally specific ways of "respect" which were regarded as fundamental to civility. Along with my two sisters and brother, I was taught the old fashioned ways of saying "please" and "thank you" to everyone. All adults were to be respected as authority figures, whether they were right or wrong: "you don't 'sass' [speak disrespectfully to] an adult!" I was taught to give *every* adult "a title": "Mr.," "Miss," or "Mrs." Our ministers were revered as "Reverend" or "Doctor." Adult family members were not called by their first names; a relational title was required as a prefix: "Aunt Maude" and "Cousin Mildred." I was taught to genuinely respect my teachers, white and black. I was educated and formed by many caring and conscientious white and black teachers in the public schools through my high school years despite the "white flight" from my neighborhood in the 1960's. Respect for all authority figures was an important social skill.

One point of repeated emphasis was the importance of respect for policemen. Growing up in a city where there were historic tensions between the police and the African-American community, one of my mother's "teaching points" was an oblique reference to Mayor Richard J. Daley's infamous orders to "shoot to kill." This contextually specific policing strategy, given during the heat of demonstrations during the 1968 Democratic Conventions in Chicago, became convoluted with a number of troubled racial incidents during that period of social unrest. This "shoot to kill" order was interpreted as "evidence" that if I had an encounter with the police, I had better behave in a respectful manner. Hence, as a young African-American, the practice of respecting policemen was not only an act of citizenship; it was a social skill related to my survival.

Further, as children raised in a Christian household, we were not only taught to respect "those in authority." We were taught to respect ourselves and to respect others, regardless of their station in life.

In our household and in our faith community, we were regarded as "gifts from God" who were "loaned" by a Creator who had given us many gifts and a corresponding purpose and mission in life. As I recall my father's mealtime prayer, which included remembering "the less fortunate than we," we were taught to respect persons who were poor, those who were "down on their luck," as well as those who struggled with various addictions.

I begin my response to James Davis' essay in this way to name my social and religious location as an African-American Christian male formed in the particular socializing matrix of my black family, church, and community. I read with appreciation Davis' proposal for Christians to be ambassadors of reconciliation by fostering civility which he describes as "a set of virtues that govern our conversations and interactions with one another." The practice of civility is carefully defined as "the exercise of patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (and especially) with those with whom we disagree." Clearly, a recovery of civility is needed to restore health to all forms of public discourse, including our national political discourse. Though Davis writes as an ethicist from within the Reformed Christian tradition and I am a ministry professor ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which drinks deeply from the wells of both the African-American Church traditions and the Wesleyan theological heritage, I agree with the substance of his argument. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church claims as its identity "the Freedom Church" because of religious forbearers who fought for social justice, including Frederick Douglass, who was a local preacher in the A.M.E. Zion Church, and Harriet Tubman, who bequeathed her property to our denomination. As I reflect on the ethical heritage of my denomination, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that "the character of the Methodist" is to "think and let think" except for "those opinions that strike at the root of Christianity." The "rules of the game" for Methodists are Wesley's "General Rules." Bishop Reuben Job, of the United Methodist Church, interprets these 18th century ethical standards for a 21st Century reality as "Three Simple Rules": "do no harm," "do good," and "stay in love with God."<sup>1</sup> None of our traditions are perfect and free from moral ambiguity. All of our faith communities have contributed to divisions in church and society; hence, I agree with Davis' approach of drawing from "the best impulses" of our religious and social traditions.

As a professor ministry, the central question that Davis' proposal raises for me is "how do we educate and form in persons that set of virtues that comprise civility, which has as one of its tenets the practice of mutual respect?" As we go through the rigors of curriculum review at Columbia Theological Seminary and at other theological seminaries and divinity schools, Davis' essay contributes to my conviction that we must contribute to students' spiritual formation, assisting them in becoming "ambassadors of reconciliation" in an increasingly polarized and partisan political climate. Do we, as faculty members, foster attitudes of respect for all types of diversity--cultural and theological? Are we paying sufficient attention to the character formation of our students? What do we model for our students? In the heat of institutional disagreements, do we take "the high road" or "the low road?" As we engage a variety of pedagogies to collectively form persons as religious leaders, in what way are exemplary virtues a part of our curriculum?

Elliot Eisner is helpful to me in his claim that all institutions teach not one but three curricula. The explicit curriculum is what is presented consciously and with intention. The implicit curriculum is what we teach by our patterns, organizations, and procedures that frame the explicit curriculum. The null

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<sup>1</sup> Reuben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007)

curriculum is the curriculum that exists because it is left out.<sup>2</sup> Although these virtues are fundamentally a response to divine grace, as leaders and teachers in a variety of institutions we are responsible for human initiatives in which we ourselves and others are on the pathway of divine transforming grace. Let me clarify that I do believe that we must be attentive to a range of virtues to define the public practice of civility--patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect in civil conversations. However, for me, respect is one of the most fundamental of these virtues.

I recall how this basic presupposition of "respect" was challenged by faculty colleagues at an institution that I formerly served. As a part of an initiative for faculty "diversity training," we had retained the services of Eric H.F. Law, an ordained Episcopal priest and professional consultant in the area of multicultural leadership and organizational development. To start our day, Law offered communication ground rules which he called "respectful communication guidelines." These guidelines were as follows:

R= Take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others

E=EMPATHETIC listening

S=Be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles

P=PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak

E=EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions

C=Keep CONFIDENTIALITY

T=TOLERATE ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.<sup>3</sup>

To the frustration of many of us, a few faculty colleagues so vigorously resisted the "respectful communication guidelines" that the whole diversity training was derailed. It was the last guideline--tolerance of ambiguity, which I would correlate with Davis' call for "humility"-- that my colleagues would not stomach. Amidst our theological (and cultural) pluralism, my scholarly colleagues debated the ground rules, effectively "filibustering" the diversity training. Though they should have been aware of the multiple meanings of "pluralism," they chose to equate the call for "tolerance of ambiguity" with moral relativism or cultural accommodation.

I had a similar disconcerting experience when I posted on my Facebook page a set of guidelines designed to elevate in young African American children civility and communication etiquette as well as to teach conflict resolution skills. The impetus for this community education initiative was not improving the tone of the national political election debates. It was to aid children in addressing personal attacks, bullying and other unhealthy social interactions. In response to this "Civility and Etiquette Awareness Month" initiative, I signed off on a specific pledge of civility rules and encouraged my FB friends to do the same. The "Girl's Rule! Etiquette Imperatives' 'Speak Your Peace' Civility and Etiquette" initiative offered the following nine tools for practicing civility:

- **Pay Attention.** Be aware and attend to the world and the people around you.
- **Listen.** Focus on others in order to better understand their points of view.
- **Be Inclusive.** Welcome all groups of citizens working for the greater good of the community.

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<sup>2</sup> These form of curricula discussed by Elliot Eisner in *The Educational Imagination* are summarized in this way by Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 68-69.

<sup>3</sup> From Eric H.F. Law, *The Bush Was Blazing But Not Consumed* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1996), 87.

- **Don't Gossip.** And don't accept others [who] choose to do so.
- **Show Respect.** Honor other people and their opinions, especially in the midst of disagreement.
- **Be Agreeable.** Look for opportunities to agree; don't contradict just to do so or simply agree to disagree.
- **Apologize.** Be sincere and repair damaged relationships
- **Give Constructive Criticism.** When disagreeing, stick to the issues and don't make a personal attack.
- **Take Responsibility.** Don't shift responsibility and blame onto others; share disagreements publicly.<sup>4</sup>

After posting these guidelines and encouraging others to sign this Girls Rule! pledge on civility and etiquette, one of my FB friends, a Christian minister, condemned the effort as "another trick of the enemy to not hold people accountable to accept Jesus Christ and [leave them to be] free to do what they desire." Explaining his decision not to sign this pledge of civility and etiquette, the minister invoked what he understood to be the biblical principle that Christ "came to divide."

This personal incident with a ministerial colleague reminds me that people of faith who live in a pluralistic world with persons with very different commitments have a variety of approaches with coming to terms with this reality. Linda Vogel summarizes four responses to pluralism by people of faith: 1) engaging in dialogue and honest sharing, 2) seeking to change those who are different, 3) isolation and refusal to communicate with any who do not speak the same language or share the same commitments, and 4) accommodate or assimilate within the other's cultural worldview.<sup>5</sup> My personal approach would be closest to the first option. Dialogue is fundamental to meaning making and can contribute to transformational learning. As an instructor, I try to create space for dialogue and difference. As a learning facilitator, I can be "the sage on the stage." However, I really want to challenge students to first *generously* engage persons, texts, contexts, and situations in order to understand and then to critically engage and evaluate these sources to contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

I agree with Davis that in the seminary classroom, in the church, and in the broader society, we must "aggressively demand civility" from ourselves and others. We must do this, and not only as an act of citizenship; this *aggressive* demand for civility is a fruit of our central vocation as Christian disciples and a critical dimension of our prophetic witness. I agree that civility, in public political discourse, must comprise the *cluster* of virtues that he names; however, what seems most fundamental to me is recovery of a basic tone and practice of respect.

In an address at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. in 2001, Rev. Joseph E. Lowery described respect as "a matrix for spirituality." In this "Georgia Day" address Lowery said:

The Creator, the creatures, and creation. The respect for each of these should be thought of as a matrix for spirituality. Creation empowers us to respect the sacredness of our being and the sacredness of others. It allows us to relate to each other in God's

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.girlz-rule.org/CivilityAndEtiquetteAwarenessMonth.html> (accessed May 8, 2012)

<sup>5</sup> Linda J. Vogel, *Teaching and Learning in Communities of Faith: Empowering Adults through Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1991), 6.

creation, not for what they can do for us but for who we are and who they are. ...Reverence for the Creator, the creatures, and creation leads us to become instruments of healing for the distortions in our social, economic, and political institutions.<sup>6</sup>

I resonate with Davis' proposal which appears to be a call to "go back to the basics." As people of faith, we will encounter much resistance, not only from politicians, but also from within our own faith communities as well as our theological seminaries, religious colleges, and divinity schools. However, with Davis, we must "aggressively demand civility" from ourselves, our leaders, and our media. We can teach and practice what Aretha sang about so gloriously: R-E-S-P-E-C-T. This is "taking care of business" in our private as well as our public discourse. Much is at stake as we "resist politics as usual."

#### Questions for Reflection:

1. Think about your own upbringing. How were you raised to show respect, and to whom? Were there people or groups of people you were not taught to show respect to? How were you taught to treat such people?
2. How do you convey respect for others in your family? In your workplace? In your church? In the broader public? Does conveying respect look and sound the same in all these places? If so, why? If not, what are the differences and why do they matter?
3. How do you work with people who refuse to show respect to others?

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph E. Lowery, "Respect: A Matrix for Spirituality" in *Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 46.