

What does it mean to be civil?

Civility and politeness are not the same. Sometimes, they're even antithetical.



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I've been thinking a lot lately about what it means to be civil.

As our administration steamrolls over norm after norm after long-held democratic norm, I've been waffling between annoyance and fascination at the media tempest surrounding Sarah Huckabee Sanders and the restaurant owner who asked her to leave.

The angry progressive in me wants to say, *Really? After everything this administration has done, this is what we choose to focus on in a debate about civility?*

The bleeding-heart liberal in me wants to say, *Well, but should a restaurant be able to refuse someone based on their politics? How would I feel if the situation were reversed?*

Then there's the philosopher in me, who is driven to ask, *What does it even mean to be civil?* It's a harder and more important question than it seems.

Words are, after all, notoriously easy to misuse, misconstrue, and weaponize. I see this happening with "civility" now. Many of the calls for so-called civility are actually coded calls to uphold the status quo. They're designed to shut down and discredit activists who are pushing for the sorts of changes that make those in power uneasy. What they really mean when they call for "civility" is, keep quiet, maintain order, and stop asking so many uncomfortable questions.

What does it mean to be civil?

In common English, we tend to associate civility with politeness, courtesy, and good manners — saying "please" and "thank you," queuing in line, speaking in a level tone of voice, avoiding hot-button topics of conversation. And what purpose does politeness serve? It keeps things orderly, predictable and comfortable, even as it seeks to keep the uncomfortable out of sight.

The Ringer recently published a [fantastic essay](#) on the history of the word "civility" and how it came to be conflated with politeness. It's well worth a read in its entirety, but I found the etymology of "civility" to be especially interesting. The word comes from the

Latin *civilitas*, which refers to citizens' willingness to give of themselves for the greater good of the *civitas*, or city.

With this in mind, I'd like to offer an alternative understanding of what it means to be civil, one that's less about good manners and more about good citizenship, less about orderly conduct and more about care and compassion.

It is polite to smile and nod when a friend, neighbor or colleague makes a bigoted comment. It is polite to smooth over the awkwardness and discomfort that emerges in such moments. It is polite to continue the conversation and pretend one does not hear.

But it is not civil. On the contrary, such politeness is a form of quiet violence. It perpetuates oppression and weaponizes courtesy in the name of easing social discomfort. This kind of politeness is antithetical to civility.

What does it mean to be civil?

To be civil is, fundamentally, to care. To care for one's community and the dignity and flourishing of each individual within it, even when doing so is difficult and uncomfortable. To be civil is to participate with others in that community, tend to it, help bring forth its latent potential. To be civil is to recognize the interconnectedness of modern life and take responsibility for oneself as an interconnected being whose actions have consequences.

Civil, in other words, is not something you are. Civil is something you *do*.

And sometimes, to be civil is to actively protest injustice and oppression, even when it means peacefully disrupting regular order. With this in mind, I believe there's a strong argument to be made that the owner of the Red Hen was acting from a place of deep civility when she asked Sanders to leave her restaurant. It is not discrimination to confront a public official because she has lied for, defended and supported an administration that is proudly guilty of violating human rights. It is an act of civil protest. For those of us who would like to believe that we, too, are civil beings, it is almost a moral imperative.

From *The Ringer*:

Protest is a profoundly civil action, even when the act of protest involves raising one's voice, or politely refusing service on ethical grounds. It may not be mannerly to scream during a circus, but frequently it is the only way to be heard.

I wonder sometimes how history will judge those of us who have lived through this time. My guess, and my hope, is that thinly-veiled calls for "civility" by elites will rightly be recognized as the reactionary admonishments they are, while the unmannerly few who resist, protest and advocate for justice and equality will be seen as the truly civil ones.

The Ringer article notes that Martin Luther King, who is often held up now as a model of civil protest, was [heavily criticized](#) for lacking civility in his day. His [Letter From](#)

[Birmingham Jail](#) is most famous for its criticism of the white moderate “who is more devoted to ‘order’ than justice,” but his passage on the hidden tension of injustice is equally powerful:

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

So what does it mean to be civil?

To be civil is to care for our community so deeply that we find the courage to step past the orderly and the comfortable in service of the greater good.

To be civil is not to create tension but to expose the hidden tension of injustice that quietly poisons us all.

To be civil in these times is, I think, a tremendous act of faith, for it requires us to believe we can be more than what we are now. At the same time, it also forces us to acknowledge that we are powerful enough to make a difference as we are.

Maybe, then, to be civil is to accept that we are indeed both powerful and imperfect, and to answer the call to service anyway.