The Word 'Civil' Has Become Meaningless. Here's a Definition We Should Consider

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A few years ago, I was researching a black women's social club and mutual-aid society called the United Order of Tents, a group that began during slavery to help enslaved women escape to freedom. It was still operating in the 21st century, providing black communities with resources for senior citizens, banking and loans. But besides the economic benefits of this institution, I was struck by how much of what they were able to complete together was based on fostering a sense of community. The women I spoke to pointed as much to their gatherings, celebrations and parties as they did to their community work—for many, these were one and the same.

Those women are the best examples I can think of [civility](#), at least the kind of civility I want to see. We have had [so many requests for civility](#) since the [2016 presidential election](#) that I am not even sure what people mean when they use the word anymore. I think that is kind of the point— *civility* gestures toward the values of thoughtfulness, of care. But civility, which is so often interpreted as privileging comfort and societal norms over truth, is often enacted as violence— killing those ideas and arguments that make those in power uncomfortable. Think of [Martin Luther King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"](#) in which he wrote, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."

Can we take the lessons of the Tents to a deeper meaning of civility? I think of the other meaning of the word *civil:* "relating to ordinary citizens and their concerns." To that end, I thought a way to come to a radical understanding of civility could be to ask organizers who think and work constantly to reach ordinary people how they use language to achieve this civic goal. Maybe we could come up with a version of civility concerned less with whether or not someone used strong language, and more with whether the words they used described a future that could work for all.

One of the organizers I approached was [Ai-jen Poo](#), the director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Poo stresses, "When building support and community, an offering is more attractive than a request …" She says, "When I invite you to a gathering, I invite you to become connected to something bigger than yourself. One of the most effective approaches that we use is by beginning our meetings with sharing personal care stories. Everyone can relate to the need of care: we have all needed care at some point in our lives, or know someone who is receiving or in need of care."

Another organizer I spoke with was Emery Wright, the co-director of the group Project South. Wright says, "Effective organizing is not about prescribing solutions and convincing people to

agree with you. It's about listening to the needs and desires of the people and coming to shared agreement about collective action based on those needs and desires."

Every organizer I contacted said the obsession with correct language hinders movements and can stop connections between people. Yamani Hernandez, the executive director of the National Network of Abortion Funds, says, "I think political education is important. However I think it's really important for our language to be accessible and plain. I would say, Don't lose the people you're fighting for just because they didn't know or use the same words you did to describe their experience or analysis of an issue."

What would it mean if we used these guidelines to identify civil speech? If we said that *civil* included the language that called in more people, that provided space to listen to their concerns. If we decided [common ground](#) was meant for building new worlds, not paving over uncomfortable truths? I'm not sure, but I hope we will soon find out.