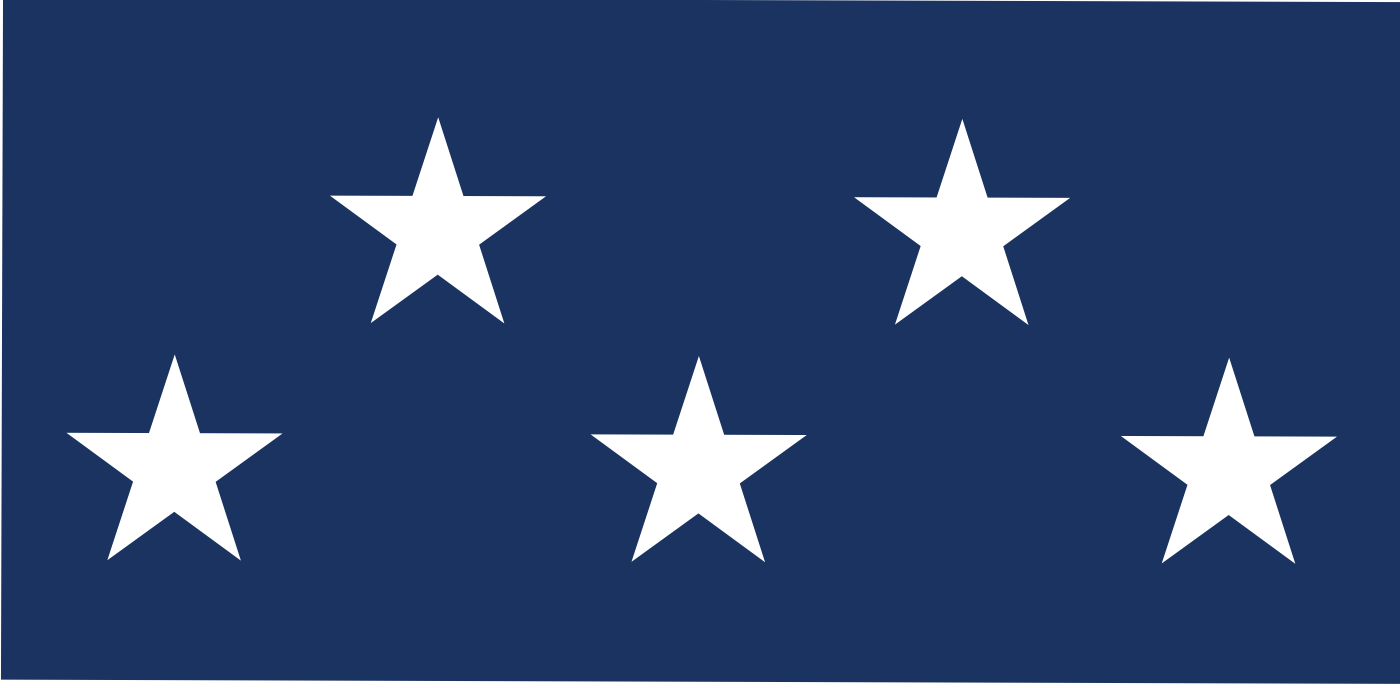


The Civility Handbook

A Guide For All Americans

The Civility Handbook



Ronald Reagan

CENTER ON CIVILITY
AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy depends on more than institutions
–It depends on how we treat one another.
The Civility Handbook offers a practical guide to restoring the habits that make self-government possible: listening with intent, arguing with respect, and finding common ground without abandoning conviction. In an age of division, it shows how everyday choices can strengthen a free society.

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In memory of Romeo Legaspi, whose dedication and creativity were instrumental in shaping The Civility Handbook.

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Introduction

"Democracy is not a fragile flower. Still, it needs cultivating."

– Ronald Reagan

Civility: The Cornerstone of Democracy

Our democratic republic is under strain. The values that once allowed peaceful resolution of disagreement are eroding. In our politics, workplaces, schools, online spaces, and even our homes, conversations increasingly devolve into anger or withdrawal.

Successful self-governance depends on more than laws and elections. It depends on social norms that guide how citizens treat one another in daily life. That is where civility becomes a cornerstone of our democracy.

Two and a half centuries ago, the American Founders achieved something new in history: a government built on the consent and participation of its citizens that gave them the power to shape

their own destiny. Democracy was the world's boldest experiment in self-government, and it still is.

Our American experiment has survived wars, economic depressions, and fierce disagreements because generations of Americans chose to sustain it. Throughout history Americans have argued passionately but within shared boundaries of respect. In short, they practiced civility.

Today, our collective commitment to civility has weakened, and many Americans are exhausted by the anger and division that fills our screens and hijacks conversations.

The solution is in our reach. It begins with habits we can all learn, one interaction at a time. It begins with civility.

Civility is a discipline that we can practice in every conversation and interaction with our fellow Americans. Rather than a particular set of outcomes or goals, civility is a way of communicating that treats our neighbors and fellow citizens with honesty and respect.

At the core of civility lies the belief that every person has equal value and inherent dignity, the very principles enshrined in the Declaration of

Independence by the Founders of our country.

Civility is also an action, a habit that can be adopted and nourished, but sometimes forgotten. It is like learning to shoot a free throw in basketball or play the piano. Anyone can do it, but it takes practice and only stays sharp if it is reinforced day after day.

Above all, civility is a moral duty to our fellow citizens, ancestors, and future generations to carry the values and habits of the free society we inherited into the future.

Our conduct determines whether we move forward together or retreat into division and dysfunction.

The Civility Handbook is a practical guide to navigating modern American life in a way that cultivates a strong democracy and advances our freedom.

The book explores enduring principles of civility that will make us better communicators and more active citizens. Through great American stories and practical strategies for civil discourse, these pages present examples that demonstrate America at its best.

Each chapter explores one principle and shows how it applies in two arenas where democratic life unfolds: in our private relationships with family, friends, and neighbors, and in the places we gather that shape our shared life, such as workplaces, churches, schools, sports leagues, civic associations and government.

The principles move in a deliberate sequence: beginning with who we are and the character we bring to public life, moving to how we treat other people and the relationships we need to sustain our democracy, and ending with the habits that enable us to disagree productively.

Through these guiding principles, we can build stronger connections to our fellow citizens and rekindle the democratic spirit of civility. Whatever our role—student, parent, co-worker, advocate, or elected official—engagement with the practice of civility will help build new habits, bridge the country's divides, and build a strong foundation for the next generation of Americans.

Chapter 1

The Power of Humility and Curiosity

"Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls, your ego goes with it."

– Colin Powell

Take Inspiration

Over a career that spanned war rooms and diplomatic tables, Colin Powell built a reputation not just for leadership, but for judgment. Rising from a young officer in the Vietnam War to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and later Secretary of State, Powell operated in environments where decisions carried immense consequences—and where certainty was often elusive.

He understood that strong convictions, if held too tightly, could become liabilities. In fast-moving and uncertain conditions, leaders had to remain open to new information, willing to adjust course, and prepared to admit when assumptions no

longer held. That discipline shaped his approach to leadership.

Powell emphasized listening, testing ideas, and separating personal identity from professional judgment. Positions could change as facts changed; what mattered was getting the decision right, not defending it at all costs. Powell showed that intellectual humility is a strength: the ability to hold views firmly, but revise them when reality demands it.

Civility is possible when we recognize that no one sees the full picture. Practicing humility means holding our views confidently but also with openness and the recognition that what we know may be incomplete or out of date. Others may see what we cannot, and there is always more to learn.

Beginning with curiosity allows us to deliberate together and discover solutions we could not find alone. It requires testing our convictions against evidence, experience, and others' perspectives. That discipline strengthens judgment rather than weakening it.

For each of us:

- ★ **Accept the limits of our knowledge.**
  Remember that what we know is partial. Even if a view is mostly correct, there may be more to consider.
- ★ **Hold convictions without rigidity.**
  Strong beliefs are not a problem; the danger lies in treating them as beyond question. We can hold our principles firmly, but avoid taking ourselves too seriously.
- ★ **Welcome surprise.**
  When new evidence or experiences challenge what we thought we knew, view it as an opportunity, not a threat. Changing our mind when presented with truth is wisdom, not weakness.
- ★ **Challenge established wisdom.**
  When we hear "this is how it has always been done," pause and ask why. Progress begins by testing whether old answers still fit new conditions.

Together we can:

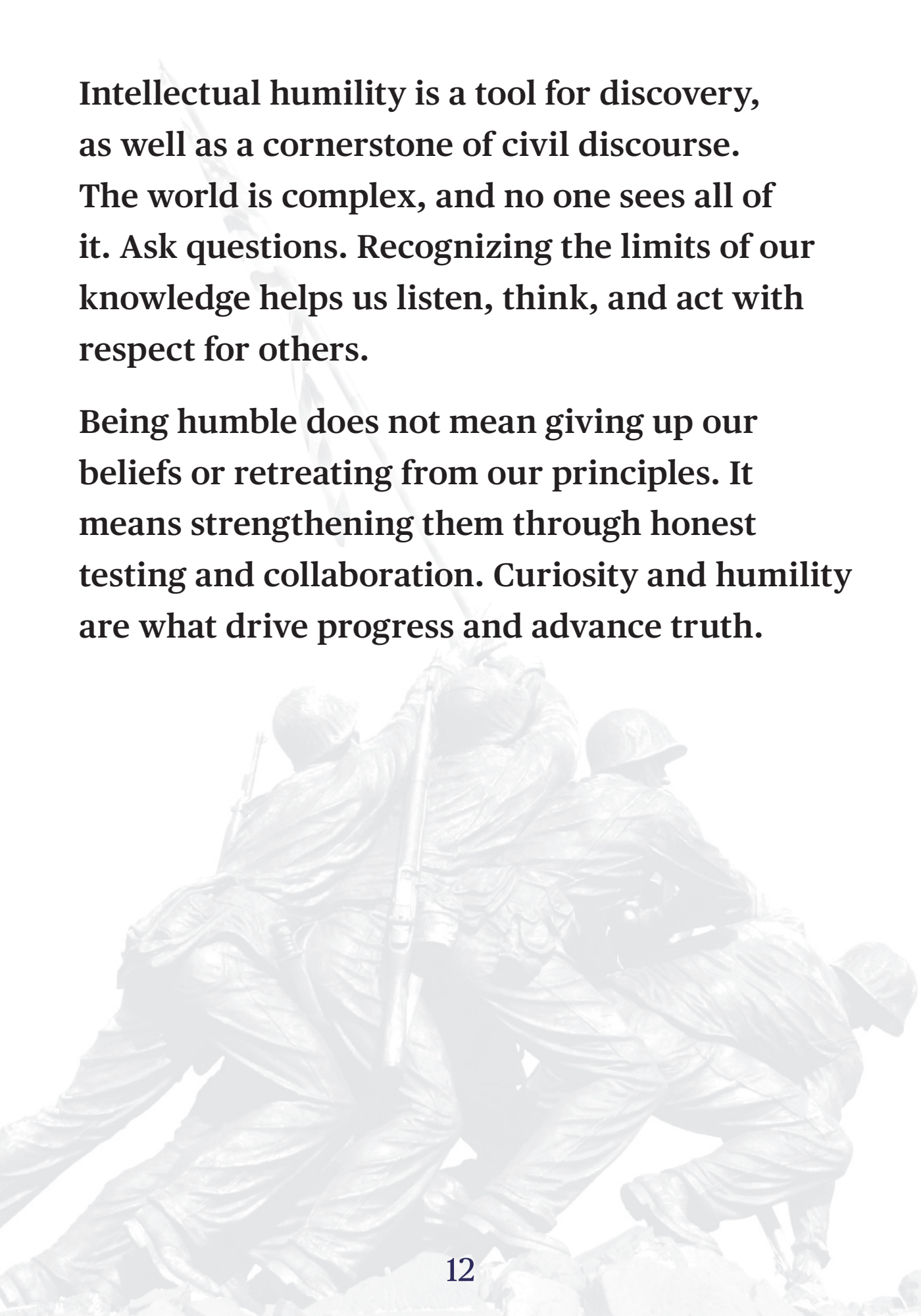
- ★ **Design processes that invite challenge.** The scientific method relies on testing assumptions and revising conclusions based on evidence. We should follow the same procedure in civic, political, and work life.

- ★ **Model humility and reward curiosity.** Leaders set the tone. By admitting error or tempering certainty, we set a standard. Publicly credit people whose questions improved outcomes. Humility is contagious.

- ★ **Create space for dissent.** Establish norms that protect all views, avoid group-think and prevent consensus from forming too quickly. Assign someone to argue the opposite case or have a structured debate to prevent blind spots.

Intellectual humility is a tool for discovery, as well as a cornerstone of civil discourse. The world is complex, and no one sees all of it. Ask questions. Recognizing the limits of our knowledge helps us listen, think, and act with respect for others.

Being humble does not mean giving up our beliefs or retreating from our principles. It means strengthening them through honest testing and collaboration. Curiosity and humility are what drive progress and advance truth.



Chapter 2

Follow your Inner Compass

"You rarely have time for everything you want in this life, so you need to make choices. And hopefully your choices can come from a deep sense of who you are."

– Mister Rogers

Take Inspiration

Mister Rogers, the longtime host of the children's television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, is remembered for his kindness– but his defining trait was moral clarity.

Behind the calm voice and gentle manner was a man who made deliberate choices about who he was and what moral standards he would follow. He rejected commercial deals that would have brought him a fortune, choosing instead to protect the integrity of children's programming. He insisted that his work put human dignity before ratings.

In 1969, at a time when public swimming pools across America were still sites of racial division, Mister Rogers invited Officer Clemmons, played

by African American actor François Clemmons, to join him in cooling their feet in a small wading pool on his television set. It was a simple act, but a deliberate one. Rogers was acting on a clear inner conviction about dignity and equality. Without speeches or confrontation, he demonstrated what it looks like to quietly follow the dictates of one's conscience, even when it would be easier to do nothing. In doing so, he offered millions of viewers a model of principle in action.

His public conduct reflected a settled inner compass and the discipline to always follow it.

Civility is usually described as how we treat other people. But it begins earlier than that, with how we govern ourselves.

Before a word is spoken, before a disagreement turns heated, decisions have already been made: What kind of person am I? What do I value and want to protect? What are my beliefs and principles? Do I act in accordance with them?

A free society cannot depend on constant supervision. Democracy works only when citizens bring self-restraint, judgment, and moral guidelines into public life. Conscience is what keeps civility from collapsing under pressure, when restraint is inconvenient, costly, or unpopular.

For each of us:

- ★ **Name non-negotiables.**
  Know the moral lines that we as individuals will not cross, in money, speech, conduct, or anything else. When pressure comes, boundaries are already clear.

- ★ **Decide before we're tested.**
  If we wait until we're angry, tired, or afraid, we will bargain with ourselves. Establish key moral boundaries in advance.

- ★ **Practice small refusals.**
  Conscience is a muscle. Decline the minor shortcut, the easy exaggeration, the polite lie. Civility in public is built from integrity in private.

- ★ **Accept the cost upfront.**
  Following conscience usually costs time, status, or personal comfort. Accept the cost in advance.

Together we can:

- ★ **Identify and state organizational principles early.**
  Distill an institution's identity into a short set of clear, repeatable statements. If workers or members cannot say it from memory, it will not guide them under stress. Do not wait until a crisis begins to define values.

- ★ **Make escalation easy.**
  Create a clear, stigma-free path for raising moral concerns up the chain, without forcing adversarial and controversial whistleblowing theatrics.

- ★ **Clarify where authority ends.**
  Define what leaders cannot decide alone. Conscience can be weaker when power is vague. Ensure executive leaders and managers know when they can or should bring in others, and clarify when boards of directors and trustees should be involved in decision-making.

★ **Limit anonymous power.**
Reduce decisions made by committees where no one can be identified as responsible. Those who make decisions must own their consequences. Conscience requires a name attached.

Civility is not just a matter of tone or technique. It is the outward expression of inner restraint.

In a democracy, no one is compelled to act with dignity. That choice is voluntary, and therefore moral. Conscience is what makes civility durable when it stops being convenient, when restraint costs status, speed, or approval.

A free society depends on citizens who can govern themselves before attempting to govern others.

Chapter 3:
Show Respect and be Respected

"I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me. All I ask is that you respect me as a human being."

– Jackie Robinson

Take Inspiration

In 1947, Jackie Robinson stepped onto the Brooklyn Dodgers field as the first African American player in Major League Baseball. He entered both a game that tested his athletic skills and a trial of his character. Every taunt from fans or opponents tested his composure. Robinson rose to the occasion and responded with restraint and respect, even when others failed to show him the same.

His restraint revealed a deeper strength, one rooted in respect for himself, his teammates, the fans, and even those who did not respect him. Robinson refused to return insult for insult. His discipline earned him the respect of many, and led America to confront its own conscience. As President Reagan said decades later, when

awarding him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Robinson "struck a mighty blow for equality, freedom, and the American way of life." Today, his uniform number, 42, is the only one retired across Major League Baseball. While modern athletes face a different set of pressures—constant scrutiny, instant reaction, and public judgment—the discipline required to show and earn respect remains the same.

Civility begins with respect. To respect others is to acknowledge their worth, regardless of how they appear, where they come from, or what they believe. A foundation of respect builds trust, increases cooperation, and makes constructive conversation possible.

Respect does not mean we can't disagree strongly, or that we must have warm feelings for everyone, or even that we like one another. Rather, it enables us to disagree in a way that maintains dignity for ourselves and those we engage with.

In an age that promotes instant reaction and outrage, respect demands internal restraint. It invites us to listen, look people in the eye, and recognize their experience might be different from ours. While these may seem like small acts, they carry a significant weight that sets the foundation for civility.

For each of us:

- ★ **Begin with dignity.**
  Recognize that our shared humanity outranks our differences. Every person has inherent worth that transcends their beliefs, titles, or any other characteristics.

- ★ **Disagree without demeaning.**
  We should critique ideas, not people. Hold firm convictions, but resist contempt. Composure under pressure is a form of strength—and it often changes the tone of the room.

- ★ **Carry ourselves with self-respect.**
  The way we stand, speak, and work informs others about us. Respecting ourselves invites others to respect us. Prepare thoroughly, present our best selves and follow through on the commitments we make.

Together we can:

- ★ **Promote communities of respect.**
  In the office, at school, or in a house of worship, culture is built deliberately–one interaction at a time. A culture of respect doesn't appear by chance; it is designed, practiced, and reinforced through daily norms.

- ★ **Set expectations that all voices can be heard.**
  Make it clear in meetings, classrooms, or town halls that everyone has a right to speak and be heard, even when their views are unpopular. Rotate who leads discussions and invite quieter participants in.

- ★ **Lead by example.**
  Whether in a meeting, a classroom, or a public square, we should model the tone we wish to see. Respect practiced in public becomes respect multiplied.

- ★ **Show gratitude and recognition.**
  Respect deepens when people feel their contribution is acknowledged. Credit a colleague in a meeting for a thoughtfully planned event. Thank a volunteer by name. Communities get stronger when people express their admiration for each other's contributions.

Respect begins in the choices we make and endures in the cultures we build. If we practice it in our dealings with others, and reinforce it in the communities we serve, it becomes culture. When respect becomes routine, civility follows.

Chapter 4

Listen

"I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening."

– Larry King

Take Inspiration

Larry King, one of America's greatest television and radio hosts, built a career on the power of listening. Across tens of thousands of interviews, from everyday people to musicians, actors, and presidents, he was devoted to listening well. He stood out in his field because of his genuine curiosity. He asked simple questions: *What happened? Why? How did that make you feel?* Then he stepped back and let others talk, ready to learn and probe for more.

He believed that a conversation should unfold like a discovery, not a performance, with a change in direction always possible. Instead of preparing rigid lists of questions, he followed

the conversation closely, responding to whatever was said. Never afraid to ask “stupid” questions, he knew the curiosity behind it mattered more than a show of sophistication. King proved that listening–not cleverness–opens people up and uncovers truths.

In a world where everyone has a microphone, Larry King showed that listening remains the quickest way to learn.

Civility depends on not just hearing words, but taking them seriously. When we listen actively, every conversation carries the chance to teach us something new. We are not learning when we are just waiting to speak.

Listening requires curiosity, humility, and the discipline to table our thoughts long enough to hear another’s. In a time when communication is constant but attention is rare, attentive listening is especially crucial.

For each of us:

- ★ **Be fully present.**
  True listening begins with attention. That means turning off distractions, setting down our phones and laptops, facing the person speaking, and looking them in the eye.

- ★ **Ask honest questions.**
  Curiosity keeps conversation alive. Ask to learn, not to signal what we already know or "win" the exchange. The best questions are often simple and sincere.

- ★ **Allow silence.**
  Resist the impulse to rush to fill a pause. Silence invites depth. It gives others the courage to continue and gives us time to consider what has already been said.

- ★ **Reflect what we have heard.**
  Listen until we can explain the other's view in terms they would recognize and then summarize their point before offering critique or reply. This practice steadies tempers, surfaces nuance, and shows our goal is comprehension.

Together we can:

- ★ **Plan for listening.**
  Intentional design makes listening part of the rhythm of daily life. In leadership or civic life, build routines like weekly one-on-ones, small-group debriefs, or an end-of-day check-in. Reflect on whether we listened at least as much as we spoke in these meetings.
- ★ **Start with listening.**
  Open gatherings—staff meetings, sports practices, or community forums—with a brief "listening round." Give each person time to share an update, concern, or insight before getting underway.
- ★ **Set clear norms for turn-taking.**
  Establish practices that prevent the loudest voice from dominating. Use tools like a speaking order, timed turns, or rotating leaders to ensure all reasonable perspectives are heard, especially quieter ones.
- ★ **Set up feedback loops that matter.**
  Create consistent ways for people to be heard—short surveys after events, anonymous comment boxes, open office hours, or end-of-week check-ins. Then tell people what will change as a result.

Listening is not just the absence of speech but the presence of curiosity. The best conversations expand both participants' minds. They also strengthen the trust and connection among citizens that a democracy depends on.

When we listen fully, we honor another person's experience and keep open the possibility that they can teach us something essential. Listening can be contagious: the more we listen to others, the more they may listen to us. The habit begins in daily conversation but extends to our workplaces, teams, and communities. It ultimately strengthens the health of our civic and national life, one attentive exchange at a time.

Chapter 5

Build Relationships

"We don't accomplish anything in this world alone."

– Sandra Day O'Connor

Take Inspiration

In 1981, when Sandra Day O'Connor was nominated by President Ronald Reagan to become America's first female Supreme Court Justice, she found a bench full of brilliant minds who often worked in close quarters but rarely shared time as people. The justices' group lunch—once a regular tradition—had faded. Some attended occasionally; many preferred to eat alone.

O'Connor understood that the country's highest court needed a foundation of trust to function well. So she revived the tradition of group lunch between the Supreme Court members and gently, persistently urged every justice to join. When Clarence Thomas joined the court a decade after Justice O'Connor, he resisted at first—he wanted to catch up on work—but O'Connor kept inviting him until he came. Soon, newcomers like Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer joined too, again at her insistence.

Around that table, they did not discuss cases. They talked about families, hobbies, music, baseball, and vacations—the ordinary things that remind people they are more than their ideological positions. Her simple act did not eliminate disagreement, and it was not meant to, but it strengthened the trust that kept the institution whole. Even in our era of video calls, text messaging, and hybrid work, the power of breaking bread together remains the same.

Civic culture thrives in healthy communities and relationships. Building and sustaining strong relationships grounds our conversations in trust and reminds us that we share more beliefs than the issues that divide us. It builds common ground.

Communities grow through everyday interactions in our neighborhood groups, faith communities, clubs, and other gathering places that bring people into regular contact. They grow in simple, intentional practices like shared meals, small traditions, and moments of showing up for one another.

In a time when many Americans feel increasingly isolated, choosing connection is more important than ever. When we foster relationships, disagreement becomes easier to navigate and cooperation becomes possible even in the midst of sharp differences.

For each of us:

- ★ **Be the person who brings people together.** Host the simple things: a standing game night, a backyard dinner, a monthly coffee. This doesn't require a big guest list, just a consistent place where friends and family can come together.

- ★ **Create small rituals of connection.** Send a quick note to a friend each morning. Call a sibling every week. Micro-rituals anchor relationships in a world where busy schedules pull us apart.

- ★ **Invite someone.** Ask a new neighbor to join a lunch group or book club. Expanding the circle does not require a grand gesture, just a willingness to notice who might benefit from an opportunity to contribute and participate.

- ★ **Show up regularly to a shared public space.** Visit the same farmers market, library hour, or coffee shop each week. Repeated encounters with the same people build trust and familiarity, laying the groundwork for genuine relationships.

Together we can:

- ★ **Design spaces with community in mind.** Shared rooms, shared meals, and shared moments create the relationships that support honest debate. Weekly gatherings, informal lunches, and open-door time encourage people to be social.
- ★ **Strong relationships don't emerge on their own. Build them.** Whether in a workplace, a school, a congregation, or a neighborhood, healthy institutions create opportunities for people to know one another beyond their formal roles.
- ★ **Build rhythms that bring people together.** A workplace book club, a rotating lunch group, a volunteer day, or a weekly trivia team can give colleagues a reason to connect beyond deadlines and deliverables.
- ★ **Create organization-wide community service projects.** Coordinating a charity drive, mentoring program, or neighborhood cleanup gives people a reason to collaborate, and collaboration builds trust faster than conversation alone.

Civic life thrives when we take the time to bring the people around us together—friendships, neighborhoods, congregations, and the everyday circles that give us a shared sense of life together. When people feel connected, they give one another the benefit of the doubt and listen more. When connection fades, conflicts can harden into mistrust.

In today's loneliness epidemic, choosing to build relationships matters more than ever. We must prioritize them in daily life, strengthen them in the groups we are a part of, and protect communities when they start to unravel. When we invest in one another, civility grows and cooperative success becomes possible.

Chapter 6
Find Common Ground

"People can work together, people can love each other, no matter where they come from, or how they were brought up."
– Snoop Dogg

"The melding of cultures is really what I want to see happen in the United States and so does Snoop...There shouldn't be any divides. There shouldn't be any question that we can all get together and get along."
– Martha Stewart

Take Inspiration

The unlikely friendship between Snoop Dogg and Martha Stewart has lasted more than 15 years, though it never would have worked on paper. He is a West Coast hip-hop icon known for his laid-back swagger and irreverent wit. She is the image of traditional East Coast domesticity–formal dinners, pristine kitchens, perfect table settings.

But on a cooking set in 2008, they saw past

these divisions. They laughed at the same jokes, enjoyed the same flavors, admired each other's talent and discovered a shared love for food and storytelling. From that spark came a long-running friendship. They have since co-hosted countless television programs and even attended events together like the 2024 Olympics. They don't pretend to be alike. They lean into who they truly are and build on the overlap through playful humor, mutual respect and a willingness to learn from the other person's world.

Their chemistry surprises America because it reminds us how much more possible common ground is than our culture suggests.

Finding common ground takes discipline. It requires us to notice what we share before arguing over what we do not. It does not erase disagreement or ask us to pretend differences are not real. Instead, it creates a stable foundation—shared tastes, interests, goals or values—that makes honest discussion possible.

In a polarized age, we often forget how ordinary those bridges can be: food, music, sports, art, family. Each of these is a universal human experience that cuts across background, class, geography and political belief. Music moves people who do not share a language, sports unite

strangers in a common endeavor, art sparks emotion across cultures, and family life reminds us of our similarities.

Finding common ground matters for civility because it reminds us that our disagreements happen inside a larger circle of shared humanity.

For each of us:

- ★ **Seek out shared experiences.**
  Do not wait for common ground to appear on its own–go looking for it. Join a local sports league, cooking class, art workshop or music group where people show up for the same purpose, not the same politics.

- ★ **Ask people about what they love.**
  We often learn more from someone's favorite album, team, or hobby than from their résumé or voting record. These doorways lead to connection even across sharp differences.

- ★ **Widen the circle on purpose.**
  Make space for people outside our social lane: an older neighbor or someone new to town. Common ground expands only when we do.

Together we can:

- ★ **Create recreational traditions.**
  Launch a workplace kickball team, a monthly bowling night, or a weekend running group. Sports dissolve hierarchy, invite teamwork, and remind people they are on the same side.

- ★ **Build arts and music into public life.**
  Start a community "music league" where colleagues share songs each week or host a rotating art wall in their office or school where people display creative work. These practices spark conversation.

- ★ **Protect shared civic spaces.**
  Churches, libraries, farmers markets, museums and parks are venues of democracy, places where strangers begin to recognize each other. Support them, fund them and show up.

Civility does not require agreement, but it does require relationships. Common ground becomes cultural when we build structures that make shared experiences routine. When we connect through food, sports, art, music, or simple stories from daily life, we weaken the belief that we are hopelessly divided.

Americans of both political parties admired the relationship that was established between Republican President Ronald Reagan and Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. Although they had deep political and ideological differences, they developed a respectful relationship that enabled them to find common ground and advance the interests of the American people.

Build overlap in personal conversations and stay open to the possibility that friendship comes from a direction we would never expect.

Chapter 7

Distinguish Facts from Opinion

"Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts."

– Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Take Inspiration

Daniel Patrick Moynihan spent much of his career arguing that policy should follow evidence, even when the evidence contradicted what his own side wanted to hear.

In 1965, as a Labor Department official under a Democratic administration, he published a report linking a lack of family structure to poverty. The findings drew sharp criticism from civil rights allies and liberal colleagues who saw them as detrimental to their political agenda and the episode strained his standing within the coalition he worked inside.

As a senator, he broke from the prevailing view inside the U.S. intelligence community and much of the foreign policy establishment by arguing

from open data that the Soviet Union was far weaker than official estimates claimed. He was proven right when the Soviet Union fell apart shortly thereafter and confirmed his claims.

In each of these cases, Moynihan treated the data as the starting point for argument, not something to be settled by consensus, seniority, or party loyalty.

Civility in conversation requires that we test claims against reality. Arguments—whether in work, politics, or civic life—carry weight only when they are grounded in evidence.

That evidence may take the form of verifiable facts, or of clear reasoning that can be questioned and challenged. Ask whether arguments are sound and supported, either by facts or by valid principles that lead to the conclusion drawn.

This discipline applies not only to what others say, but to what we ourselves say. Conviction is important, but it does not relieve us of the obligation to justify our claims.

For each of us:

- ★ **Evaluate the basis of claims.**
  Before making a claim, ask whether it rests on direct evidence, credible reporting by an unbiased source, or a chain of reasoning. Speak with the confidence the assertion deserves.

- ★ **Verify with primary sources when facts are at issue.**
  When a claim relies on what happened, consult original documents, data, transcripts, or firsthand news accounts rather than summaries or commentary.

- ★ **Test the logic when evidence is indirect.**
  Some arguments depend less on data than on reasoning. Examine whether the premises are clear, relevant, and sufficient–and whether the conclusion actually follows.

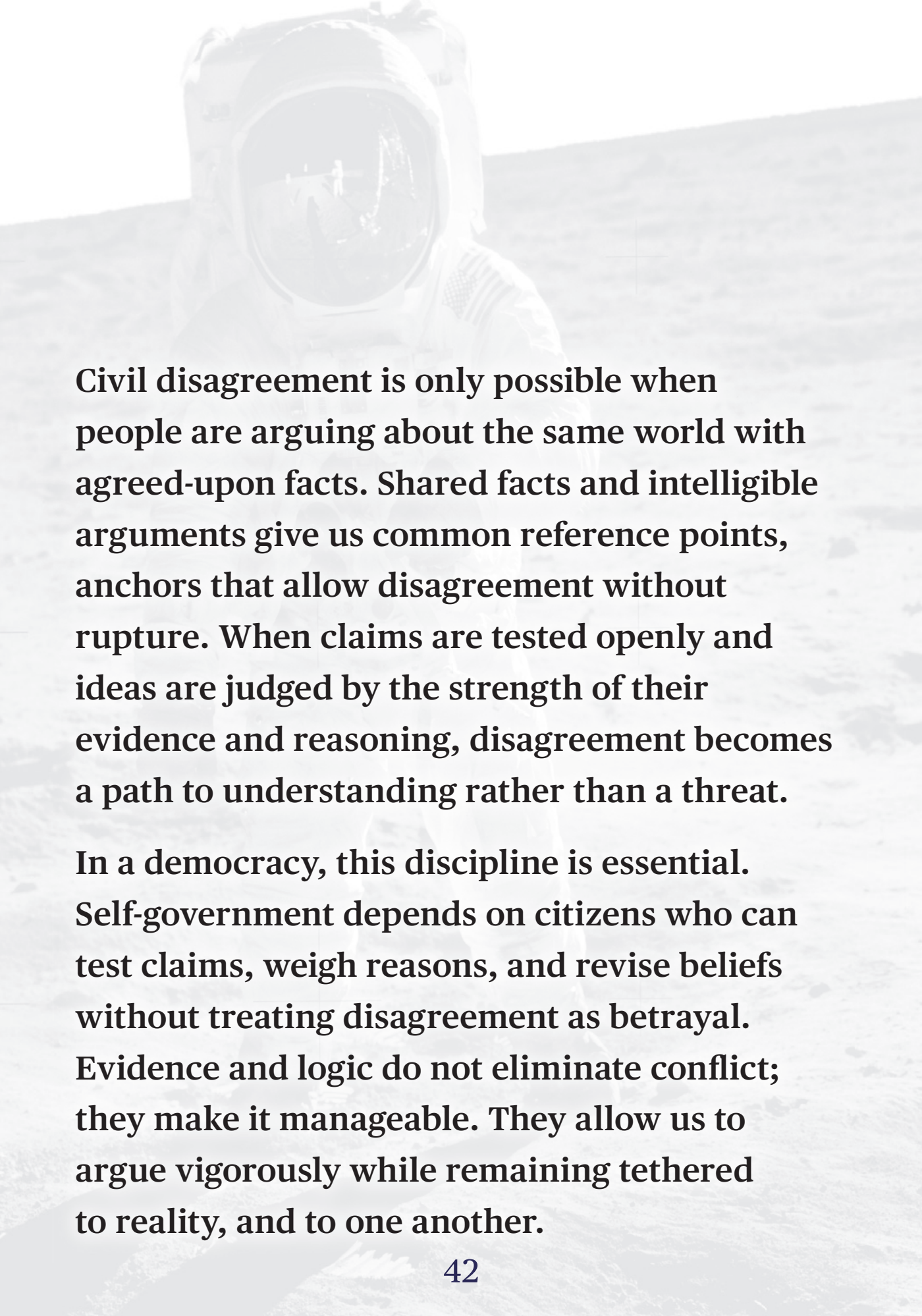
- ★ **Distinguish facts, interpretations, and judgments.**
  Facts describe the way something is or was. Interpretations are opinions. Judgments weigh known factors. Civil argument requires keeping these categories distinct.

Together we can:

- ★ **Expect sources, not just assertions.**
  In staff meetings, boardrooms, classrooms, congregational discussions, and council hearings, establish the norm that claims affecting others are accompanied by sources that can be examined and discussed.

- ★ **Encourage accuracy over speed.**
  In offices, newsrooms, and public forums, reward accuracy more than speed. Slow the conversation when necessary to confirm facts before decisions are made or positions harden. Once presented, inaccurate information is difficult to retract.

- ★ **Model disciplined argument.**
  When leaders cite evidence, lay out their reasoning, and present conclusions publicly, they signal that persuasion depends on proof and logic–not force, volume, or status.



Civil disagreement is only possible when people are arguing about the same world with agreed-upon facts. Shared facts and intelligible arguments give us common reference points, anchors that allow disagreement without rupture. When claims are tested openly and ideas are judged by the strength of their evidence and reasoning, disagreement becomes a path to understanding rather than a threat.

In a democracy, this discipline is essential. Self-government depends on citizens who can test claims, weigh reasons, and revise beliefs without treating disagreement as betrayal. Evidence and logic do not eliminate conflict; they make it manageable. They allow us to argue vigorously while remaining tethered to reality, and to one another.

Chapter 8

Disagreement: The Operating System of Democracy

"We have wonderful arguments."

– Steve Jobs

Take Inspiration

Steve Jobs built a culture where disagreement was required. Inside Apple, ideas were expected to survive confrontation. Meetings were often heated, but they were aimed at one goal: making the product better. Jobs did not equate pushback with insubordination. He rejected company hierarchies, encouraging even low-level employees to voice feedback and criticism.

The launch of the original iPhone illustrates this discipline. The absence of a physical keyboard sparked intense internal dissent. Engineers raised serious objections about usability and adoption. Rather than overruling them, Jobs demanded that those objections be tested. Prototypes were built. Software was refined. The strongest criticisms were answered directly.

Only after the arguments against the touchscreen had been addressed did Apple greenlight the device—and reshape global communication.

Jobs understood a crucial truth: disagreement, when focused on real constraints and real solutions, is a form of respect for the work and for others. Healthy conflict was how Apple refined ideas under pressure and became an iconic, world-changing company.

Disagreement is not a breakdown of civility. Every serious institution—families, businesses, churches, and democracies—must navigate competing interests, incomplete information, and real tradeoffs. In a democracy, disagreement is not a flaw in the system. Rather, it is the system working. Avoiding conflict does not resolve these tensions; it postpones them, often at higher cost.

The question is not whether disagreement will happen, but whether it will be productive. Undisciplined conflict produces resentment and paralysis. Disciplined conflict leads to better decisions and stronger institutions. Self-government depends on this distinction.

For each of us:

- ★ **Define the question before debating the answer.**
  Many arguments fail because participants are solving different problems. State clearly what decision or issue is actually under discussion before advancing positions.

- ★ **Force tradeoffs into the open.**
  Productive disagreement identifies costs, risks, and second-order effects. Identify what each proposal sacrifices as well as what it gains.

- ★ **Consider switching to writing when disagreement turns heated.**
  Even in private relationships with friends and family, writing can turn down the heat and bring discipline when conversations fail.

- ★ **End arguments with a next step.**
  Summarize what changed, what did not, and what action follows. Closure prevents disagreement from becoming a recurring fight.

Together we can:

- ★ **Allow disagreement across ranks.**
  In offices, committees, and civic bodies, make it clear that good ideas matter more than job titles. When status determines who can speak, institutions lose access to their own intelligence.

- ★ **Require arguments to propose alternatives.**
  Criticism without a counterproposal is not helpful. Productive disagreement advances options, not just objections.

- ★ **Record minority positions.**
  When decisions are made, document dissent alongside the outcome. This preserves institutional memory and signals respect for serious disagreement.

- ★ **Separate debate from decision-making.**
  In meetings and other public forums, create defined windows for argument, followed by clear moments of resolution. Endless debate weakens authority and execution.

Disagreement is unavoidable in any serious endeavor. In a democracy, it is essential. What matters is whether it is disciplined. When conflict is structured, purposeful, and grounded in outcomes, it strengthens judgment and sharpens institutions. When it is personal, vague, or endless, it erodes trust and the capacity to act.

To disagree productively is to take responsibility for the quality of conflict we bring into the world. Do it with rigor. Do it with restraint. Aim it toward solutions worthy of the effort. Strong societies are not those without disagreement—but those that know how to channel it well.

Chapter 9

Civility in Action: At the Dinner Table

Why the Dinner Table Matters

Unlike a public debate or a workplace meeting, the dinner table is not designed to resolve difficult issues. It exists for something more fundamental: enjoying company and maintaining relationships. As President Reagan said, "all great change in America begins at the dinner table."

Intimate, unscripted, and recurring, the dinner table is one of the few places where people with deep relationships but different convictions still sit together regularly.

Civility at the dinner table requires a different instinct than debate elsewhere. The goal is making sure tomorrow's conversation will still be worth having, not total victory.

It's also one of the first places where we learn how to disagree.

The patterns repeated at family dinners–interrupting or listening, dismissing or questioning, escalating or pausing–become habits that people carry into classrooms, offices, and civic life.

Those absorbing the most are the ones saying the least. Children learn whether conflict destroys relationships or strengthens them.

The dinner table feels ordinary but it is one of the first places where the habits of civic life take shape.



The Situation

It starts casually. Someone mentions a news story they saw that morning. Another person adds a comment about an election or protest they watched online. At first the tone is light. But within a few minutes the mood shifts.

An uncle interrupts his teenage niece. Her mother takes quiet note of the offense but stays quiet to avoid a public dispute. A grandparent shifts uncomfortably.

Someone laughs dismissively. A comment lands harder than it was meant to. Across the table, a younger family member goes quiet, watching. An effort to change the subject is met with resistence.

Soon two voices dominate the conversation, no longer talking with each other but at each other. One person begins speaking faster, raising their voice and piling on examples. The other cuts in before the sentence finishes.

Everyone else listens apprehensively, hoping it will end soon.

What was supposed to be a relaxed and friendly dinner has become something else: a debate no one agreed to join, in a setting that can not hold it.

Still, in tense conversations there are moments when escalation can still be avoided, pauses where someone could press forward or pull back.

At that moment, the habits described throughout this book become more important.

Applying the Principles:

★ **Choose humility and curiosity.** Ask a sincere question before offering a view:

- "What led you to that conclusion?"
- "what part of that matters most to you?" *This slows the conversation and shifts it from a debate to an effort to understand.*

★ **Listen before responding.** Let the person finish, then reflect back their point to them:

- "So you are saying this is really about?" *This reduces misunderstandings and shows respect, even in disagreement.*

★ **Gently put on the brakes.** Acknowledge that the conversation is becoming a distraction and agree to pick it up later:

- "We should not talk over each other," or "This is not, worth us getting heated about."
- Pointing to the relationship ("We are family;" "We are friends here;" etc.) can help reframe the moment. *Small resets keep the conversation from turning into something the setting cannot sustain.*

Chapter 10

Civility in Action: On the Sports Field

Why the Sports Field Matters

Sports have the power to unite individuals, build character, and instill discipline. Yet we have all seen games where emotions take over despite shared rules and a common goal.

A single call, a hard play, or a moment of frustration can quickly change how players relate to one another.

What begins as fun and structured competition can spiral out of control. In those moments, how people respond determines whether the game holds together or unravels.

Sports are designed to bring people together around a shared objective. They require coordination, trust and a willingness to subordinate individual impulses to a collective goal. In that way, they are one of the clearest settings in which community is built.

They also create pressure on purpose: clear rules, high stakes, limited time.

The ability to compete hard while staying within limits–respecting opponents, accepting decisions

we disagree with, maintaining control under pressure—is learned.

And it carries forward into daily life. The same instincts that govern a moment on the field, whether to escalate or reset, whether to react or stay composed, do not stay confined to the game.

They show up elsewhere, often when it matters most.

The Situation

The game is close.

Late in the second half, an official makes a call against one team that could be decisive to the outcome. It is not just questionable, it is obviously wrong. Players react immediately. Arms go up. Some shout in anger.

The official does not change the call.

Play resumes, but the rhythm is gone. Frustration carries into the next possession. A hard foul followed by a retaliatory shove after the whistle. Words are exchanged that do not need to be said.

Now the game is no longer just about fun and love of sport. It shifts toward something else, less about competing well, more about settling a score.

Across the field, the opposing team responds in kind. What started as structured competition begins to slide toward an outburst or brawl.

Teammates feed off one another and tension builds. The game continues. But it is close to slipping out of hand.

Before it does, steps can be taken to prevent further escalation.

Applying the Principles:

★ **Respect through restraint.**
Accept that the call stands and try to play on without dwelling on it:

- Avoid arguing with officials or escalating with opponents; instead, re-engage immediately. *This keeps the focus on the game rather than the grievance.*

★ **Hold teammates accountable in the moment.**
If someone is losing control, step in and say:

- "Next play," or "We need you here." *Peer intervention restores composure faster than waiting for authority.*

★ **Have a go-to reset.**
Pick one action—clap, deep breath, jog it out—and use it every time something goes wrong. *Routine helps you regain control quickly.*

Chapter 11:

Civility in Action: The Workplace

Why the Workplace Matters

The workplace is one of the most consistent areas of adult life.

People with different roles, incentives and perspectives are required to work toward shared outcomes, often under pressure. The quality of interactions matters for the future of the organization.

Poor communication does not just create tension, it affects results. Projects stall as trust erodes. Small misunderstandings compound into larger failures.

But the opposite is also true.

When people handle disagreement with discipline—clear thinking, measured tone, a willingness to listen—the work improves. And so do the relationships that make that work possible.

The office is not just a place where tasks are completed. It's a place where habits of collaboration and conflict are practiced every day.

The Situation

The meeting is already running long.

A project is moving forward, but not smoothly. Priorities have shifted and different parts of the team are working from different assumptions about what matters most.

At first, the tension is subtle in comments about timelines, scope and responsibilities. Then the differences become clearer.

One person emphasizes urgency. Another raises concerns about quality. A third points out that earlier decisions are now creating complications.

People start to defend their approach. Some pull back, choosing not to engage. Others speak more forcefully, trying to bring the discussion back in line with their view.

The original goal of figuring out how to move forward remains. But the path to get there is less clear than it was at the start of the meeting.

Getting back on track requires speaking clearly and directly. Avoiding the issue does not solve it. But how the point is made matters.

Applying the Principles:

★ **Ground the conversation in specifics.**
Point to concrete elements:

- "Timeline-wise, we are behind by two weeks," or "This changes the original scope."
  Specifics keep the discussion focused on the work, not personalities.

★ **Listen to align before advancing your view.**
Briefly restate a colleague's position:

- "If I am hearing you right, your concern is quality over speed? Did I get that right?"
  Alignment reduces friction and make disagreement more productive.

★ **Disagree toward a shared goal.**
Frame your point around the outcome:

- "If we want this to succeed, we may need to adjust..."
  This keeps the team oriented toward results rather than sides.

Chapter 12:

Civility in Action: On Campus

Why Our Campuses Matter

Many Americans spend four or more of their most formative years on college campuses. In that time, they encounter new ideas, develop lasting relationships, and begin to define what they believe.

It is temporary but influential. The habits developed in college often persist long after, and the knowledge gained carries into careers and daily life.

Campus is one of the few places explicitly designed for the exchange of different ideas.

The temptation is to treat disagreement as something to cancel rather than work through.

But campuses are also places where some of the strongest communities take shape: intellectual, social, and institutional.

Students and faculty are bound by shared experiences, shared spaces, and a common pursuit of learning.

It is harder to dismiss others entirely when they are part of the same campus community, working–however differently toward overlapping ends.

The Situation

The event was meant to be a discussion, kicked off by opening remarks.

A controversial but well-known speaker has been invited to campus. Some students are eager to hear it. Others are already opposed.

By the time the event begins, the room is divided.

The first interruption comes early. Not loud enough to stop the speaker, but enough to signal what is coming. A few people clap while others shift uncomfortably.

Then it builds with more interruptions. Someone stands and shouts something. Another responds from across the room. What was supposed to be a conversation becomes a contest for control of the space.

Some students disengage completely. Others record on their phones. A few try to restore order, but their voices are lost in the noise.

Disagreement with a controversial speaker was always inevitable. The question is how it is expressed and what can be done to contain it.

Applying the Principles:

★ **Follow conscience with discipline.**
Rather than shouting the speaker down, wait for a natural opening and ask a direct question:

- Can you clarify what you mean by?"
  Engagement is more effective when others can hear and evaluate it.

★ **Disagree respectfully in public settings.**
Address a specific claim rather than the speaker broadly. Avoid interrupting or talking over.
Targeted challenges sharpen the discussion instead of shutting it down.

★ **Find avenues that are more conducive to presenting your evidence and conclusions.**

- Write a response for the school paper or a blog, building an argument outside the constraints of a crowded room.
  Some arguments require space and structure to be productive.

Chapter 13:

Civility in Action: Social Media

Why Our Social Media Behavior Matters

With so many hours of our day online, digital engagement has come to replace in-person conversations. Online conversations move faster, are less nuanced, and often anonymous. As a result, people sometimes say things on social media platforms that they would never say in a face-to-face conversation with someone they know.

Online conversations are further complicated by algorithms social media sites use to get us to spend more time on their platforms. Algorithm-driven outrage is a primary driver of this engagement.

Still, social media is a new kind of public square—immediate, expansive, and largely unfiltered.

It collapses distance. It brings strangers, acquaintances, and close friends into the same space, often without the context and humanity that make conversation productive.

Because it is so new, its norms are still forming.

The habits people practice there—reaction or reflection, dismissal or engagement—are not yet fixed.

The tone of public life is increasingly shaped in these spaces. Unlike older institutions, there are fewer built-in constraints. No moderator is at the table. No shared expectation of how to proceed.

Responsibility shifts to the individual. What feels like a small interaction, a single post or reply, contributes to a larger pattern.

Over time, those patterns become culture. By applying the principles of civility, we can make our time online more productive.

The Situation

It happens quickly.

A post appears in the feed, something politically charged and deliberately inflammatory. It succeeds in provoking outrage.

Replies appear within seconds. One is sarcastic. Another is sharper, more direct. A third reframes the original post in exaggerated terms, drawing an even stronger reaction than the initial claim warranted. A fourth agrees with the post, laughs, and shares it with a large following. Another responds to what the conversation has become rather than what it was.

The thread grows.

Misreadings accumulate. Each new reply addresses a slightly different version of the argument. Pace increases, but clarity does not.

What began as a single post has turned into something else, less a conversation than a series of overlapping reactions.

And the longer it continues, the harder it becomes to recover what was actually being argued in the first place.

Online exchanges often collapse faster than in-person ones. There is less interaction: no pauses, no tone, no facial expressions, no physical presence to slow things down. Yet there are still paths to de-escalation and civil behavior.

Applying the Principles:

★ **Separate the person from the performance.**
Address the idea without speculating about motive or character.

- "Avoid lines like "you people always..." or "this is just bad faith."
  Keeping the focus on the argument avoids turning a disagreement into a personal pile-on.

★ **When you do respond, address the strongest version of the claim, not the weakest.**
Addressing the central point of the argument avoids distractions over less relevant subpoints.

★ **Resist the pull of the audience.**
Write as if you are speaking to one reasonable person, not performing for a crowd.

- This lowers the temperature and makes a constructive response more likely.

★ **Not every provocation requires a response.**
Letting a comment pass can feel like conceding something, but endless repetitive arguments aren't productive either. Try:

- "I think we see this differently–appreciate the back-and-forth."
  If a post is designed to inflame, continuing to respond spreads it further.

The Path Forward

Civility is a discipline suited precisely to the moment in which we Americans now find ourselves, not a relic of past times. Our success or failure to be civil will determine the character of our future.

The principles in these pages are habits and behaviors, not abstract ideas. They are ways of thinking and acting that ordinary people have practiced in extraordinary circumstances throughout American history.

What distinguished the people whose stories appear in these chapters was the discipline they brought to difficult moments, and the choice they made, again and again, to stay within the bounds of respect even when it was challenging.

Choice is at the heart of the matter. In a free nation, no law compels civility. It must be a course chosen deliberately: in the conversation that grows heated, in the meetings that lose their way, in the reply that takes a moment longer to compose. It must be practiced in private and modeled in public.

Humility and curiosity keep us open to what

we do not know. Conscience supplies the inner compass that keeps us to our convictions when pressure increases. Respect sustains the dignity of the exchange even when feelings run high. Listening slows the conversation down and opens us to new ideas. Relationships build the trust that makes disagreement survivable. Common ground reminds us that the things dividing us exist inside a larger circle of shared humanity. And the ability to distinguish facts from opinion keeps arguments grounded on solid footing.

These habits reinforce one another. Together they constitute a way of engaging that makes productive civil disagreement a foundation of a free society.

“It’s people, not government” who matter most in America, as President Reagan put it. The people who will carry the country forward are our neighbors, colleagues, students, parents, and citizens. They are ordinary Americans who, in ordinary moments, choose to engage rather than dismiss, to listen rather than shout, and to seek common ground with their fellow citizens.

That choice, made over and over again, is the essence of civility.

Let us act together.

– Ronald Reagan

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About the Ronald Reagan Center on Civility and Democracy

The Ronald Reagan Center on Civility and Democracy works with organizations across America to promote civil discourse, help us to find common ground and advance our democracy through informed patriotism. We follow President Reagan's example of reaching across the aisle, despite political differences, to promote the interests of all Americans and make our country better and stronger.

To learn more and to get involved visit us at: reaganfoundation.org