

Palaima: We, the people, are losing civility, understanding

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This Fourth of July, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Jim Leach, spoke on "Civility and the American Spirit" in Chautauqua, N.Y. (Read the text of his speech at [neh.gov/whoweare/speeches/07042011.html](http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/speeches/07042011.html).)

Leach knows all about the opposite of civility, as those of us who heard him speak at the University of Texas last October found out. He served for 30 years representing southeastern Iowa in the U.S. House. In his Austin talk, he decried the fact that both houses of the U.S. Congress had virtually institutionalized the political incivility we are seeing in negotiations over our national debt ceiling.

Leach explained that because of hard-line partisanship among leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties, the days are over when senators and representatives could reach across the aisle to find common ground. In one anecdote, a member of Congress explained that merely being spotted by reporters having coffee with a member of the opposite party could start rumors of being open to compromise, a word that now means something close to betrayal.

Leach no doubt chose Chautauqua for his speech because of the tradition begun there in 1874, peaking in the 1920s, of speeches, called "chautauquas," delivered in over 10,000 small American communities on important political and social issues of the day.

What did Leach hope the American people would hear in his own chautauqua through the noise of think-tank ideology, radio talk-show extremism and cable news channels locked into political bandwidths?

Leach argues that challenges "of our own making" are rending us asunder: our continuing formally undeclared wars in two Islamic countries; our "bombs dropping in four others;" our widening income disparity; our failure to manage personal, family or government indebtedness; unemployment; and an economy that is stagnant at best.

These issues are exacerbated by political polarization and long-standing active encouragement of distrust of government at all levels. Leach pinpoints "the increasingly hostile and ad hominem tone of national politics" characterized by "anger and name calling" that "damage our social cohesion."

Leach stresses that "citizenship is hard. It takes a commitment to listen, watch, read, and think in ways that allow the imagination to put one person in the shoes of another."

The core message of Leach's entire talk boils down to these few sentences: "Whatever our backgrounds, in politics as in family, vigilance must be maintained to ensure that everyone understands each other." He argues rightly that "argumentation is a social good," that it prevents tyranny and keeps us away from dogmatism.

In my own view, this way of thinking and behaving as citizens is crucial because we can take as given that the major challenges we face will not become less complex or less potentially polarizing. Leach asserts, correctly, that we will rarely get close to unanimity on any important political issue. I would add that, when we do, as in ramping up in 2002 and 2003 for use of our military power in preemptive warfare, we should be very wary. Unanimity may be an indicator that we have lost our moral compass in making emotionally satisfying decisions.

Putting ourselves in the shoes of others. Acting as we would if we were still members of extended families, such as my own large ethnic family in the 1950s, and having to be tolerant and patient and compromise on a daily basis. These are no longer commonly shared experiences.

Our educational systems put an emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-achievement, on students as consumers. Our economic system promotes being and acting in whatever ways our money can buy. We hold in contempt the very governments that are "we, the people" in our towns, counties, states and country. We have put iPods in the ears of our citizen souls.

Worse than lack of civility is lack of kindness. As Naomi Shihab Nye writes in her poem "Kindness," to be kind, "you must lose things." You must notice those who are suffering and "see how this could be you." You must feel loss, know sorrow, "catch the thread of all sorrows until you see the size of the cloth." Then it will only be kindness "that makes sense anymore."

Recognizing you in me and me in you would be a first step toward making mutual plans for a better future, toward moving forward in mutual respect. A first step toward bringing decency and humanity back into our public actions, before it is too late.

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