

The Civil Pause



There comes a point in the progression of a society when it is advantageous, perhaps even essential, that it take pause and stock of where they've been, where they are and where they're going. This critical self-assessment can be addressed towards any and all aspects of the society, be they matters of economics, socio-politics, education, healthcare, religion and so on. Whether perceived or not, all issues, in their own degree, contribute invariably to the collective growth or decline of that society. Case in point...

A short time ago, I was driving along a side street in Georgetown, Conn. on what was by all accounts a bright and beautiful southern Connecticut morning. I had just dropped my son off at school and decided to take the scenic route as I pursued a series of morning errands about town. At one point, the road I was on had narrowed and steepened considerably and I found myself behind a cyclist who was valiantly laboring to climb the hill whose peak I could not quite see beyond. Concluding I could not safely pass and having no particular schedule to keep, I was content to slow down and follow (while quietly rooting) for the gentleman to make it to the top.

After a few moments, another vehicle came over the crest of the hill from the opposite direction. I'm not sure if it was my presence behind the bike or the cyclist himself that made the other driver feel compelled to slow down as she passed, but she did and I was grateful for it. As it was a lovely day, I had my windows down to enjoy the pleasant breeze. Unfortunately, this also facilitated my being able to hear with clarity, the gross and unsolicited onslaught of foul cursing and vehement condemnation (not to mention

the accompanying hand gestures) which began emanating from the driver of the passing car (“get off the [expletive] road!” “Get an [expletive] life!” & “Why don’t you get a [expletive] job!”) directed towards the gentleman on the bike. He, in turn, offered a few equally unpleasant retorts.

Unable to imagine what had motivated this horrible and completely unnecessary display of indecency, my shock at this exchange quickly shifted to unmitigated horror when a moment later, my eyes met with a second gentleman (presumably a father), who was walking his early elementary aged daughter along the road on their way to a nearby school. While, thankfully, my son was not with me at the time, I have to believe that the parent in both of us immediately shared a sense of anguished sadness and outrage at the thought of his, or any child, being exposed to this inescapable display of “inhumanity”.

For me, what had till then been a decidedly lovely day, had now turned eerily cloudy. My mind raced with unanswerable questions. Why would that driver attack the cyclist so viciously? Were those few seconds of slowing down really such an impediment to her morning? Did she not see the other man and his child walking along the road? Would it have mattered if she had? What terrible thing had happened to this poor woman that produced such foulness? What choice could the cyclist, whose response was far more understandable, yet no less ugly, have made? Would I have done the same in his place? Did they feel regret upon seeing the man and child bear helpless witness to their exchange? I wonder what effect this had on the little girl and her father? How did he explain this behavior among adults and then try to inspire going forward with kindness in her day? Did he even bother, or has this sort of display become so commonplace that it was hardly worth a shrug? How many of us witnessed or participated in this sort of interaction in our community today? How do we go forward in growth as a person, a parent, a teacher, a public servant, a member of a society suffering this decline in civility? How do we break this wheel of learned and too often embraced indecency towards each other?

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Viktor Emil Frankl

The Austrian psychiatrist, philosopher, author, and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Emil Frankl wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking on Frankl’s words. For me, they are both haunting and inspiring. I think of the many times I myself have failed to observe that precious “space” in my own life ... to take that invaluable and irreplaceable moment of pause that could have changed the course of a conversation, a relationship, a career ... perhaps a life. I’m haunted by the realization that under the right circumstances, I have been and could, yet again, be that irate driver of the car, or the instinctively, aggressively defensive man on the bike. Or worst yet, the helpless bystander trying to shield my child from the human ugliness that too many are capable and willing to reveal.

And yet, I am inspired. Whilst we still have breath in our bodies, we have the opportunity to harness the “space” ... to pause, choose and walk a different path ... to grow, to make a difference no matter how seemingly inconsequential. And so dear reader, neighbor, fellow parent, co-worker, friend, stranger and precious member of this community, I humbly submit to you this new and hopefully ongoing column I am calling “The Civil Pause” It is my hope that this recurring dispatch from my, and your social and societal thoughts, observations and questions might serve as a vehicle by which we may come together in dialogue on that which troubles, inspires, disturbs and perplexes us about each other. Let us celebrate that which brings us together and challenge that which stubbornly continues to pull us apart. And when I say “challenge,” that is exactly what I mean. I have no interest in avoiding constructive conflict. The key is not to ignore or

dismiss our differences, nor is it productive to belittle and attack each other for having them. Instead, we must explore, be curious and diligently remain open to learning and understanding the root of our divergent thinking. It is only through constructive engagement that together we learn and grow as both individuals and a community.

So, I invite you to join me in conversation. Send in your questions, thoughts and observations and reflections to thecivilpause@gmail.com. If there is some challenging interpersonal issue you're struggling to understand and deal with in your home, your relationships, your extended family and friends, your neighborhood, workplace, your schools, your favorite show on tv (yes, even the oscars), our politics at a town, state, national or global level, I promise, you are not alone. Let "The Civil Pause" be your "space" in which to take a moment, listen, share, reflect and be inspired. Together, let us rediscover the power in hearing each other, seeing each other, challenging each other, supporting each other, learning and growing with each other. It is the power of choice we each have to improve ourselves and our community. It's a power we will reimbrace together... in "the Civil Pause"!



Charles Frederick Secrease is a new contributor to the Easton Courier. He holds graduate degrees in communication and music from Sacred Heart University and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He has been a consultant for performing arts organizations throughout the U.S., Europe and East Asia. He is a member of the Prague Shakespeare Company and has lived and worked in music and theatre on five different continents. He now lives with his wife, son and two dogs in Redding, Conn. and can be heard every Wednesday on WMNR out of Monroe, where he hosts a weekly classical music program from 8 a.m. - noon.