

Blogging, Incivility and Negativity

Social scientists, socioeconomists, and social psychologists are increasingly pointing to the fact that the social mood in the United States, and across the world's culture and civilization is turning bad and that overall social mood is going to get a lot worse before improving. Research graphs and diagrams, such as the Elliot Wave Principle, underscore the finding that there is a natural ebb and flow of social mood (positive vs. negative) and that darker times, socially and politically, lie ahead of us, creating increased tension and negativity. Nowhere is this negative mood more evident than in the blogosphere where incivility, disrespect, meanness, bullying, and demeaning behavior rule the day, and the posts. What is it that accounts for this negativity among bloggers and what can be done to perhaps soothe and diminish their high degree of vitriol, rancor, meanness, incivility and disrespect?

I've followed the negativity of blog discussions mainly from the perspective of being curious about the nature of the interactions where the behaviors are as interesting, if not more so, than the content.

There's no question passion drives many a blogger's interactions. Unfortunately, passion is often used as an "excuse" (it's never a "reason") to treat another blogger disrespectfully or in an uncivil manner.

Curiously enough, research also points to increases in the number of heart attacks, cancer incidents, obesity rates, diabetes, suicides, spousal abuse incidents, etc. What's the connection?

Whether it's an increase in incivility or in life-threatening illness and disease, these statistics do not mean that I have to engage in anti-social or self-destructive behavior.

I can choose what behaviors support me to live a healthy lifestyle and which don't. The same reasoning is true for whether I choose to be civil or uncivil, respectful or disrespectful, hurtful and harmful or compassionate and understanding in my relationships and interactions, on blogs, that is, in how I choose to show up in the world.

Shakespeare said, "An event is neither good nor bad, only thinking makes it so." So, why is one's "thinking" so negative? What belief systems, mental models of the world and people in the world, assumptions, misconceptions, misperceptions does one have hard-wired into their brain that bring one to reactivity, to negativity in the face of just, well, "words"?

So, with respect to how I show up in the blogosphere, the bottom line is the degree to which I am "conscious" — whether I am consciously aware of "how I am" and "who I am" while blogging, and relating to others in a blog community, or am I "unconscious", being reactive, with no conscious thought of how I am behaving.

In our current culture in the U.S. where most folks are obsessed with ego needs for control, recognition and security, it's no wonder that most folks' thoughts are "killing thoughts" as opposed to "healing thoughts." The mantra underlying most of our interactions and interrelationships is: "It's all about me! Out of my way!"

Moreover, in a culture where many folks gain their sense of identity ("who I am") from a direct association with their "knowledge and information" (the database in their brain), it's no surprise that much of the incivility and reactivity on blogs comes from the perspective that: "When you disagree with my information, well, you disagree with me", and because such disagreement is just too much of a hit to many folks' egos, they react (fight, as

opposed to flee or freeze). Agreeing to disagree and engaging in constructive dialogue are fast becoming a lost art forms in Western culture.

When folks are "unconscious" of "how they are" and "who they are", when folks are unable or unwilling to engage in self-reflection, their tendency is to associate and behave with a herd mentality — witness the vitriol, the high-pitch ever-escalating level of disrespect, sarcasm (in the guise of "humor"), mocking, bullying, that is taking the place on blogs.

Much of the negative and disrespectful exchanges in blogs has to do with how one relates to another human being. Life is relationship — the manner in which one chooses to, consciously or unconsciously, relate to, "meet", "see" and accept another person. What's happening in the blogosphere is a manifestation of a blogger's internal conflict that manifests as a failure to relate to another individual in an accepting, compassionate, respectful manner that transcends simple "exchange of knowledge and information."

So, while the research is what it is, that does not mean one cannot consciously choose how one wants to be in relationship, is dialogue, in conversation when blogging.

So, how does one become more conscious of one's blogging behaviors? How does one become conscious of what's driving one's negative blogging behavior? By consciously considering what's underneath one's need to be uncivil, mean, disrespectful, and demeaning.

There are two underlying drivers for much of the negative interactions on blogs. These two drivers are characterized as: (1) "It's not about the information or content", and (2) "It's all about the information or content."

1. It's not about the content

From this perspective, what is occurring is the need for an individual blogger to resort to a verbally abusive and bullying approach in an effort to make a "connection" with another person. For other bloggers, the need is to first engage, and then disengage, then engage and disengage, as in a "love-hate" relationship, in order to stay in the game.

In the arena of psychodynamics or ego psychology, this both of these behaviors are referred to as "negative merging." In some relationships, the only way two people can "merge" or have any semblance of "connectivity" (e.g., mental, emotional,, psychological, social, etc.) is by fighting or arguing. Without the fighting or arguing, there would be no connectivity, no relating. Thus, the need to bully, argue, demean, find fault, nit-pick, etc., supports a blogger to feel engaged and "merged." It gives the blogger a sense of "belonging", being psychologically and emotionally connected. It really has nothing to do with the "information" being discussed or exchanged.

Rather, the negative and uncivil behavior is about connecting and needing to feel "seen" and "heard", in other words, to feel that the blogger is actually "somebody" as opposed to being a "nobody." Unless the blogger feels they are somebody, they feel they have no sense of value or worth. The only downside is that playing out of this need to be "seen" comes from a deeper place of anger, fear and negativity.

In "negatively merged" relationships, real and true, mature, heartfelt acceptance, approval, and satisfaction are lacking. So, the only way the two or more bloggers can experience any "false" connection at all is from this place of negative engagement, often it's in the form of poking, being disrespectful, being uncivil, nit-picking, finding fault, etc. .

In "negative-merged" relationships, such back-and-forth behavior, and childish emotional acting out, becomes the sole source of contact between bloggers. The bottom line is that in negative-merged relationships, negative contact is better than no contact at all.

So content aside, two or more such bloggers are no different than a couple who, lacking any real heartfelt, mature, adult-level connectivity, resort to arguing and fighting over how to stack the dishes in the dishwasher, fold the laundry, or vacuum the car, or slice the turkey. At the end of the day, for negatively merged bloggers, it's never really about the "content". It's about the need to be "seen" and connect when there's no true feeling of connectedness.

Until and unless a "negative-merged" inclined blogger expands their awareness and explores what's really "underneath" their need to be negative, uncivil and disrespectful, (i.e., by consciously exploring their limiting self-images, beliefs, preconceptions, "hard wiring" about how they view their self vis-à-vis being in the world and relating to others), there's probably never going to be any change or transformation of that blogger's behavior. So, they'll fight, lick their wounds, go away and come back to fight another day on another blog, always at another's throat, always argumentative, bickering, poking, criticizing. Why? It's the only way they know how to "connect."

2. Content is everything.

The ego-personality is driven by one's Inner Judge and Critic, the inner voice that continually creates drama and upset in our lives, that never allows us to truly feel at peace with ourselves. The inner judge and critic is driven by three major ego needs: control, security and recognition.

Driven consistently and relentlessly by these three needs, many of us derive our identity, that is, "who I think I am", and "who I take myself to be" from external things, as opposed to experiencing ourselves with integrity and authenticity that arises from being in touch with our Inner Nature, our True and Real Self, from what's "inside".

One of the externals from which people gain a sense of their identity is their "information." For these folks, their mantra is "I am my information." In other words, my identity, who I am, is defined on what I have in my brain, my database. I live in my mind, and my mind defines me as a person.

Coming from this mental place, then, in a blogging environment, what happens when someone disagrees with an "information identity" blogger, is that the "information identity" blogger is unable and unwilling to see the other's response as a simple perspective, or point of view, or as just "different from me." Rather, the "information identity" blogger has a need to react, to become defensive and critical and take the other's information as a personal affront and as a personal and "attack on me."

In our culture of right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, win vs. lose, me vs. you, for many bloggers there is little to no room for acceptance of differences, i.e., "different information". Rather, there's more of a need for many bloggers to engage in some type of escalating "ad hominem" attack so that the "information identity" blogger can survive, live, and not lose their identity. The "information identity" blogger survives by meeting their need to "be right" in some way, shape or form.

And so when these "information identity" bloggers feel attacked because another blogger

has presented "different information", or disagreed with them, they emotionally feel out of control, insecure, and unrecognized, unseen. Their internal, unconscious reaction is: "My God, I have no identity if my information is 'wrong'. I need to fight back and save my self."

In this state of (often unconscious) reactivity characterized by anger, fear, worry, resentment, defensiveness, feeling "small", unseen, invisible, unrecognized, unappreciated, being resistant, defensive and agitated, and feeling a loss of control, recognition or emotional security, some bloggers act out so they can feel and see themselves as big, large, as "somebody" with an identity.

"Information identity" bloggers might be surprised if they were to explore why they need to act out and sting, poke, demean and bully others, why they need to attack, defend and counter-attack, why they are so caught up in identifying with "my information."

What happens in the blogosphere is really no different from what happens between and among individuals and couples every day, at work, at home and at play, i.e., occurrences of the same behaviors that manifest when folks allow their ego-personalities and "comparative-judgmental minds" to get in the way of a healthy relationship, a healthy dialogue, a healthy interaction. The dynamic here with the "information identity: blogger, is that they are being by their need for control, recognition and security as opposed to allowing their self to coming from one's inner plane where one can be perfectly comfortable with who one is and where one is without needing to be right and without depending on one's information as the source of who they are.

The poking, the disrespect, the vitriol and incivility are all about resistance, denial and projecting. It's all about not being "consciously conscious of "Who I am" and "How I am" in relationship; so the negativity comes from one's locking on to cruise control, being "unconscious" and simply reacting to everything happening "outside". It's about needing to look "outside" for what's lacking "inside."

While some may view ad hominem attacks, rudeness, disrespect, poking, bullying and negative behaviors as "common" in today's discussions and relationships, they are not, neither for children nor for adults, and sometimes, in the blogosphere, it's hard to tell the difference. Reactive elements cause mental, emotional and even physical pain, and discomfort and for the actual and lurking "ringside" participants and observers, even though they may not even be aware of it. The discord does take a toll, one way or another.

Where some lurkers would honestly and sincerely like to offer their perspectives in a safe environment, they are often wary of doing so as they don't want to come up against bloggers whose need is to "take it personally" and who react to "different" takes and information in a negative, poking, rejecting manner. It's the "information identity" bloggers who make many blogs unsafe for so many others who have worthy contributions to make.

So, The negativity is an attempt to fill this hole of deficiency, thinking that spending time and energy being critical, judgmental, demeaning and disrespectful of others will somehow make me feel "better" at the expense of those who I am stepping on and over in my attempts to get to the top of some ladder (financial, social professional, etc.) that will make me feel like "somebody."

So, what can bloggers do to ensure a more inclusive, safe, mutually-respective container for adult-adult dialogue and reduce the intense degree of negativity that permeates so much of the blogosphere?

Perhaps bloggers can envision and then act to create an environment where one can notice, accept and appreciate the uniqueness of another blogger's perspective without automatically jumping on the "me vs. you", "right vs. wrong", "good vs. bad" "expert vs. novice", "intelligent vs. stupid" continuum.

Perhaps bloggers can take some time to move out of their intellectual zip code of "It's all about what I know." and explore the perhaps, more foreign, landscape of non-violent communication to enhance the quality of some of their interactions, even approaching discussions with the curiosity of a "beginner's mind", a neutral mind.

Perhaps bloggers can take a deep breath, sense into their bodies and experience their feelings and emotions, before responding to a post and consciously ask themselves, "Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person like me consciously choose to be disrespectful, uncivil and harm another person simply because their "information" is different from my "information."

Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see." So, if you are engaging in uncivil, disrespectful, demeaning behaviors as a blogger, don't wait for others to change their tone and tenor. It starts with you.

As Rumi says, "Out beyond right doing and wrong doing, there is a field; I'll meet you there." Come from that place in your blogs and interact from that part of yourself that is respectful, accepting, compassionate, empathic, and inclusive.

Bloggers can choose to play in that field with their colleagues; or they can choose to create and fight in a battlefield of words, of ego, hostility and lost identity. One brings happiness, collegiality, contentment and well-being; the other brings pain and suffering, mentally, emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually.

Incivility and negativity are all about "resistance" to someone or something "out there" with which one feels uncomfortable. Incivility and negativity are all about being "unconscious" of how one is in relationship. Incivility and negativity are all about the ego's need for control, recognition and security and being unwilling to go "inside" and explore why one needs to hurt, be verbally abusive, and disrespect another. Incivility and negativity are largely about the mantras: "I'd rather be right than happy." Or, "I have to be somebody at the expense of being seen as a nobody."

Life, after all, is choices. Do I choose to be reactive, hurtful, negative and uncivil? Why? Really, really, really, why?

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