Behaving Badly - Would I do That?

In the past ten days, we've experienced an athlete, an entertainer and a politician openly engage in angry or uncivil behavior. The one common denominator in these three events? A demonstrated lack of people skills and disrespect.

During President's Obama's speech to Congress, South Carolina Rep. Joe Wilson shouted "you lie!" at the President.

During the U.S Open, tennis star Serena Williams, blatantly angry and defiant, threatened a line judge after the judge made a questionable call.

During the MTV Video Music Awards ceremony, rapper Kanye West interrupted 19 year-old Taylor Swift's acceptance speech, grabbing the microphone and announcing that singer Beyonce Knowles' video was better.

These three episodes are indicative of this country's move towards an increasingly, deepening dark mood that results in overt anger, resentment, rage and verbal abuse.

We seem to be gravitating towards a country where anything and everything goes, a country where people skills are unnecessary, where verbal violence and rage are acceptable, and fewer and fewer truly care about showing respect.

In the world of newscasts and talk-shows, and the world of texting, blogging and tweeting, many folks seem to care less about the "how" of what they say, focused solely on the "what" - "I'll say what I want, how I want, whenever I want and to hell with anything or anyone else!"

While not all of society lacks appropriate people skills, it seems fewer and fewer folks are exhibiting civility and decorum in their interactions.

More and more research studies from social scientists, socioeconomists, and social psychologists are pointing to the increasing unsettling social mood in the United States, and across the world. Many say this mood will become a lot worse before improving.

The research points to a natural ebb and flow of social mood (positive vs. negative), especially noting that in darker times, socially and politically, we experience increased tension and negativity. We seem to be inhabiting the dark times.

Incivility, bullying, disrespect, meanness, and demeaning behavior are fast becoming the norm. Conversation, discussions, and interactions are fast moving in the direction where outrage, vitriol, rancor, incivility and disrespect are the tools one uses to get one's point across.

And, let's say this up front. Passion is never a reason to show disrespect, incivility or anti-social behavior ever!

Why do we do it?

One's ego-based needs for control, recognition and security drive their thinking. We live in a culture where many folks' identity (which gives them a sense of control, recognition and emotional security) is based on "what I know is true." Agree with me, and we'll get along. Disagree, and we're enemies. When you agree with me, you acknowledge I'm "somebody."

When you disagree, you're saying I'm a "nobody." That's the kicker.

Unfortunately, agreeing to disagree and engaging in constructive dialogue are losing their allure in Western culture, being replaced by a knee-jerk reactivity characterized by a high-pitch, ever-escalating level of disrespect, incivility, meanness and personal attack.

The question beneath the question is: why are so many so uncivil? Shakespeare said, "An event is neither good nor bad, only thinking makes it so."

So, "What am I thinking?" is an apt question. "What's going on in me that brings me to act in an uncivil manner?"

In a word, fear. Fear that I'll be losing my identity, fear that I'll be relegated to the ranks of "a nobody," fear that no one will "see" me. And, in this fear state, the logical, thinking, rational, executive part of the brain shuts down while the reptilian, reactive brain takes over and induces one to a fight, flight or freeze response. What we're experiencing so much today is the unconscious, knee-jerk "fight" response.

Becoming conscious

So, how does one become more conscious of one's often self-limiting and self-destructive "fighting" response? By consciously considering whats underneath ones choice to be uncivil, mean, disrespectful, and demeaning. By recognizing that one's uncivil behavior is about needing to feel "seen" and "heard."

In our culture of right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, win vs. lose, and me vs. you, there is less and less room for "fighters" to accept differences. So, to survive as "somebody," they resort to ad hominem attacks, threats and "put-downs" as a way to save their identity - by hoping to make the other a "nobody" - and by operating from a place of always needing be "right" no matter what, no matter how.

The fighter, swept up in a reactive state of anger, fear, worry, resentment, defensiveness, feeling "small", unseen, invisible, unrecognized, and unappreciated a potential "nobody" needs to "act out," to make their point and feel secure and in control.

Becoming conscious means choosing to create an environment, an interaction, where one accepts and appreciates the uniqueness of another's perspective, point of view, position or premise without automatically assuming a "me vs. you," intelligent vs. stupid, "right vs. wrong," or "good vs. bad" approach to dialogue.

Becoming conscious means choosing to move away from one's intellectual zip code ("Its all about me and what I know or think.) and approach discussions and interactions with the curiosity of a beginners mind, a neutral mind, asking, for example, "How so?" to engage, rather than alienate another.

Becoming conscious means taking a deep breath, sensing into the body, experiencing (not acting out on) feelings and emotions, not being reactive and asking, "Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person like me consciously choose to be disrespectful, uncivil, mean 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 find yourself engaging in uncivil, disrespectful, demeaning behavior, perhaps be curious as to why.

Rumi says, "Out beyond right doing and wrong doing, there is a field; I'll meet you there." - and respond from that place, interacting from that part of our self leads to respectful, accepting, compassionate, empathic, and civil interaction and dialogue.

We can choose to play in that field with our friends, colleagues, even with those with whom we disagree. Or we can choose to engage and fight in a battlefield of words, ego, hostility and lost identity. The former brings happiness, collegiality, collaboration, contentment and well-being mentally, emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually. The latter leads to deeper pain, suffering and disconnection on every level.

Incivility, rudeness and meanness are all about "resistance" to someone or something out there with which one feels threatened and uncomfortable. Incivility and rudeness are unconscious, reactive behaviors stemming from the fear of loss of control, recognition and security. Incivility and negativity are largely about being right rather than happy, or about being a "somebody by making another a "nobody."

The conscious question is "Why do I choose to be reactive, hurtful, negative and uncivil? Why? Really, really why? The conscious, deeper, sincere, honest and self-responsible answer will indicate it's never about "him, her, it or them" - ever.

Hmmm. That leaves only - me.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Have you engaged in uncivil, demeaning, or disrespectful behavior recently? Did you justify your behavior? How so?
- How do you generally interact with folks who disagree with you?
- Do you live life at work, at home and at play from an "I need to be right" perspective? Would you generally rather be right than happy? If so, why do you think that's so?
- Do you ever view compromise as a weakness?
- Do you ever rationalize or justify another's uncivil or disrespectful behavior? If so, how or why?
- Do you ever use "passion" as an excuse to behave inappropriately?
- Have others ever accused you of behaving in an uncivil or disrespectful manner? If so, how did you respond to their accusations?
- How did you learn to deal with disagreement as you were growing up? How did your parents deal with disagreement, either with one another, or when interacting with others who disagreed?
- Can you envision a world where it's possible folks respond to disagreement without being uncivil, bullying, angry, enraged, or otherwise disrespectful?
- (c) 2012, Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D. and True North Partnering. All rights in all media reserved.