

Presidential Address, 2000 NCA Convention

Coloring outside the lines; the limits of civility

Thank you Jim for that very fine Introduction. You are to be commended for the theme of this convention and for the excellent work you have done in fulfilling its promise; I can only hope to do further justice to engaging the discipline in the comments to come.

Over the past three years it has been my privilege to work with the National Office staff as an officer of this Association. Just this morning, we presented the National Office staff with a Presidential Citation in honor of their dedication and commitment to the Association. That we are here in Seattle, and in our new home in the District, given the unplanned events of the past several weeks, is a testament to their steadfastness in the face of adversity. My service has been made possible by their assistance, as well as the work of the Administrative Committee and members of the Legislative Council. In addition, I want to express a special thank you to my colleagues at Ohio University; the support I have received has made it possible to take the time necessary to attend to NCA affairs. I also owe a great deal more than I can repay to members of my family, Gayle — my best friend for the last 35 years, my son Matthew, and Alina; the constancy of their love has sustained me. My close friends, and I will not attempt to cite names as I will surely miss one, also have suffered through my doubts, and as friends will, told me what I didn't want to hear. That I am here at this moment is a testament to the patience, love, and



Raymie E. McKerrow,
NCA Past President

support of my colleagues, family and friends.

The time has come, then, to consider the topic I have chosen. If we are truly to be an engaged discipline, it means we must come to grips with what it means to valorize civil discourse. The central question for this address is this: "Are there limits on what civility brings to the solution of human problems?" I ask this question in the spirit of the 1999 NCA convention theme, "Coloring Outside the Lines." That theme struck a fairly responsive chord within our academic community. Only one or two found it necessary to suggest that the theme was demeaning, while I had only intended it to be demanding. If Coloring Outside the Lines is to engage the free play of our imaginations, where might we transgress prohibitions, cross borders, or otherwise challenge and re-draw boundaries, all the while remaining engaged with others in a common pursuit? For lines appear to be ever-present in our social and political lives, whether as academics or as citizens of the world. The understanding we give to the expression, "They've crossed the line" would give clear evidence to the salience of lines in our everyday interactions. Playing with the dimension of color in relation to lines also is implied in this theme, as several programs at the Chicago convention took to heart and played out in imaginative and provocative ways. Drawing connections between and among disparate groupings, re-conceptualizing conventional strategies, and rethinking what is most important in our academic pursuits took center stage in a way that I could not have planned alone.

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Introduction of President Ray McKerrow

By James C. Applegate, First Vice President

It is my honor today, and one of the many joyful duties that come with my job as First Vice President, to introduce your President, Ray McKerrow. This is a relatively easy job since Ray truly needs no introduction to the members of our discipline.

He currently serves as Associate Dean in the College of Communication at Ohio University after distinguished scholarly service at the Universities of Maine and Wisconsin. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa and was a NDEA graduate fellow there.

I will not try to recite all of Ray's honors. But just in the last few years

he has received the Outstanding Service to the Discipline Award from the American Communication Association and been named a teaching AND a research fellow by the Eastern Communication Association. He has been an active scholar and editor serving us both with his own scholarship and by fostering the scholarship of others.

Personally, let me say I have been honored to work with Ray as an officer of this Association. His foresight in creating the current Constitutional Task Force promises to restructure NCA in ways that make it an effective force for change in higher education and advancement of the discipline for years to come. His challenge to us to "color outside the lines" at last year's convention began to break down

boundaries that prevented us from becoming a truly engaged discipline.

Most important, Ray has been a faithful advocate for inclusiveness in all facets of NCA. His thoughtful comments directed NCA, however tactfully, to always consider the interests of ALL of its members as it made important decisions.

He has represented us tirelessly and well among the powerful while advocating for the needs of the powerless. He is a just person. The good ideas he shares carry increased weight because of the character of the man who presents them. I look forward to hearing more of those ideas tonight.

Friends, your President, Ray McKerrow.

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That was then, this is now — what might I say that would continue the conversation, that would move the project forward in ways that reconfigure the very nature of our interactions? In the context, then, of coloring outside the lines, I will highlight two arenas in which we might challenge ourselves with respect to the lives we now lead: our lives in an academic and social community, and our lives as political beings in the larger world.

While the lines I will draw here are highly artificial, let us focus for a moment on our lives as members of an academic and social community. In recruiting students and faculty to our campuses, and specifically to our discipline, we have a common desire to foster cultural diversity. If we can accept the aphorism that civility begins at home, and that for the time being, the campus is our home, what might we say of our behavior on campus, especially in fostering diversity? If there are to be persons of color within our discipline, they must exist first as students -- as undergraduates who find within the discipline a receptive place to continue advanced studies and ultimately, as an inviting and personally rewarding place to work as professors. While readily affirming the goal, many of us already within the academy are relatively clueless as to what life is truly like for persons of color who have entered the discipline. An example from an international student's experience in our academic community may help clarify the distance we have yet to travel:

I cannot understand many expressions, I cannot follow jokes, and I cannot actively engage in exciting discussions. I have many experiences that I watch myself smiling and nodding, and pretending that I am understanding what the other person is saying even though I could not follow the conversation.

The feeling of "being comfortable," and those of us in communication may justly pride ourselves as a discipline on creating or striving to create such a feeling among our students, is not an issue solely with respect to our international students. We have other students of color who may not have the same barriers to cross as our international students, but for whom other barriers, equally invisible to many of us in our daily habits, also exist. In too many places, college students have been pulled over, not on suspicion of a DUI or DWI, but for the simple act of DWB, or "Driving While Black." Racial profiling, as Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton and others have so eloquently reminded us, does not need to be an official policy to be "in place" within a local community. That we have not yet found a reason to coin the parallel acronym, DWW, or "Driving While White," should suggest something about the lines that yet exist in our campus communities. In our lives as teachers and scholars, it also should underline the importance of our critique of language's power in perpetuating the dominance of whiteness. No wonder many African-Americans, at campuses across the country, express a multivalenced attitude toward their educational experience: they don't want to leave a campus where they have friends, but they also can't say they are truly com-

fortable, or feel welcome in that same community. And the experience and attitude is not in any way restricted to African Americans or others of color. The members of NCA's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered division would equally note the problem of "being comfortable" in our academic communities. While we attack racism and sexism in our scholarship, we do not necessarily recognize its everydayness in our own immediate community. The campus is our community — whether mine or yours. And yet, we often remain silent when we should speak — all of us, irrespective of color, have an obligation to color outside the lines as it were through our own spoken challenge. And it is the case that those of us who speak from the privilege of whiteness must share a greater sense of moral duty when faced with the kind of idiocy reflected in the following example: When asked, in reference to the racial profiling noted earlier, "why not hire some of those students of color who are interested in law enforcement — they understand the community, and would serve as role models for others" the reply has been "well, they'd have to pass the civil service exam." Keep in mind that one needs only a high school diploma if one is white, but if one is a person of color (and in a special case I'm aware of, also an athlete), what do or can you say? Is this a time for incivility?

Before addressing that question, it is important to recognize that the issue of civil discourse may NOT be the most critical problem facing our society. I don't mean to downplay it at the outset, but I do want to suggest that, at times, I wonder whether simple STUPIDITY is not more prevalent and more in need of redress than is the issue of CIVILITY. Consider these recent real-life events:

A day-care administrator, apparently captured by the aphorism that Duct Tape can do anything, decided to put it to the test — the administrator wrapped a baby in duct tape and stuck the baby to the wall to see if the tape would hold the child in place. It worked. That the administrator and others found this funny might lead us in the direction, not of civility training, but of the need to educate the presumably educated.¹

From a perspective that might be humorous if not such a sad commentary, consider three instances of what might be accounted for as stupidity, rather than as acts of incivility:

A young inmate broke out of jail, only to be recaptured when he stopped a police officer and asked for directions to a known drug-dealing area. A person using stolen ATM cards, while hiding his face from the surveillance camera, kept his company's hat on, with the logo clearly depicted. Police simply took the photo to the company, and within minutes had identified a suspect. An alleged robber, prior to entering a shop, inadvertently stood in front of the surveillance camera practicing how he would disguise himself.²

My next illustration arguably reveals either an acculturated blindness or simple stupidity moreso than an uncivil action. The organizers responsible for selecting finalists for the creation of the Sojourner Truth statue received 49 entries, about

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equally divided between male and female artists; the initial five finalists were... and you know what is coming... all male.³ What are the chances that at least one female applicant might have been worthy of selection as a finalist?

One may tire of the social requirement to remain civil in the face of this and similar actions. Whether or not we should be civil gives rise to a central question: "Is there ever a reason for the expression of an uncivil rhetoric?" In responding, I want to shift our focus toward our lives as citizens of the larger world. While the line between our campus and society is more artificial than real, my goal in this discussion is to recognize that privileging civil discourse as a solution to human problems carries with it the promise of what might be called the tyranny of civility. Civil behavior may be more than politeness, but in its execution it may also serve to mask very real differences in power relations. In a word, civility may perpetuate servitude.

Rest assured that I will not be dismissing civility in what remains to be argued, for "Who can be against civility?"⁴ Nevertheless, we should not uncritically accept the positive rhetoric about how we should all "just get along." You may recall the plaintive cry, "why can't we all just get along?" from a few years ago; one could answer this in various ways:

First: we can't get along; we are, after all, a product of our own limits as humans, limits presumably so powerful and ever-present as to preclude getting along with others.

Second: we could but we won't get along; it is not because we are limited by our own natures, but because we don't wish to put these natures under any sort of control.

These two answers affirm our destiny as closed to the possibility of living in harmony with one another. I would suggest that neither response is entirely accurate — though to be sure there are people in our society who would fit either of these characterizations. There is a third alternative that is closer to the mark: we should not get along — at least not all of the time. Getting along may be well and good in most circumstances (to go along is to get along as the saying suggests).

Unfortunately, the presence of getting along, and the civility it projects, may be simply illusory. As a Montana farm boy, I got along with the Native Americans living in railroad cars up on hill 57 just outside of Great Falls. They kept, for the most part, to their world, and I kept to mine; and when we did cross, it was with a civil silence that protected each from the other. I am not, now, proud of the civil indifference my actions projected in those days. But what I hope to have taken from that experience is the recognition that merely getting along is woefully inadequate as a response to social issues.

I am equally sure that the well-intentioned white women in the South who acted to prevent lynchings 'got along' with the black women they interacted with.⁵ But do I think that getting along in this instance meant that civility alone produced positive results for the emergence of an equal status between two groups? I'd be willing to bet that nothing changed in the primary relationships between white and black. That the black women were recognized for their color was affirmed; that they

were accepted as equals was not. To have done so would have torn the fabric of an otherwise well woven tapestry of prejudice, and have placed white women in direct opposition to the prevailing attitudes. To alter the social landscape in such a fashion was not the intent of these white women. Rather, they walked the tightrope of an objection to a scurrilous practice while maintaining the cultural 'truths' about difference to which they were so well accustomed. In being civil citizens, they adopted a common perception of what it means to be civil, in which civility bespeaks "a willingness to conduct oneself according to the socially approved rules even when one would like to do otherwise."⁶ Isn't that enough? Before answering in the affirmative, consider this example: "Mississippi slave owners of the 19th century were renowned for exhibiting impeccable manners, conversational decorum and knowledge of the social graces, namely, the requisite components of social civility." Then, as in the case of the Southern women protesting against lynching, life went on "because everyone knew his or her place and recognized the often severe penalty for stepping out of it."⁷ In this context, who controls the rules determines what occurs.

This approach to civil behavior is ever so clearly expressed in the following rationale, advanced as a means of justifying repression in the perpetuation of a civil society:⁸

democratic discourse, then, posits the following qualities as axiomatic: activism, autonomy, rationality, reasonableness, calm, control, realism, and sanity. The nature of the countercode, the discourse that justifies the restriction of civil society, is already clearly implied. If actors are passive and dependent, irrational and hysterical, excitable, passionate, unrealistic, or mad, they cannot be allowed the freedom that democracy allows. On the contrary, these persons deserve to be repressed, not only for the sake of civil society, but for their own sake as well.

What is present in this description is a recognition of the centrality of discourse in constructing the symbolic codes. What is equally absent is any recognition of who is defining what it means to be either calm or excitable, active or passive, rational or irrational. Such a sense of civil society is meaningless in that it merely serves to perpetuate the dominance of those already in positions of power. It is one thing to play nice with the cultural other; it is quite another to accept that person as an equal—an inescapable condition of being civil in the first place.

Civility is not, as Stephen Carter would have us believe, a sacrifice we make.⁹ For if seen as sacrificial, as playing nice, in all cases, the act of civility is constantly tainted with the potential of inauthenticity. If you must sacrifice your better nature to be civil to me, I may then wonder what you really think, and whether your civil face is in fact sincere and trustworthy. If we must both sacrifice, it also suggests a Hobbesian view of who we really are -- humans whose natural condition requires the overlay of a sacrificial act of pretense that we express ourselves in a manner other than what we would most desire. Nor is it "morally better to be civil than to be uncivil."¹⁰ Admittedly,

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that seems like a reasonable assertion on its face, but who is determining what counts as civil? Keep in mind that within the councils of civility that have occurred in the past few years, those invited to the table have been the "civil ones" — mostly white, mostly male, and always in a position to decry, denigrate and demean the actions of those not invited to the table.¹¹ Is it always better to be civil to these self-appointed arbiters of what will count as good behavior? To raise these questions is to consider where the lines are that define the contours of a civil society, and what it might mean to transgress those lines in advancing one's cause.

What is the solution? One that might be proposed is the call to transcendence — if we can just get beyond our differences, we can eliminate the problems; but transcendence alone does not provide all the answers, for it makes invisible those differences that may well matter in the outcome. Reality recedes from view in a transcendent world, wherein differences that do change the way we interact are no longer of import. Bringing the Other to my table, within my white world, also is the wrong path — for it is still my table, set with my patterns of interaction and control. Claiming a commitment to tolerance that "allows" difference its space to play also is the wrong path, — for the language of "to allow" perpetuates the cultural dominance of the person doing the "allowing."¹² Nothing changes if we simply allow the Other to come over. Going to the world of the Other likewise is the wrong path, as the same holds true if only in reverse. Compromising our identity, or seeking to compromise the identity of the Other, is also the wrong communicative path. Being civil in a manner that erases our collective soul may yield agreement, but may also impoverish us as a people.

To challenge civility, to "color outside the lines" of accepted social practice, is to affirm the presence of difference — difference that matters to the social reconstruction of relationships created in and through communication. A civility that masks or covers over the presence of deep disagreement retards social progress rather than, as it would otherwise seem, advancing it. A civility that smothers discontent destroys. If we re-invoke the phrase "coloring outside the lines" as a response to civil discourse that masks or hinders the expression of difference, it would mean taking our everyday taken-for-granted practices, and turning them inside out, upside down — interrogating them before altering or re-adopting them.

How, then, might we conclude this sojourn? From choices we make in our academic community, we can construct a more comfortable community for all, and from choices we make in our larger role as citizens we can determine the limits of civility, and utilize those opportunities to recognize when incivility may be a positive force for change.

As already implied, all challenges are not equally right, all choices are not destined to be correct. There is an implicit balance between the impetus to conserve that which we know, and the desire to live that which is new. Put in these terms, it might be pictured as follows: To conserve is to protect and to defend those rights accorded a people — not to strip away or deny

those self-same rights. To call conservatives to task then is simply to remind them of the originating duty. It is a state of being in the world to defend and protect that which is accorded humanity by virtue of its nature as human.

To liberate, on the other hand, is to set free, to loosen the lines or boundaries which set a person within a place, fixing one's options to always already delineated contours. To call liberals to task, then, is simply to remind them of the duty to see beyond the lines, beyond the present place. It is a state, not of being in but of acting out of the world, not toward any one predetermined place, but to act toward the future in a manner that preserves the ability to move beyond the lines that define one's place at any moment in time. In this regard, then, the conservative is the defender of human and civil rights, and the liberal is the promoter of the new and as yet untried which a people might come to enjoy in an as yet undefined future. Once accorded, these new rights become the province of the conservative as defender or conservator of the present. We need both forces — those holding us fast within the lines, and those impelling us forward across the lines — in active tension. Enacting a civil, or at times uncivil discourse, in this scenario, is not simply an option to consider, but a fundamental necessity of being actively human.

Note: Earlier versions of this address were presented at the 2000 Southern States Communication Association Convention, New Orleans, at the University of Maryland, and at the 2000 Arizona Communication Association Convention in Phoenix.

Resources:

1. *Athens News*, 15 May, 2000, p. 22.
2. *Athens News*, 1 May, 2000, p. 22; 4 May, 2000, p. 26
3. "Artist selection for Sojourner Truth statute in dispute," *Columbus Dispatch*, 20 Feb., 2000, 9A.
4. Gören Ahrne, "Civil Society and Uncivil Organizations," in Jeffrey C. Alexander, ed. *Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of Institutionalization* (85; 85-95) Thousand Oaks CA: Sage 1998
5. Kimberly A. Powell, "The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching: Strategies of a Movement in the Comic Frame," *Communication Quarterly*, 43: 86-99.
6. Randall Kennedy, "The Case against 'Civility,'" *The American Prospect* (Nov-Dec, 1998) 41:84 (84-90).
7. Constance Hilliard, as quoted in Sam Smith, "Building a Civil Society: Let them eat discourse." *Progressive Review*; accessed from (October 8, 2000).
8. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Citizen and Enemy as Symbolic Classification: On the Polarizing Discourse of Civil Society," in Michèle Lamont and Marcel Fournier, *Cultivating Symbolic Boundaries Differences and the Making of Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (292; 289-308).
9. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. NY: Harper, 1998.
10. Carter.
11. Benjamin DeMott, "Seduced by Civility: Political Manners and The Crisis of Democratic Values," *The Nation*, 9 Dec. 1996, 11-19.
12. I am indebted to Jennifer Willis-Rivera for this suggestion; personal communication, December, 1999.