

HISTORY AND CIVILITY

by Larry Schaefer

Larry Schaefer's history of civility is a succinct summary of the implicit and evolving definitions of civility over 2500 years of civilization. Beginning with the Romans and the root word civitas, meaning the rights and duties of citizenship, civility appears in classical literature as integral to the roots of democracy in the context of assembly. In the middle ages, civility referred to proper conduct and later became a courtly term then moved into the Renaissance as a focus on communities and the social celebration of human achievement. This researched overview of the history of civility constructs a broad definition of the term through historical phases and establishes civility as a universal human characteristic.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WORD CIVILITY

Civility is one of our most honored and valued words, a five-star word. It has had a long and eloquent history. It has been sculptured and polished over time. It is nuanced; it has depth. It has linguistic layers of meaning. It walks in partnership with other honored words such as *politeness*, *duty*, and *civilized*. There are those who say that duty and civility should be expressed together: the duty of civility. The word *civility* has evolved over 2500 years.

Larry Schaefer received an AMI diploma from Bergamo, Italy, studying under Eleanora Honneger and Camillo Grazzini; he holds an MA and PhD in history from Fordham University and an MA in education from Fairfield University. In 1964, Larry and his wife, Pat, founded The Montessori School, now in Wilton, CT, for their four children. In 1976, they founded Lake Country School in Minneapolis, MN, and in 1982 Larry created a Montessori adolescent program at Lake Country, a program that continues to serve as a model for other urban adolescent programs. Larry created the blueprint to obtain a grant from the Gates Foundation, establishing the Great River School, a charter junior and senior high school founded in St. Paul, MN in 2004. Although now retired, Larry remains committed to Montessori's vision of education for peace, social justice, and the realization of human potential.

This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Grace, Courtesy, and Civility Across the Planes, Portland, OR, March 13-16, 2014.

It is a Latin word that originated in 509 BCE when Romans founded their republic, and kings were driven from the city. Civility appeared over time from the word *civis*, which means citizen, that is, only men with property. It matured into *civitas*, meaning the rights and duties of citizenship, and then *civilitas* appeared, meaning the art and science of citizenship.

The Renaissance was an age of humanism where society focused on broad human and humanistic concerns. Being human and human hearted, creating an elevated sense of humanity, and celebrating human achievements became the central focus of communities in both a social and civil way.

The rights of citizenship meant that citizens met in an assembly where they voted for their leaders: consuls, praetors, oediles, censors, and pontifex. It also meant the right to be governed under laws that they voted for and not subject to the whims of despots. Their duties were clear—serving with other citizens in centuries, cohorts, and legions, and providing for their own equipment—shields, swords, javelins, and helmets.

In the Greek classical world, there was a parallel development. Around 500 BCE, the Greek *polis* changed into democracies, where male, propertied citizens met, discussed, argued, and voted in assemblies and created public policy. This political and civil world of the Greeks and Romans has been passed on to us.

The English word *civility* comes from the French word *civilité*. The Norman and Plantagenet kings were French. The time period was the twelfth to the fifteenth century. I like to think that it was Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry II's wife and mother of Richard the Lion Heart and King John, who brought civility to the English. But the word had changed. Citizens and the Republic were missing and Europe now had lords and vassals. Civility became the proper conduct between lords and free men who served them—deference, cooperation, service, reciprocal rights and duties, and proper speech and dress. Civility became a social, political, that is, courtly word. *Magna Carta* was an agreement between the king and his vassals (courtiers).

Then during the Renaissance, the Age of Science, and the Enlightenment—a period of three hundred years—the understanding of civility reached new levels. The Renaissance was an age of humanism where society focused on broad human and humanistic concerns. Being human and human hearted, creating an elevated sense of humanity, and celebrating human achievements became the central focus of communities in both a social and civil way. Republican civility reappeared and flourished in the Italian city-states and republics. The communes throughout Europe had special civic and economical privileges. The educated gentleman was characterized as

- polished manners, courtly etiquette, fine speech,
- a nobility of bearing and attitude,
- a love of beauty, sensitive, and respectful to their class and to others,
- sophisticated and international (European), educated in the humanities,
- inspired by honor and duty, deliberate and liberal in thought, a gentleman.

At this time, a wisdom developed over the importance of civility. A Latin phrase was used—*civilitas* was the *mansio hominum*. The phrase meant that the culture of civility was the anchor of our humanity. The practice of civility holds us to our human heartedness, the essence of our humanity. It meant humans acting their best, their most noble selves, acting civilized.

The late eighteenth century experienced the American Revolution and the French Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. All of these were part of a wider movement that demanded rights for everyone grounded in the rights of citizenship.

Presidential democracy and parliamentary democracy appeared in the nineteenth century and the franchise for women was won in the twentieth. The greatest achievement of the twentieth century was

the UN's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Add to these magnificent achievements *The Discovery of the Child*, and the idea of civility seems complete: All the human family are citizens of the Earth.

The idea of civility began in small cities in the ancient Mediterranean world and then expanded around that world. It shifted and narrowed into the lord and vassal governance of the European Middle Ages. It expanded dramatically during the human-centered culture of the early modern age that shaped the character of the courier and gentleman, the commonwealth man and the liberal republican traditions of our time.

- Civility is the art of citizenship; it is the recognition of the reciprocal rights and duties of those who govern and are governed.
- It is the proper understanding of the human condition, of human relationships, and the power of human heartedness.
- It recognizes the qualities of humanness that bond us together in the human household and the human family.
- It recognizes the universal human rights of others.
- It is formed in the proper study of the humanities—those studies that explore and honor the human struggle and the human condition.

In 1938, Walter Lippman was deeply worried “that the nations of the Atlantic community would not prove equal to the challenge, and that if they failed, we should lose our great traditions of civilities, the liberties Western

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man had won for himself after centuries of struggle and which were now threatened by the rising tide of barbarity” (11).



The Blackfriars School, Sydney, New South Wales, 1914

In Montessori schools, there is a developmental progression around social life:

- In infancy (age 0-6) the development of the normalized child, a child with a strong sense of self, with a balanced and integrated personality, who shows respect for others through acts of grace and courtesy and who cares about the environment.
- In childhood (ages 6-12), the child maturing consciously in social life, aware of duties—good manners, teamwork and cooperation, listening to others and sharing their work, speaking out in class meetings, challenging their peers to honor responsibilities, kind, and empathetic.
- In adolescence (ages 12-15), the young adult growing up, assuming responsibility, becoming a leader—in the “Great Democracy” of the adolescent community.

MARIA MONTESSORI'S GREATEST ACT OF CIVILITY

On August 31, 1898 Maria Montessori turned twenty-eight years old. On September 20, 1898 modern Italy turned twenty-eight years old; on September 20, 1870, French soldiers left Rome leaving the capitol of the papal state defenseless. The Franco-Prussian War had started. Italian troops entered the city, occupied it, and a few months later in 1871, Rome was declared the capitol of Italy and the Vatican became an independent state. The Montessori family moved to Rome in 1875.

Maria was young, vibrant, active, and creative, just beginning her third year as a medical doctor, and well into her fourth year working in an asylum with "deficient" children. She was soon to find herself in the center of a national crisis. That September turned into a dark and depressing month for Italy and the Italians, especially for educators and teachers. On September 10th, in Geneva, Switzerland, the Empress Elizabeth of Austro-Hungary, wife of Franz Josef, was stabbed to death. The assassin was an Italian anarchist who was a common laborer in the building trades. What increased the horror of this brutal murder was that it was the third successive assassination of a European monarch by an Italian. Newspapers all over Europe spewed out headlines, editorials disparaged and denounced Italians as uneducated, criminal, and barbaric.

In response Italian newspapers turned on and pointed at its teachers and educators. Writers asked, "What are we teaching in our schools? Are we educating killers?" In the midst of this turmoil, three thousand teachers and educators gathered in Turin in northwest Italy for The National Congress of Italian Educators. They were in a somber and depressed mood. Maria Montessori had been invited to speak at the congress. It was her first address ever to teachers and no one knew much about her. She was invited because earlier that summer she had published an article in a political review titled, "Social Miseries and New Scientific Discoveries." The article made quite a stir, she was quoted often, and the article was reprinted. This was why she was invited and her topic struck at the heart of the national crisis. She began her talk saying the country was practicing a barbarism against handicapped children and that these children could be educated and trained. She told the audience to look at the work of Seguin and begin with educating the senses, then

approach the work with reason and science, properly understood. She suggested that schools be created for these “deficients” and this education would not be a charitable duty, but a matter of political economy. She ended by saying that no one who fails to support this program has the right to be called a civilized person. This is not sentiment and rhetoric but sanity and science.

Her speech was brilliant and timely. The audience erupted in cheers and a standing ovation. Before the congress ended, the delegates passed unanimously a resolution calling for the establishment of special classes and schools for handicapped children—medical-pedagogical institutions—and the creation of training courses for teachers. And they *demand*ed that the resolution be carried directly to the Minister of Education.

In one great moment, Montessori transformed a national disaster into a civic opportunity that inspired the nation. And this happened because of a woman, a new woman, young, active, attractive, stunningly articulate and knowledgeable, educated, and



Maria Montessori, Director of the Orthophrenic School, Rome, 1898

a medical doctor—the first ever trained in Rome. She was bold and innovative in her thoughts, direct, confident, and challenging and was a new woman who was active in the professional, social, and civic life of her country, and deeply caring about the health and future of neglected children.

The congress ended in mid-September. But Montessori's work was not over. From October 1898 to the spring of 1900—for twenty-one months—she poured her efforts into the creation of the National League for the Education of Retarded children. Members of this league were members of the Chamber of Deputies, senators, professors, prominent educators and publishers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, and wealthy society figures in the political life of Italy. No one was more active than Maria. She gave many talks in Milan, in Padua, in Venice, in Genoa, in Rome, and she raised money. She was elected to the governing Board of the League. Her voice and her arguments were heard—clear, learned, powerful, and convincing.

When the school opened in the spring of 1900, Montessori was appointed its director. She was almost thirty years old; Italy was almost thirty years old and acting maturely. The school was called the Orthophrenic School. Maria Montessori had become a national celebrity and a national leader who through her experience, talent, hard work, and vision helped her country turn a corner into a more positive future. Today, one hundred and sixteen years later, we pursue our professional lives within the framework of this great act of civility that led nine years later to *The Discovery of the Child*.

In the 1930s, a parallel act of civility happened again in Montessori's life when she travelled all over Europe to peace conferences. The talks she gave were collected and later published as a small book. Its title is *Education and Peace*. It is a book that our world desperately needs, and we Montessori educators hold in our hands the future of this remarkable book.

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