



# WINDOWS INTO CIVILITY

SUBMITTED BY:

## CIVILITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS AT UC DAVIS

NAOMI JANOWITZ  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Our university is a spectacular place because we hear a great deal of what some might call “bad news.” People tell each other to rework, re-do, rethink, and resubmit. So let’s cut right to some bad news: Our statement on *Principles of Community* rings with juicy words including “justice” and “understanding” but tells us little about how they are manifest in our community.

We earn our pay as staff and faculty, our grades as students, by scrutinizing everything. We act in annoying ways, asking again and again when we do not understand something or find an answer suspicious, constantly demanding better reasoning and writing from each other. We communicate intensely since we care very much about what we write and say. Our community is probably more diverse than any ever gathered in one institution (reflecting the incredible diversity of California where everyone is now some type of minority). And the news gets worse. Our community is a giant Rorschach, eliciting intense wishes and fears from everyone in our state, from parents to politicians.

Getting along with each other and the outside world is not going to be a simple task.

The easiest way out of this stressful situation is to locate every problem in someone else (that annoying person in your class, in your office, in your department).

Civility is not accomplished passively but instead demands a huge amount of activity on a daily basis even when we are feeling very tired already. The Principles below address struggles writ extra large due to being part of a public,

land-grant university, under pressure from both ourselves and the external world to make miracles happen in hundreds of minds of all ages.

### **1. Demand from Yourself the Honest Moment of Self-Doubt (i.e. You may not know why you believe what you believe)**

Learning civility could begin with hypnosis. Why hypnosis? Because hypnosis demonstrates one of the central lessons of life: we are often unaware of our true motivations. Civility is a very small task if it only demands speaking nicely to people we dislike without also demanding that we attempt to understand *why* we dislike them. And we must seek hidden reasons we don't like to think about and not simply our secondary rationalizations, that is, the reasons we make up to cover up the real reasons for our opinions.

These are hard-won insights that begin with critical thinking about ourselves (critical thinking has to be about something and in the university we are our own first subjects). We find out, unfortunately, that gratification comes in many forms. From the clear example of a mother hitting her child because it feels good we have to move to the gratifications that we are permitted, even encouraged to engage in. *Is it possible that I enjoyed downgrading the paper of that sassy student just a little too much? Is it possible I enjoyed listening to myself talk in class today just a little bit too much? Was I so unwilling to help my fellow co-worker because she reminds me of my sister who always got her way by whining?* Plato reports Socrates' dire warning: The unexamined life is not worth living. Principles of Community begin not with the most abstract concepts but with the greatest singularity of all: each unconscious mind and how it shapes each life for good and for ill.

### **2. Your Neighbor is Just as Confused As You Are**

Even more disconcerting than knowing how little we know about our own mind, is the realization that others have the same struggle. Humans are animals that offer a constant string of interpretations about themselves and

their world. They express and entwine their lives with ideas that foster their creativity and attachment to others and yet cause pain at the same time to themselves and to others. Our neighbor does not know why he is looking down on us or why she is rejecting our most precious beliefs but we have to begin with that realization. Just as we abhor plagiarism of other people's idea so too we reject echoing their self-serving defenses.

### **3. Imagination is Central**

Civility begins with your imagination. You use that imagination to develop certain muscles in your psyche, muscles that may not have gotten the daily strengthening they require. Lack of civility is a failure of empathy. In fact, the upside of all the recent discussions of UFOs may be in part that they make "us" a very large group (all humanity) united against the "them" of aliens. All humans now have common cause. Tomorrow, give yourself a civility test. Every time you start feeling angry/peevd/annoyed at someone, step aside and write down five reasons why the person might have been acting that way. (For extra credit turn your observations into a dance, song, poem or science experiment). Those who annoy us the most are often nearly identical to us (the narcissism of petty differences, to use Freud's phrase).

### **4. Principles 1-3 Fuel Rational Criteria (Even for Irrationality)**

Our community works to make, support and refute arguments whether those arguments are about how atoms behave or how dance has become more than narrative. These arguments are the Esperanto of academics, the language that everyone must learn to speak to join in the conversation. This language may be the only thing we share. It has to do all the heavy lifting of finding a way for us all to live together even if we disagree on most everything. Some issues in life can be settled by vote, but academics is where voting is replaced by the persuasive argument. Be proud of this fact since it is a very high bar to set and is one of the central ways we are a light unto the nation.

## **5. Don't Get Arrested with your Mother**

As much as we all love our mothers, we need to examine our attachment to ideas from our youth and later on, from our middle age and so on, as long as we live. We need to find out which ideas and values we are willing to get arrested for. They may not be the same as our parents' (Imagine what the world would look if they always were!).

## **6. Be Ready to Stand Alone**

Numerous studies remind us that other people are likely to stand against an evil if at least one other person does so. Being the one person to stand first is really, really hard. In the university we teach independence of thought for just this reason. Be that first person. Have your argument ready to bring the second person on board.

*Personal note: My father always said each person should have one hopeless cause, that is, one cause that is a real stretch of the imagination. So, in light of the continuing revelations about corruption, brain damage and finances, I am founding a new group of abolitionists, COMA, the committee to Abolish intercollegiate football. Is there a second person out there?*

## **6. Don't Pull Up the Rope behind You.**

This is a tall order these days and demands more from each of us than just passing classes or drawing our salaries. We were able to join this community because of the care and tending of prior generations. We have to convince everyone that UCD is worth supporting for people we will never know or see but who are our intellectual heirs. They will tend our ideas and, hopefully, criticize them and come up with some better ones. Let's replace the *Principles of Community* with a list of 10 action items to preserve public higher education in California and then let's do them. A principle that stays on the webpage is not worth the electricity it takes to keep it there.