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NOLAN FINLEY | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Finley: I'll take a civility pledge. Will you?



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Mackinac Island — Incivility is killing America. It's the language of hate, and hate has become the dominant force in our culture.

We are an angry and bitter people, fractured along political, racial and class lines, unable to talk to each other and increasingly unwilling to see value in those who believe, vote or look differently than we do.

There's a coming-apart feeling to what's happening. I know we've been through polarizing times before and always survived. That doesn't mean we will this time.

Point in any direction to assign the blame: A rise in partisanship corresponding with the principle that all that matters in politics is gaining and holding power; social media and cable television outlets that profit from keeping us angry and frightened and a growing conviction that those on the opposite bank are ignorant or evil.

It all plays into this roiling sense that America is going to hell, and it's the other side's fault.

Civility is one of the pillars of the Detroit Regional Chamber's Mackinac Policy conference, underway here this week. This morning, I'll participate in a panel on how to create and sustain a more civil society in my role as co-founder, with Stephen Henderson, of the Great Lakes Civility Project.

A core principle of the project is that all good people come to their opinions in the same way: They take the available information, run it through the filter of their personal experiences and values and form a point of view. If that viewpoint differs from yours, it doesn't make them stupid or their opinions invalid.

Taking the time to understand those values and experiences is key to building the respect necessary for civil engagement. It may not lead to agreement, or a softening of positions. But

hopefully it will enable honest conversations that bust through the assumptions that lead to hate.

And that's the real problem. We assume we hate people based on what we know about their politics, their skin color or where they come from. We choose to avoid rather than to engage. It makes it easier to be rude, accusatory, mean.

Unfortunately, incivility is the ticket to success in today's world. Social media rewards the loudest, nastiest voices. They garner the most friends and likes, though there's nothing friendly or likable about their narratives.

We're not preaching a macro-sermon. Our aim is to help individuals build personal relationships across the various divides, to measure people by something other than our differences. And to not contribute to the divisiveness.

To that end, I've been taking a look at my own role in fostering discord. And what I've found is hypocrisy that doesn't align with my civility project work.

Language matters, and the words I've chosen to make a point have not always been civil. They've sometimes amounted to personal attacks and name-calling. And I've done exactly what I urge others not to do — assign sinister motives to those with whom I disagree.

Presenting forceful and provocative arguments can be done without taking cheap shots.

I can do better. We all can. We'll all have to if we're going to hold this country together.

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