

A MORE CIVIL SOCIETY BEGINS WITH US

THOMAS W. TURNER JR.

The recent tragedy in Tucson continues for many of us to dominate our thinking, with good reason. The president pointed out in his compelling speech at the memorial service for the victims of the shooting that, as humans, we struggle to make sense of it all, to explain what happened in some kind of rational way. I found one comment particularly challenging: "how we treat one another, that's entirely up to us."

A civil society depends not just on its elected leaders. They can only do so much - though it wouldn't hurt to see them model civil treatment to each other a little more often. Fortunately, we don't have to wait for that kind of miracle. We can do this ourselves. Those of us who mostly live in nongovernment-focused communities, interacting in nongovernmental ways with our families, neighbors and service providers - we are the ones who can initiate a change for the better.

At the National Conflict Resolution Center, one of San Diego's busiest nonprofits, we honor everyday citizens for building a more civil society. This year's Peacemaker Award honorees are being recognized for having chosen peaceful and often creative solutions to crisis and conflict.

Athol Fugard, known for his deeply rooted and controversial anti-apartheid dramas, fought to give a voice to black native South Africans. His work inspires people to fight injustice peacefully and speak openly about life's cruel realities.

Our local honoree, The New Roots Community Farm, a project of the International Rescue Committee here in San Diego, provides land and resources for refugees from eight countries to embrace the simplest form of human rights through homegrown food. The farm allows the various culturally diverse populations to peacefully

collaborate while providing a chance to build a new life in a new country.

In addition, the National Conflict Resolution Center is honoring Morris Casuto, retired regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, for his 37 years of immeasurable contributions to justice and fair

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treatment for all.

Just as our Peacemaker honorees rose to overcome their hurdles, we face a similar challenge every day: How do we, as citizens, treat each other so that the effect of what we say and do contributes to a more civil society? How do we continue the trickle-up civility exemplified by "ordinary" people such as Patricia Maisch, who prevented the Tucson shooter from reloading; by Daniel Hernandez, who provided lifesaving procedures to Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, and by the many others who intervened to keep that awful situation from becoming even worse?

How can we initiate trickle-up civility? It is hard, but it's not that complicated. Our center has an amazing formula. Honed through 28 years of providing mediation and mediator training to the neighborhoods and communities of San Diego, it utilizes a deceptively simple three-step process. It's a civil way to address divisive issues. It is called "the exchange."

Step one: Listen effectively. Effectively means

listen to understand what the other person wants you to hear. Listen beyond the tone and sometimes even the words. Listen - don't start practicing - your response to what you assume they want. Listen with your eyes and your ears and listen with your mind. Then demonstrate that you got the message by recapping the key points in your own words. If you don't get it just right (which is normal), try again!

Step two: Respond respectfully. As a part of the conversation and a partner in the discourse, you also need to be heard. So having understood the other, try getting him or her to hear really you. Think about the effect your choice of words will have (is calling the person a liar really going to make it easier for you to be heard?). Think about what you really want the other person to hear from you. Then make sure your message was received by asking them to repeat what came across.

Step three: Go deeper. Now that there is a foundation of understanding, it is necessary to go forward. If there have been changes in what either of you think, that is fine, but it is not necessary. What is necessary is that now you talk together about what is next. Given what each of you have heard, what *can* you agree on to do together?

Strikingly simple, yet time and time again we have seen that it works.

Each of us should take up the president's challenge. If we can create a more civil discourse on the grass-roots level, we may actually influence our leaders to do likewise. If nothing else, we can make a difference in the relationships that matter in the neighborhoods in which we live and the workplaces in which we labor.

Turner is managing partner of Procopio, Cory, Hargreaves & Savitch and also is board chairman of the National Conflict Resolution Center, based in San Diego.