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SPOTLIGHT

COMMENTARY: Common decency is at the heart of good ethics

Calvin Bellamy

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It's a free country, I can say anything I like." How often have we heard someone say that?

Usually, what preceded that comment was something coarse, cruel, insulting and often vulgar. And such comments are no longer limited to the locker room or other private places. Entertainment personalities and political leaders are also increasingly careless with their language. Social media, augmented by AI, seems to have no bounds.

Recently, the nearby community of Orland Park, Illinois had one of those “free speech” moments. The village adopted a civility code outlining a code of ethics and setting standards for conduct in discussing official business. So far, so good. Who could object to such sensible action?

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Well, one councilwoman did object, asserting that such a code could abridge free speech. She said discussion should be unfiltered “even if uncomfortable.” Apparently, in her view good taste and self-control constitute a restraint on freedom of speech. Sad!

Here in Northwest Indiana, the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission (SEAC) has also adopted an ethics code — the Code of Shared Ethics and Values, which has been accepted by SEAC’s 23 member communities. That Code serves as the basis for the ethics training SEAC provides for employees of member communities.

One of the four pillars of SEAC’s Code is Respect/Civility. This pillar calls on all member communities and their employees to treat each other and everyone else with dignity and respect, to act professionally and courteously, to give fair consideration to

other points of view, to show tolerance and understanding, and to be open and transparent. (The other three pillars are Honesty/Integrity, Accountability/Responsibility and Fairness/Justice.)

Northwest Indiana is fortunate to have two annual events where the focus is on ethics and civility. SEAC sponsors an Ethics Summit in October and Chuck Hughes of the Gary Chamber of Commerce hosts the World Day of Civility in April. Both events are open to the general public, the Ethics Summit free of charge.

It can be difficult to always act ethically and speak civilly. We all get angry at times. Maybe an occasional outburst cannot be avoided. But the more we restrain our impulses, the easier it should get. Think of it as adding a speed bump to slow down a heated comment or response.

We are not born ethical. Consider that cute baby. He only cares about himself and will shout (we call it crying) whenever he feels he needs something, even if it is 3:00 a.m. The point is that ethical behavior is something we have to learn either by being taught ethical principles or by observing others acting with respect. Hopefully, it's some of both.

Reasonable, open and civil discussion should never be seen as undermining free speech. Perhaps being ethical and civil require giving up the freedom of bad taste and worse manners. If so, those are freedoms we can do without.

When asserting the right to free speech or for that matter any other right ask yourself: Yes, I can, but should I?

Calvin Bellamy, a life-long resident of Northwest Indiana, is a retired banker-lawyer and a co-founder of the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission. The opinions are the writer's.