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When Aikidoka Speak and the Silence that Ensues by David M. Valadez

Civility is not a logical conclusion to a rational thought process that has run its course. It is a choice the mature person makes. It is as much a choice that the mature person makes as incivility is a choice the insecure or immature person makes. Civility is an option of human action. It is not something open only to Aikido masters, aikidoka, or even martial artists. So let us say that there is no great mystery to civility in and of itself and that it is simply something we should all choose to be toward each other.

Matters of civility become complicated for some whenever they feel that an “antagonist” has “first” broached civility. True, the more mature the person, the less antagonists they face, the less pressure they feel from the antagonists they do face, and thus the less “impulse” they feel to return incivility with incivility. Yet, because of a lack of metacognition (what sociologists called “self-reflexivity”), folks that opt to react in uncivil ways often feel justified, and thus “civil” in how they are interacting with another human being. The lack of self-reflexivity also hides from them the immaturity, the insecurity, and the falseness of feeling attacked. All of this is delusion. However, delusions do not exist and/or do not rise to the surface because they are false. There are real social/cultural pressures and results that make delusions for the most part perfectly functional within any given arena of life. That is to say, life starts to be constructed in such a way that one’s view of reality (even delusional views) becomes Reality. This is something we all do.

In my opinion, the thing that makes incivility so prominent in mediums like Aikido Internet forums is the dedication that some folks have to arguments of authority. If you will allow, even the view recently provided on one forum that suggested that everyone has something to say and/or to offer, etc., is coming from the position that arguments to authority are valid within this medium. This is why it has come to be implied that “new folks” or “folks not yet known” only say something “wise” or “worthy” because they have stumbled across it – either by accident, by repeating something someone else with “authority” has said, or by “leaping” ahead in what they have actually experienced. They have no “authority” so their “wisdom” can only be afforded the status of “correctness.” It is not afforded the status of purposeful or earned insight.

Arguments of authority, better understood as arguments of prestige, are fallacies because they assume that authorities cannot be wrong. They lead to uncivil behavior whenever they encourage a holder of such a position to believe that proponents of contrary views can never be right or can never be an authority of equal measure. This encouragement comes from ego-driven impulses that “pressure” such proponents to

defend their status of authority while falsely believing such action to be a continuation of defending their position and/or stated ideas. This is precisely why such folks go from stating their ideas as best they can, to touting their status, to no longer debating against the position of their fellow human being but to denouncing that man or woman themselves (i.e. uncivil behavior). The absence of self-reflexivity (or metacognition) allows all of these various stages toward incivility to go unnoticed, to be lumped under a vague notion of civility, and/or to be covered with the cloth of self-righteousness – one under which some great abstract (“Real Aikido,” “Real Budo,” “Real Koryu”, etc.) is being upheld and protected at the cost of one or a few individuals that deserve to be mistreated.

To be sure, the dojo has its place for positions of authority and for the privileges granted that position. However, Aikido Internet forums are not dojo. People do not chime in to study under anyone. Learning there does not take place according to the tenets of the traditional sensei/deshi dynamic. The medium’s only value is its only capacity: to exchange ideas, positions, and perspectives. While one may find some of the reasons to hold positions of authority in the medium, one will not find any of the assurances needed by such positions there. For example, even if I say I have trained in Japan, trained in the martial arts for twenty years, trained with four shihan, did kenshusei studies with two shihan, speak, read, and write Japanese, read kanbun, read Japanese Buddhist specialized terms, got a master's degree and a doctorate candidacy in History of Japanese Religious Culture under a leader in the field, etc., it can hardly be proven. Moreover, the more important point, it can never a priori turn an opposing view into a guaranteed wrong view. It cannot transform a view contrary to mine into one not worthy of hearing but worthy of being uncivil towards.

In such forums, because of the nature of the medium, ideas must wrestle along rational or logical lines, not institutional ones. There, for civility to remain, for the mature exchange of positions and ideas to take place, folks are going to have to always put their ideas on the table with anyone. There are no real dojo dynamics that can thrive there (i.e. there alone). A deshi who is looking for such an element (e.g. those folks who like to defer their opinions to the “wise” and forfeit their voice and mind for no other reason), and a “sensei” that is looking to be able to claim authority and thus the last word, are both severely out of place (which is probably part of the urge many feel when they want to take things to some other place – i.e. “Why don’t you come to my dojo and show me what you are trying to say?!”)

The reason why these forums are dead or dying, or go through stages of death and dying, is that there is not enough metacognition being employed. Folks are not able to see what affect the fallacy of Argumentum ad Verecundiam is having on the multiplicity of voices that is truly out there and also upon how those voices are understood. The current population of posters has been reduced to silence and/or agreement but for a vocal handful that say little more than “I agree.” Hence, there is not only fewer things to say, there are fewer reasons for saying anything. The chance for something other to occur will not take place until, in boredom, the current population of “non-authority” members will leave. At that time, a new population will enter into the forum as part of a natural occurrence, and the cycle of reducing others into silence and/or agreement will again repeat itself as folks battle to “save” or to “establish” their positions of authority instead of allowing this medium to do all it can and should do: allow for open and rational exchange.