

Jay Lenrow:

Welcome to the 2nd season of the Johns Hopkins virtual alumni book club. I'm Jay Lenrow, alumnus of the Krieger School, class of 1973, and an Officer of the Alumni Council. We are here on a glorious fall day at the Mattin Center on the Homewood campus of Hopkins at the Digital Media Center. Hopkins sophomore Buddy Sola is taping this talk for us today and it is available to you in transcribed form as well. It is a pleasure to introduce our faculty author and host, Professor P.M. Forni of the Romance Languages and Literatures Department. He will discuss this month's selection, which is his book, **The Civility Solution: What to Do When People Are Rude**. Dr. Forni is a Professor of Italian Literature in the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences. He graduated from the University of Pavia in 1974 and received his PhD from UCLA in 1981. A faculty member since 1985, he received the JHU Alumni Association's Excellence in Teaching Award and the Outstanding Faculty Award for undergraduate teaching. He has written extensively on the works of Giovanni Boccaccio and was the co-founder and co-director of the JHU Civility Project (JHCP) in 1997, an aggregation of academic and community outreach activities. The JHCP is aimed at assessing and addressing the role of manners, civility, and politeness in modern society. It was recently reconstituted as the Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins, which Dr. Forni now directs. His first book on civility, **Choosing Civility: The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct**, was published in 2002. There's been wide mention of his work in such publications as the New York Times, the Times of London, and the Wall Street Journal. He has appeared on a number of radio and TV shows from ABC World News Tonight, the BBC Outlook and Oprah. Dr. Forni, thank you for being with us today and let me begin the book introduction with this question, "How did the Civility Project get started and what led you to write two books on the subject?"

Professor Forni:

First of all, let me thank you for having me here today. It is a great pleasure to be able to address our wonderful constituency of alumni. I was teaching a course on **Dante's Inferno** in the mid 90's here on the Homewood campus and one day as I was presenting a conversation to my students on **Dante's Inferno**. I looked at my class and a thought occurred to me that had not occurred to me before. It was a funny thought, but it stayed with me and really changed a lot of things in my life. The thought was that these are my students and I would like them to know everything there is to know about Dante and **Dante's Inferno**, but even if they did and then they went out to be unkind to a little old lady on a bus, I would feel as though I had failed as a teacher. Again it was an odd thought but it stayed with me and it really changed my life, after having lived most of my life under the sway of aesthetics. I was a professor of literature, after all. Ethics was knocking at my door. And so I thought maybe this happens to everybody. In the first part of our lives we pursue beauty, and in the second part of our lives we pursue goodness. And my pursuits of goodness or my pursuit of the interest of goodness took the form of a quest for this kind of gracious goodness that we call civility. I was at the university at the time and I was just a professor of Italian literature, but after that day I started to collect all that I could find on the topic of civility, good manners and politeness. I put together what I called my low tech civility archive and I started to read and study all that I could find and at a certain point I went to some colleagues of mine in

other departments and I said, "I have this ball, do you want to play with me?" And they, being good Hopkins professors, said, "Well sure, let's do a symposium on civility and good manners at the end of the century." It was 1997 by then and I didn't want to do a symposium or at least I didn't want to do just a symposium. Let's do this, let's build a container and let's call this container JHCP and let's put in this container activities of academic nature, the symposium for instance, but also community outreach activities and try to verify what civility, good manners and politeness mean today. So we started to choose three places where to clarify what civility meant and what good manners meant and that was the inner city public school, the hospital, and the maximum security prison. We did activities in all these locales throughout the fall and the winter and so we were on our way. The JHCP started in 1997 and has continued throughout the years and it still continues with the name the Civil Initiative at Johns Hopkins.

Lenrow:

Very interesting, and I wonder what kind of thoughts you had when you brought this not only to your fellow faculty members but to the students who, I guess that by the time they were in their late teens and early 20s studying at Hopkins, had long since heard these things from their parents, but were far from their parents orbit at college. What kind of introductions did you get from them?

Forni:

That's right. Well the first class we taught that had a component of good manners and civility was in that fall of 1997. And it was at the time that we taught the same class with similar books with similar text to the inmates of the maximum security prison at Jessup and the end of the semester we brought the two groups together and we brought the students to Jessup for two nights and my students said, "Dr. Forni, we have learned more in one night in Jessup than we have in 4 yrs in Hopkins." And I said great, but then I realized it was also a double edged compliment. But it was quite a learning experience for them to hear, for instance, that some inmates would describe civility as something obtained through intimidation, a form of respect obtained through intimidation, which is not exactly how we define civility – but also to hear some inmates say they were trying to be civil in that extreme environment in order not to feel like caged animals. And it was quite an experience to be confronted with this reality. But other than that, what we did in that course, in that first course and subsequent courses with elements of civility and good manners in them, was to look at certain rules of conduct that have been recorded in books of manners throughout the centuries and see which rules survived through the centuries and which were dropped and became obsolete and tried to see why. And also we wanted to find out what it means to be civil in different eras of Italian, in that case it was mostly Italian European, societies and history. What does it mean to be a polite, a good Christian boy in Milan in the 13th century? Well, you go to the books that were circulating on good manners in the 13th century and you find that out. What does it mean to be a good aristocratic young woman in the Renaissance in Florence? Well, you go to the books of conduct written at the time and you find that out. This course developed into a course that was called "Italian Matters, Italian Manners" that we continued to teach over the years and alternating this historical perspective with the theoretical perspective, meaning we would take a rule of good

manners and civility that seems to be shallow and arbitrary and would show that in fact it has a moral, it has an ethical backbone. What brought me to this study of civility and good manners was its connection with ethics and whenever we present to our students this kind of phenomena that are civility and politeness and their significance in society, I am very, very careful and to show that the civility, politeness and good manners are not trivial because of their connection with ethics. They are not trivial because they do in essence the everyday busy work of goodness.

Lenrow:

As an Italian native who was raised and educated in Italy (Forni), I'm reminded of Alexis de Touqueville, when de Toqueville came from the more advanced civilized European culture and came to this country to write about American society and democracy. You have come here with that European perspective and upbringing and you are writing about civility, but much of your laboratory for that writing is here in the U.S. How does that European background, Italian perspective, affect the way you've written?

Forni:

In my book I describe something that happened to me in my first months when I came to the United States and my port of entry was Los Angeles. I was a grad student in Italian Renaissance literature at UCLA and I went to the doctor once just for just a checkup and a tanned nurse toting a clipboard looked at me and said, "Pier, the doctor will see you now." I was 27 at the time, and the last time that a stranger, and a stranger providing a service, in Europe called me by my first name rather than Mr. Forni or Dr. Forni, I was probably 12 or 13. So I was really taken aback that I thought, I do not know this woman. Why are we on a first name basis all of a sudden? And I thought it was extremely rude, but then the next day when I climbed onto the bus – the #1 bus, the blue bus that goes from Santa Monica to west L.A., to Westwood – I witnessed something that I had never witnessed before in Europe. The travelers climbing on the bus were saying good morning to the driver and exiting the bus they would say thank you to the driver. Now I was really surprised. Again in Europe, the driver was just another anonymous cogwheel of the machine that he was driving. And so I had never seen anyone paying attention to or thanking the driver for the important service and I thought to myself yesterday, I thought Americans were very rude, but I see how there is something very civil in what they are doing this morning. And so, little by little, I started to distinguish between informality and incivility and this is a mistake that my fellow Europeans make when they judge American behavior. They mistake American informality for incivility. Are Americans more informal than Europeans? Yes, they are. Are they ruder? Are they more uncivil? No, they are not. In many cases, I think they are less rude but it is true, however, that at its extremes, informality borders incivility. If you are invited to the White House and you show up in flip flops, are you uncivil or are you informal?

Lenrow:

Only if you're a lacrosse team.

Forni:

Yes, probably both, that's right. So I think that I managed to go back to the situation with the young nurse and I realized that she had not been rude to me, she was just acting according to the informal code of the society in which she lived. So I had to learn this. But certainly to adjust to the sometimes turbo informality of Americans is always something that is not easy for a Europeans and a European of my generation.

Lenrow:

And what you said reminds me of how in my studies of German I learned how there was a different manner of asking questions, whether it was a formal, which you did with people you did not know well, and then the informal, much of which in this country doesn't exist and doesn't exist in our language.

Forni:

No, in the Italian language as a matter of fact, it exists exactly the same. There is a formal address, which implies a certain use of the pronouns, and an informal one. And my father and my uncle liked one another, this was the uncle, the man who had married his sister, and we used to spend Christmas at their home. And of course we were family, but my father and uncle Gianni, it took them about 15 years to switch from the formal address to the informal address. Being family, being people who liked one another and so on and so forth, but the ingrained formality in which they had been raised that would call for the pronoun of respect took a very long time to break down.

Lenrow:

I'm going to ask you to share some passages from the book. What I noted while reading was how a lot of what you had to say regarded slowing down and it appears as though as society goes on in this country we have more and more electronics from cell phones to blackberries and iphones and ipods – everything seems to be speeding up. And I know you talk about slowing down as one of the keys toward improving civil behavior. So if you could choose some passages and we could weave a little discussion of that in.

Forni:

That's very, very true. One of the main reasons for the proliferation of uncivil behavior is lack of time or perceived lack of time. We are so task oriented; we are so goal directed that we often engage in what becomes a mad rush for the attainment of our needs and our goals. And as we engage in this mad rush, we don't think that we have the luxury to slow down for the sole purpose of being kind to one another, and that is a real shame because if we did, it would be good for the soul and for our goodness and we would strengthen our bonds with the people around us. And so it's a very myopic view of relationships, this business, blindly business-oriented way of being in the world.

Lenrow:

Think of two passages that have resonated most with readers of your book. They may have mentioned them to you when you have spoken to groups.

Forni:

Yes, one is about individualism and lack of restraint. "Although it certainly generates innovation, progress and prosperity, individualism can also be a liability. Someone who goes about the daily business of life strictly adhering to an 'I'll do it my way for my own good' philosophy is unlikely to be consistently and scrupulously mindful of others. Certainly the whole extreme individualist mindset is not geared towards the subtle points of interaction. Social approval is definitely not as powerful a motivator as it used to be. In part this is because most of us no longer live in cohesive and controlling communities. We may be tempted to celebrate all this as liberating when we care little about what others think of us, however, we end up thinking very little of them. We definitely feel less bound by the noble obligations of respect and restraint. I would not be surprised if a survey told us that a large percentage of people today consider restraint something that does not concern them. In reality, quality of life in a society depends on the willingness of its members to keep their needs and desires under control. It may be as mundane as lowering the volume of our stereo when the sound can disturb our neighbor or as serious as taking no for an answer when our romantic advances are not welcome. Restraint based civility makes civilized life possible. In days gone by, good manners were seen as good because they helped make restraint second nature. Values have changed. Self esteem and self expression are in, and restraint is, if not out, an annoying afterthought. When we lack restraint we inevitably hurt others and eventually pay dearly ourselves. Think for instance about the consequences of car crashes caused by drunk drivers."

And something that really resonates when I speak about these matters, especially to parents and to youngsters in this school across the country, is the very commonsensical and simple observation that as a society we have been very good at teaching and instilling self esteem in our children. We have been very good, very good, and perhaps too good. Now, self esteem is important in good measure. Self esteem keeps us sane, it is a sort of an immune system for the soul, but when we feed our children oversized portions of self esteem, we create children who are self absorbed, who think the world revolves around them, and for whom it is very difficult to be considerate and kind. In essence, they are trapped in a cage of narcissism that we have built for them. What we have not been good enough at is to instill self restraint. And so one of the important things I think for us to consider as a society is to rebalance the ratio of self restraint to self esteem, in our dealings with our children in the way that we raise the new generation.

Lenrow:

It would appear that that's largely a societal issue as well as an individual parental issue because the society as a whole doesn't seem to enforce the civil behavior the way it perhaps did years ago. And I

look to the differences between Europe and the United States; we're a more transient society. And the fact that you're not necessarily living in the same community as your parents and grandparents or people who have known your family for generations makes it a little easier to be uncivil.

Forni:

Yes indeed, it's the issue of anonymity and stress that are two generators of uncivil behavior. When we are stressed we are less tolerant of the mistakes of others. We are more prone to anger. And when we are in an anonymous environment we do not have much of an incentive to be kind and considerate to others because those others around us are not part of our lives. And in traffic when you have both anonymity and stress, it is then that real trouble can ensue because that's how incidents of road rage happen, because of this volatile and sometimes deadly picture of anonymity and stress.

Lenrow:

Do you have an example from the book of a situation that you think would be good to share with our listeners?

Forni:

Yes. I was thinking when I was invited that I would read one from traffic since we were talking about traffic. The second part of my book contains about 110 situations of rudeness with the solutions, what to do in those situations and this is about it. It has the title, "The Infamous Finger Makes an Appearance," and it's about traffic as one can imagine. "The battered pickup truck in front of you has kept you going at an excruciatingly slow speed in the fast lane. You have been patient but you can't help honking your displeasure. When you do, the other driver's response comes in the form of a raised middle finger. The unimaginative profanity makes you furious. The thinking function seems to be temporarily obliterated from your brain; all that matters to you is not letting your rival get away scot free." This was the situation and the next is the solution. "Bypass your kneejerk reaction to gesture back, tailgate, or keep leaning on your horn. This is not about getting even, teaching the guy a lesson, you gaining the upper hand. Instead remain clear headed under pressure. You don't want to end up reenacting the Ben Hur Messala charioteering duel. So here's what you do whenever you are at the wheel. Expect that the infamous finger may appear at one point, and picture this scene in your mind. There you are calm and collected even after the slight anticipating and visualizing makes you feel in control and prepares you to deal at your best with the real thing. When the offensive gesture does appear, take a deep breath and accept unconditionally that it did. Understand that the other person is not gesturing at you, the specific being you are, with your unique identity, but rather at the anonymous person who just happened to be driving that car at that moment. Making the slight less personal will take some of the sting out of it."

Lenrow:

You're also saying to someone in that situation that they should be true to themselves and their own sense of morals and ethics rather than sinking to that lower common denominator exhibited by the driver.

Forni:

That's right. Throughout the book I discourage the reader from responding to rudeness with rudeness. I don't think it's a good idea for many reasons: one, because you want to be true to yourself, and also I think that it's more effective if you respond in a way that is consistent with your better self. Can you have people listening to you if you scream at them? Yes, you can for two minutes.

Lenrow:

You can't win a race to the bottom.

Forni:

You're right, that's very true.

I have a situation called "Your grandma relives your weight problem. Bridal radiance, married stability, and prompt pregnancy is what your loving grandma sees in her mind's eye when she sees you, her 31 year old, still single granddaughter. Loving she is, tactful, not quite. 'Now dear, you have a great smile, you're smart, and you're funny, it doesn't mean you have to settle for less than the best because of your weight problem. You were so slim in high school, oh well.' Although she has occasionally dwelled on your weight before, her comments really bother you now. Isn't there an unwritten grandma granddaughter covenant saying the former must find the latter nothing more than flawless?" And this is the solution: "Try a response something like this. 'Granny, I may be a couple of pounds over my regular weight but I wish you wouldn't judge me. It makes me feel like I'm a disappointment to you. Why don't we say we drop the issue of my weight once and for all? Let's talk about something else when we are together.'"

Lenrow:

It takes a certain amount of strength to be able to do that.

Forni:

Yes, also when your mother in law gives backhanded compliments.

The situation is the following. "Instead of a warm, *How are you?*, at breakfast, your visiting mother in law says, 'That's such a pretty dress, so much nicer than the one you had on yesterday.' You think: it's going to be a long week, as a couple of barbed replies come to mind. That's ironic. This is the reply that comes to mind: *I like what you had on yesterday much more than what you're wearing today. Or When did you become the family fashion expert?* Either would serve her right, you muse, but then incivility would win out." Not so, the solution is this: "It is a situation falling squarely under the chose your battles heading, meaning you should let this one go. Your preferred response to your mother in law's qualified praise in your taste and attire is the simple and civil, 'Thank you, I like I too.'"

Lenrow:

It reminds me of the old joke. A young man wakes up on Christmas morning and finds a gift from his mother, a box containing two beautiful sweaters. So he goes up and he gets dressed, and he comes down wearing one of the two sweaters, and his mother says to him, "So you didn't like the other one?"

Forni:

That's a no win situation. But this also brings us to consider one important thing that I discuss in the book in the civility solution – when we should bring the slight to the attention of the perpetrator and when we shouldn't. And the simplest of the rules of thumb in my opinion is that if the slight comes from a spouse, a member of the family, a friend, a co worker, someone who shares your life, you should be more inclined to bring the issue forward to the attention of the perpetrator. Because if you don't say anything and you repress, then the other person will do it again tomorrow and then you repress and here she will do it again and again and one day you are going to explode. And what is going to happen then, well the other person will say, "But you never told me anything about this. How was I supposed to know that it bothered you so much?" And now you are doubly at fault. You're at fault because you didn't say anything and because you exploded. So being assertive, which is one of the rules of considerate conduct which I had in my first book **Choosing Civility**, being assertive and explaining how the behavior of the other person made you feel, and expressing that you expect that something will change in their behavior, I think, it's very important especially when you're talking about, again, someone who is part of your circle of life affair.

Lenrow:

I think you hit on some of the other questions I had, which was what you would like the readers to take away from your book. And I think you just summed that up quite well. That to analyze the situation and determine when and how you should react based on who the person was and what was being said.

Forni:

That's right, I think that's very important. I also would like to point out that the book is also proactive and not just remedial. By that I mean that the first part of the book is really about how to become the kind of person that people are less likely to be rude to in the first place. So it's preemptive. It is a book that tells you what to do before people are rude to you so that you avoid, there are better chances for you to avoid that rudeness before it manifests itself. But then the book is also about how to go about making your response appropriate and effective when the preemptive attempt at avoidance of rudeness does not work.

Lenrow:

That, I think, gives everyone a lot of insight into your book and to the things that they could find out by reading not only our selection this month but your prior book, **Choosing Civility**. I want to thank you, Professor Forni. Our listeners should know that you will be posting approximately six questions on our alumni website for the month of December for our online discussion. And I can only imagine how that discussion will go on. And you've given us a tremendous amount of food for thought. And I hope it will be a very civil discussion

Forni:

Thank you very much. I'm delighted that the alumni will read my books and that they will discuss it and that they are always welcome to look for my website, which is: Dr. Forni's Civility Website. If they Google these words, it will appear and they can always reach me at forni@jhu.edu