

Civility and Respect: A Lesson from the Life of Gil Hodges

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Seth (a pseudonym) came up to speak with me privately at the conclusion of a talk I gave recently. He voiced concern about what had occurred at a high school basketball game in Massachusetts a few days earlier that involved taunts and anti-semitic shouts among spectators. He also expressed dismay about the “insensitive, crass, and inflammatory” comments expressed during the Republican presidential debates. He asked, “Where have civility and respect gone? How do we help our children to be respectful when they witness so many examples of a lack of respect, especially from people running for president?”

A lack of civility in politics, sports, and other situations is not a new phenomenon, but given the presence of the internet and social media, it is now more immediate and far-reaching than ever before. One example of the absence of civility and respect on the web is readily apparent by reading the hundreds of comments that follow stories posted on sites such as cnn.com or espn.com. Many of the comments might best be described as mean-spirited and vitriolic, replete with demeaning words directed at other responders. At this point, I rarely go to the Comments section. Why bother reading insults that have little to do with the original article?

Analysts of social media have observed that the relative anonymity on these sites affords responders a platform to express objectionable language and disrespectful comments that most people would be hesitant to display in face-to-face encounters. I think it is a sad situation when some individuals resort to a cloak of anonymity to hurl hurtful, incendiary invectives without any sense of accountability or responsibility. Of course, as we have witnessed during the Republican presidential debates, aspersions have become commonplace with no attempt to mask them, apparently perceived by those who offer such remarks as a sign of honesty and strength that deserve to be witnessed by millions of viewers (and prospective voters).

Considering Seth’s Observations

I reflected on the observations and questions posed by Seth following my presentation—a presentation in which I had emphasized the importance of respect and

empathy in raising resilient children. I believe that people who are respectful and empathic outnumber those who are not, but I can understand why others might disagree with this view. Negative acts and pronouncements receive greater publicity since they are seen to be more newsworthy and are often more intensely absorbed than those actions that capture the generosity and kindness of people. This last statement is supported by brain research that indicates that negative events have a greater influence on our memory and psychological state than positive ones do.

It is often a Herculean task to lessen insensitive, demeaning comments at different events (just look at the problems that moderators of the Republican presidential debates have had in attempting to move candidates away from personal attacks). However, I do think there are steps each one of us can take. If we prefer not to hear others demeaned, we should make certain that we refrain from voicing demeaning comments and, when appropriate, ask others to do the same. Very importantly, we should insure that we engage in actions that represent positivity, civility, and respect.

This last point segues into Seth's question, "How do we help our children to be respectful?" I have frequently expressed the opinion, which has been advanced by others as well, that the most powerful way of "teaching" children civility and respect is for the adults in their lives to model these qualities on a daily basis. While what might be labeled "formal" teaching about positive behaviors is very important (although we must be careful that our teaching is not experienced as lecturing or nagging—an all-too-common occurrence), we must never forget that even young children are keen observers of and learn from our actual behaviors. We must practice what we teach or our lessons won't be learned.

A Memory from 1952

As I considered Seth's questions, I thought of how fortunate I was to grow up in a home in which both of my parents modeled respect and caring. I also thought of my teachers from elementary through graduate school who modeled these same qualities. And then I thought about Gil Hodges, the star first baseman on the Brooklyn Dodgers, and what he experienced in 1952.

Many of my readers are aware that I grew up in Brooklyn. My twin brother Michael and I were passionate about our beloved "Boys of Summer." The same was true

of most of our neighborhood friends. Baseball cards of Hodges, Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Roy Campanella, Carl Furillo, Don Newcombe, Carl Erskine, Preacher Roe, Johnny Podres, Duke Snider, and other Dodger players were treasured. Having three professional baseball teams in New York City led to many debates such as who was the best shortstop, Phil Rizzuto or Pee Wee, or who was the best center fielder, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, or the Duke? As Dodger fans we had our strong views, which, as one might expect, differed from the opinions of Yankee or Giant supporters.

One of the sweetest, happiest moments I experienced as a child was on October 4, 1955 when the Dodgers rewarded their long-suffering fans by winning the World Series against the team that consistently had beaten them for the championship—the Yankees. It was the only World Series ever won by the Dodgers while in Brooklyn. They left for Los Angeles following the 1957 season. In only their second season on the west coast they won the Series followed by a number of subsequent championships, but I could not relish in their joy since they no longer had the name Brooklyn on their jerseys.

Why did an event related to Hodges arise when I thought about the theme of respect and civility and, as importantly, why has that memory remained with me for so many years, representing a truly uplifting moment? I have actually described the event to others on different occasions, and I wish to do so in this column.

As I began to write about the 1952 event for this article I wondered if I could locate any reference to the story. I enlisted that wonderful source of references, Google, by simply typing in the name *Gil Hodges*. One of the first citations that appeared was on Wikipedia. I am well aware that the information found on Wikipedia is not always accurate (the Wikipedia site itself often requests that readers provide additional or updated information about a particular subject). However, as I reviewed the material printed about Hodges, I was delighted to find an entire paragraph devoted to what transpired in 1952.

Wikipedia reported that Hodges “was perhaps the only Dodgers regular never booed” at Ebbets Field (it is a well-known fact that New York City fans can be very tough). The fans were supportive even as Hodges went hitless in the last four games of the 1952 regular season and in all seven games of the World Series. “When his slump continued into the following spring, fans reacted with countless letters and good-luck

gifts.” One Brooklyn priest, Father Herbert Redmond of St. Francis Roman Catholic Church, advised his congregants, “It’s far too hot for a homily. Keep the Commandments and say a prayer for Gil Hodges.” The Wikipedia account noted, “Hodges began hitting again soon afterward, and rarely struggled again in the World Series.”

Even as a young child I was impressed with how fans treated Hodges during his prolonged slump. I am often reminded of the incredible support he received when I read accounts of the opposite happening, namely, fans booing a hometown player or an entire team when things are not going well. I recognize that booing is one way you can express your frustration and disappointment, but I once heard an interesting observation from a baseball player (I regret that I cannot remember who the player was). This player questioned why fans would boo players on their home team when the team was not doing well, especially when they were making an effort to win. He offered the opinion that when players or teams were in slumps or losing games, what they really needed were support and encouragement—just as Hodges received in 1952.

It is a well-accepted practice for hometown fans to boo players on the opposing team and often it is the star players who receive the loudest chorus of boos. Interestingly, it is not unusual for visiting players to assert that they experience boos directed at them as a sign of respect and, if anything, it motivates them even more to excel—although star players rarely need more motivation to play at their highest level. However, often the words directed at players on the opposing team, even at a high school game, cross the line of what might be considered acceptable; offensive and insensitive sentiments are screamed that further fuel anger and create a hostile “we versus them” attitude. Such actions occurred at the high school game that so distressed Seth and many others in attendance.

An Example of Civility and Respect

I have frequently wondered what our children would learn at sporting events if they witnessed adults expressing only words of encouragement for the home team, even during down periods, and if our actions towards opposing players remained simply boos and not obscenities and words of personal attack. I hope I don’t sound overly naïve when I say that I’ve also wondered what a sporting event would be like if boos were not rained

down on opposing players but if instead we expended all of our energy and vocal cords to shout words of support towards our favored player or team.

A partial answer to these hypothetical situations was found in an article written by *Boston Globe* columnist Yvonne Abraham titled “A Game Where the Fans Were the Winners.” Abraham reported what transpired in a high school boys’ basketball playoff game that took place more than a week prior to the well-publicized game that Seth attended. However, the reaction of the fans in the two games was strikingly different. One game featured taunts and religious epithets while the other was described by Abraham as “gorgeous.”

The Holliston High School Panthers were making their first playoff appearance in a decade against a very strong Concord-Carlisle team. The latter quickly took a lead, and as the lead widened the Concord fans did not gloat and shout derogatory remarks. Instead, they recognized the effort of the less talented Holliston team and began to chant the complimentary slogan, “You guys are chill,” to which the Holliston fans shouted back, “We respect you.” Then in unison, the gymnasium was filled with the words, “Sportsmanship! Sportsmanship!”

Abraham wrote that parents and coaches had never witnessed anything like that in the past. Matt Baker, Holliston’s athletic director commented, “We always talk to our kids about sportsmanship, and it was gratifying to know that they were listening.” Barry Haley, athletic director at Concord-Carlisle, observed that even when his teams were winning in the postseason, the games were “like going to the dentist five times in a row, because the kids didn’t get it and insulted opponents.”

Haley added, “That was one of the best games I’ve ever been associated with. We have a very good team, but I tell you, the spirit of that game is what it’s supposed to be about.”

Abraham continued, “Tom Dibble, whose son Ben was leading cheers for Concord-Carlisle, has seen plenty of ugliness in these situations. He said that Holliston kids set a different tone. ‘They brought out the best in our fans.’ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the chief instigators of Holliston’s civility outbreak credit the Concord fans. Holliston junior Sam Athy observed, ‘It’s rare you come across a student section like theirs. They

were mature and respectful. Usually, when a team is winning by that much, they rub it in our faces.”

I recognize that the civility that filtered through the gym during the game has occurred at other times and at other venues, but as the athletic directors of both schools implied, the kinds of behaviors displayed between the fans at that particular postseason game are the exception rather than the rule. The statements of those in attendance suggest that the fans who attended the game will remember the positive climate that was created long after they forget the final score.

A Suggestion

As I finish writing this article, and as I continue to read demeaning remarks from presidential candidates, I have a suggestion. I know that many may interpret it as overly simplistic, but I would like to offer it anyway. Here it is:

Prior to their debates, the presidential candidates would be required to view the behavior of the fans at the basketball game between Holliston and Concord-Carlisle. And then the candidates would be asked what, if anything, they learned from what they had just observed. Some may argue—including the candidates—that there is little to be learned from the behavior of high school students at a postseason basketball game that is applicable to presidential debates. I would disagree. There is much to be learned about our own behaviors when we view situations in which respect and civility are the main actions that dominate an event.

One final thought. Sadly, Gil Hodges died of a heart attack at a very young age, just two days before his 48th birthday. I don't know if anyone ever asked him what it was like to have the encouragement of so many fans during those trying days at the end of the 1952 season and the World Series that followed. I believe we would all learn a great deal from what this soft-spoken man had to say.

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