Whenever I think of C-SPAN, I think of my mother. She was a C-SPAN junkie. She loved the interviews; she loved the historical accounts; but, mostly, she loved the partisanship. “I love it when they fight,” she often said. She loved the Sturm und Drang of politics until the day she died. And she died, almost predictably, on the most political day of the year—July 4th—the same day of the year that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died. My mother was the most political of the three.

Her story is not exceptional but it is familiar. Her Irish immigrant father was killed in a horse and buggy accident in Connecticut prior to her birth; she graduated from Pawtucket High School in Rhode Island (where she was the class poet) and then married my father, the eldest of 9, who himself had become head of his mother’s household at age 18. Neither of my parents went
to college, and yet their 4 children amassed 10 college degrees among them. An American story, this.

A mother becomes a different mother for each of her children. For my older sister, Mom was a member of the Altar Society and the Women’s Sodality; for my younger sister she was a consummate wit, a jokester; for my brother she was an aficionado of all things Irish; for me she was a political animal.

Unsurprisingly, she choreographed my first political experience. The year was 1952 and the place, Somerset, Massachusetts. Dwight Eisenhower was to pass by my house in a grand cavalcade. I purloined my mother’s broom handle and a piece of cardboard, made an “I Like Ike” sign, and stationed myself among the neighbors who had gathered on our lawn. A shadow quickly loomed over me, the sign and broom handle snatched from my hand. The face was stern, the sentence abrupt: “Not in this house.”

This is my first political memory. Mom and I never spoke of the incident again, but I still remember her odd sentence (it had no subject, it had no verb). I also remember the emotion in her voice. It would be years before I would learn what it meant to be born Irish Catholic at the turn of the century in a nation not yet pleased with its growing diversity. My mother taught me, pellucidly, what it meant to be a Democrat or a Republican.

Politics came with the sunrise for her—first the Today show, then the morning newspaper. Her midday angelus was C-SPAN; dinnertime brought her Dan Rather. In the evening she sought out Firing Line and she went to sleep listening to talk radio.

A dutiful son, I phoned home regularly. The ritual never varied: my life, my wife’s life, the grandchildren, two risqué jokes, and then politics: “You won’t believe what this mayor of ours is up to.” “What’s wrong with that governor of yours?” “Sis is out campaigning for the town selectman.” “Have you heard the new Hillary joke?” If you were Mary Claire Sullivan Hart’s child and had no interest in politics, life would have been difficult for you.

Politics was my mother’s compass; it helped her navigate her world. She never forgot she was an American citizen and she never forgot the old discriminations. My father was a child of the future (“Don’t look back” was his motto) but my mother mentored the past (“Never forget your own kind,” she often declared).
Partisan though she was, she never stopped learning. The day before her stroke she watched politics on television and, more important, she had an *attitude* about what she watched.

My mother’s story is an old story and that’s a shame. Today, with the economy erratic and with politicians in disarray, it is easy to abandon the commonweal. But my mother knew that ceding power to others is just plain dumb and, worse, self-compromising. When my mother died on July 4, 2000, the United States lost a voter. We need a replacement. We need several.

But politics is having a hard time, and that’s what I want to discuss in this chapter. To my mother’s way of thinking, C-SPAN is a glorious thing. It brings us politics raw, politics unvarnished; but people have lost a taste for politics. They hate it when politicians mix it up, when they decry one another’s policy preferences. They want politics without tears.

My mother knew that that was nonsense. She knew that contested ideas and deeply felt passions lie at the very heart of politics. She knew that the whole point of democracy is to pit the forces of good and evil against one another and then decide which is which. She knew that most political parties are born out of resentment—resentment about other classes, other regions, other ethnicities, other interest groups, other age cohorts. And when you put all of these contestants on the field at the same time, as C-SPAN does, you get the United States of America at its best.

So say I. Others disagree, and I’d like to talk about them today. I want to talk about the C-SPAN avoiders, those desiring an antiseptic politics, politics without its affirmative passions. These gainsayers come in two varieties: (1) Web Evangelists and (2) Uncivil Louts. The former finds hope in political interactions based on new technologies; they want to make politics a mental thing rather than an existential thing. They are idealists, these Evangelists, and they believe that the World Wide Web and a plethora of mobile devices will tidy up politics.

The Uncivil Louts are cut from a different cloth. They decry politicians’ self-interestedness and, really, all forms of political give-and-take. They yearn for a day when the pettiness of politics will be transcended, but they only imagine that for a moment or two. At all other times, they abandon the very concept of political accommodation.
The Web Evangelists and the Uncivil Louts are perfectly suited to the modern age. They capture a zeitgeist fashioned out of deferral. My mother would have found that abhorrent. While she was fascinated by the Web and while she loved political humor, she knew that politics was a knock-down, drag-out affair on its best days and that that was its glory. She knew that contestation—full-bodied, take-no-prisoners contestation—is what purifies ideas and makes them socially palatable. C-SPAN tells this story each day, thereby honoring the political enterprise. Others, however, tell a different tale.

**THE WEB EVANGELISTS**

As someone who has spent a good deal of his professional career doing computerized content analysis, I am no Luddite. Indeed, I am attracted to any modality that would make people smarter about politics or make them feel more passionate about voting. So I find the questions posed by the cybernetic age truly profound: Is genuine deliberation possible via Internet modalities? Does the Web focus us on public policies or political personalities? Has the Internet increased social fragmentation by decentralizing information sources? Are the new media abetting Americans’ civic disengagement? Are smartphones, smart mobs, and always-on connections changing democracy as we know it?

Generally speaking, though, I am not sanguine about the civic possibilities of new media for this reason: A democracy depends on persons of known identity interacting with others of the same sort. You will immediately see my problem: the Internet masks identity and it does so aggressively, athletically. Each day, the Internet invites us to revel in our anonymity, to become scions of voyeurism. A democracy, in contrast, requires transparency of identity. A democracy depends on ideas, of course, but it mostly depends on people to body forth those ideas. A democracy depends on interactions among those whose motives can be weighed and judged, people who stand with the positions they take.

The Internet demands no such thing. It entices us with a sea of pseudonyms, letting us match our multiple e-mail addresses with our multiple personalities. For these reasons, pornography has become the Internet’s
stock-in-trade. Across the nation, across the world, unknown persons down-
load images of other unknown persons for autoerotic pleasure. No relation-
ships here. No intercourse either. Just isolated individuals doing what comes
electronically. A torrent of images, an avalanche of orgasms. All by yourself.

I have a good friend who is a successful lobbyist in Austin. To you he
may seem eccentric for he does not use e-mail, never mind Twitter. In fact, he
doesn’t write things down at all. He reasons that words prematurely printed
can undermine deals not yet fully fashioned. And so he uses his prodigious
memory and a surgically implanted cell phone to do his business. More im-
portant, he uses his body to do his business. He slaps people’s backs to signal
camaraderie, searches their eyes to spot a potential agreement, shakes their
hands to confirm a bargain. Lobbyists, that is, press the flesh. When feeling
prurient, they don’t go to the Internet; they go to strip clubs—because that’s
where the bodies are.

I truly do not understand why one would listen to those whose identities
they cannot confirm. Sure, subscription e-mails are useful. They tell us where
the conference will be held and how the convention hotel can be contacted.
And, sure, social media are fun, allowing us to make black marks on our com-
puter screens while others make black marks on their computer screens in
response. There’s a lot of loneliness out there and, if the Internet can reduce
that, it does no harm. But there is no loneliness in politics, for politics is the
business of communities. It requires exposure.

The issues being discussed in this volume are important to me as one pro-
essionally concerned with declining levels of civic engagement in the United
States.2 Because of these unhappy trends, I am ready to embrace any technol-
ogy that will extricate our fellow citizens from their recliners and thrust them
back into the public sphere. I am especially concerned that today’s young peo-
ple—the avatars of the new technologies—are abandoning traditional politics
for the virtualities of their age. I do not know if the Internet can bring them
back into the fold but, if it can, I am all for it.

But I do not believe it will. As a medium, the Internet delivers personal-
ity and emotion poorly, and personality and emotion are the very essence of
political persuasion. Citizens, after all, usually grope their way to the polling
place, relying on their vague intuitions about public character and their of-
ten poorly supported but very human impressions about whom to trust and
why. I’m not sure that computers can change these habits. I’m not sure that they should.

One hears a great deal these days about virtual communities. Communities? I’m not so sure. Real communities, I submit, are economic or ethnic or geographic or demographic or religious in nature. Real communities are mobilized organically, not artificially. Real communities observe civic and cultural rituals together—they paint the neighborhood school when the city’s coffers run low; raise money for the Scouts and cut the grass for the Little League team. Real communities have a sense of place, a sense of contiguity. Members of these communities often do not know one another’s names but they know one another’s faces. Given the importance of communities and the distancing effects of the Internet, I put this question to the reader: Do you feel good about trusting the future of this nation to a gaggle of lonely typists?

Politically speaking, the Internet performs best when it delivers timely and comprehensive information, surely an important commodity in civic life. The Internet also delivers political ideology, and that is its glory when it is not its embarrassment. Information and ideology are central to an engaged democracy, but can they sustain it? According to some, yes. Anecdotal reports suggest that the Internet helps activist groups mobilize and political parties garner campaign contributions. Too, innovators continue to launch interesting political experiments. Doug Bailey’s Freedom Channel, Tracy Westen’s Democracy Network, and the Markle Foundation’s Web White and Blue project are interesting adjuncts to traditional forms of engagement.

But Internet politics is cerebral politics, sitting-down politics, and we already have enough of both. What we need is more standing-up politics, more get-out-of-the-house politics. A vital democracy needs critics to keep it honest, but it needs activists to thrive. And so a New Age question continues to bother me: Can the e-person become a citizen? I’m not sure. As I see the members of the e-generation, they stress information over affect, speed over deliberation, individualism over community, and libertarianism over representativeness. Political trust comes hard to this generation. Even as its members surround themselves with information, it is hard to get their attention.

The e-generation thinks of government as an oaf, as a too-large, un-nimble giant that always gets things wrong. With the Web at their fingertips, e-pioneers can sail past the obdurate problems of crime, hunger, and disease and
find a cyber-pal somewhere in the vast beyond. But even as they and their pal sail past, government stumbles along, doing its best to educate children, patrol highways, stop drug abuse, and care for the elderly simply because that is what a decent society does. Problems like these call for slow, expensive, collaborative work and they do not yield to a computer fix (as the Affordable Care Act initially reminded us). These are problems that make people emotional and that sometimes tear communities apart. These are problems lying at the very center of politics. They do not lie in cyberspace.

Or so say I. At this point in history, we only have opinions to guide us since so little hard evidence has been collected about digital democracy. What little evidence we do have shows that more and more people are online these days and that political information has become fairly easy to locate. But once political information is located, I ask, what will we do with it? There is a digital divide, yes, but there is also an affect divide and it is that divide that worries me most. Somehow, we must remind ourselves that a society without government is ungovernable and that a society without politics is unpalatable. To forget that premise is to forget the very nature of politics, and that sort of forgetting would surely be the death of us all.

THE UNCIVIL LOOUTS

Even before the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords several years ago, political incivility had been in the news. The Tea Party had been ranting and raving, a sitting member of Congress had heckled the president during a speech to Congress, a storied civil rights leader had been subjected to the N-word 40 years after that historic legislation was passed, a Cuban American TV personality had used ethnic innuendos to expose a Jewish American's ethnic innuendos, bloggers of all stripes had been running amok, and a popular cable personality had attacked a liberal academic who was then subjected to death threats.3

Commentators have wrung their hands about such matters, claiming that political incivility has reached new heights in the United States. They have argued further that incivility is sidelining voters, causing them to abandon political engagement. What produces these waves of incivility? Some have
traced them to major political transitions (e.g., when one long-standing establishment is replaced by another), to changing demographic trends and the cultural sensibilities they usher in, and to especially feverish times as, for example, when a nation is attacked (viz 9/11) or when the economy slackens. Other explanations also exist: political parties become polarized, term-limited politicians see no need to befriend their colleagues, politics becomes more professionalized and hence more anomic, and the mass media become dominant, encouraging a coarseness of expression not found in face-to-face cultures (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2007).

Political incivility may be depraved but it is also popular. Talk radio has become famous for its invectiveness, while cable “news” shows further spread the outrage. Too, as the political pie is sliced thinner and thinner, and as activist cadres become increasingly removed from the political center, they increasingly feel entitled to let loose. In addition, schoolyard bullying is on the rise. Might this be children’s ways of acting out the polarities their parents find so compelling?

In light of these trends, commentators have proposed a bevy of solutions: (1) recruit a new breed of leaders worthy of being emulated rather than disparaged; (2) send our most rapacious politicians to civility school to brush up on their manners; (3) censor news personnel who goad politicians into taking cheap shots at one another; (4) send the electorate to church to reduce their blood lust. For many observers, political incivility is a known evil and its remedies lie at hand.

I disagree. I believe that political incivility is an exceedingly complex matter and that its cures are not at all apparent. I also believe that the whole issue of political incivility has been approached backwardly. We have too often assumed that incivility is obviously unattractive, but I find its attractiveness to be its bulwark against eradication. Until we reckon squarely with why people are uncivil to one another and why bystanders secretly enjoy such interchanges, we cannot upend it. In contrast to commentators on the Left, I believe that incivility is usually not a sign of an engaged and robust democracy but quite the opposite: a sign of wanton self-regard and an abandonment of the skills needed to make politics functional.

Space is not sufficient to make this latter case, but I do want to ask why incivility is lovable. Lovable? My reasoning is that only that which is loved can
survive. Families are loved; families survive. Music is loved; music survives. Football is loved; football survives. But much else survives as well: war, poverty, envy, acquisitiveness. All endure because they are loved. Kenneth Burke (1969, p. 22) tells us that war is the “ultimate disease of cooperation” whereby two adversaries agree to engage one another at a particular time, at a particular place, over particular matters. Should these agreements cease, should war become unlovable, wars would end. So, too, with poverty. Somebody, somebodies, reason that fixing the problem—via massive redistribution of wealth, or even modest redistribution of wealth—is less attractive than eliminating poverty in a fortnight, as could surely be done. Poverty persists, poverty is loved, because its remedies are judged more reprehensible.

Political incivility presents similar circumstances. It waxes and wanes from era to era, but in the United States it has been a hardy perennial. In that sense it is like crabgrass. There is something in nature that also loves crabgrass and so it flourishes despite our best efforts, or our nominal efforts. We could eliminate crabgrass in an instant by paving over our front yards but that would be seen as too expensive, or aesthetically displeasing, or environmentally problematic, and so crabgrass persists, loved for its own self, loved more than its alternatives. But why would anyone love incivility? I sketch out eight reasons here.

1. **Because it is dramatic.** Incivility crops up when people are anxious, when they lose control, when their feelings override their cerebration. Inevitably, that which is out of control attracts our attention. The Indianapolis 500, for example, is almost constantly out of control (a significant number of persons have been killed since the race began in 1911) and yet it attracts 400,000 spectators each year. Who can turn away when death stalks the Brickyard? Similarly, who can turn away when Sean Hannity sallies forth? And unlike the 500, incivility is always about something important—justice, freedom, life-and-death—and so we inevitably return its gaze.

2. **Because it is dialectical.** Incivility is Janus-like. It looks fore and aft simultaneously; its denunciations are inspired by someone else’s affirmations. Social life, of course, is never two-sided. Like the physical world, it is bewilderingly multidimensional. Public policy decisions inevitably inspire a thousand options. But who could cope with so many alternatives? And so we board the Arc of Politics two-by-two: Democrats vs. Republicans, isolationists vs.
internationalists, free-spenders vs. penny-pincher. All of them stride the deck and shout at one another. Who could stop their ears to such a din?

3. *Because it is personified.* It is not surprising that television has become a haven for incivility. There, policy issues take on palpably human form. Keith Olbermann becomes the instantiation of smarmy liberalism, Newt Gingrich of smarmy conservatism. We adore such characters and revile them. We read about them in *Time* but also in *People* magazine. We get to know their human frailties, their families, their saintliness and adulteries. As a result, when the snarkiness commences, it becomes easier to choose sides, to become “identified” with such persons and, hence, with the causes they embody.

4. *Because it is gentrified.* Incivility stops short of engaging our basest passions. It has an intellectual patina to it; it comingles ideas and feelings. Incivility is violence arrested, hatred gone middle-class. Possessed as it is of such qualities, incivility even resists its own naming. You call me uncivil; I call myself deeply committed. I call you uncivil; you call yourself a patriot. Others decry us both as uncivil; we describe ourselves as truth tellers. “If you can’t stand the heat get out of the kitchen” goes the verse. “Politics is not patty-cakes” goes the refrain. Culinarily, incivility is kimchi for the political class.

5. *Because it is expulsive.* Politics exists because of original sin. Had Eve not tempted Adam so beguilingly, we’d have no need for it. By now, however, the wages of their sins have become manifest: Nothing works very well. Territories are hard to share; skin color separates us; tribes won’t cooperate; good ideas die aborning; things cost too much; people are prickly. It’s enough to make grown men cry. And so they do—each night on Fox; each day in the city square. Incivility is as primal as primates can get in a modern age. Incivility has its roots in what makes us human: our differences.

6. *Because it is compensatory.* Life’s tragedies spring from the contingencies we face. We inherit the present from the past and hence are constrained (e.g., the national debt). The future is not yet here and so we must plan things tentatively (e.g., social security reform). As J. L. Austin and colleagues (1962) might say, incivility is performative, a way of accomplishing something when nothing else can be done—right now, put in place forever. Engaging our passions, crying into the night, thus feels like a *doing*. What else could explain the sense of camaraderie and accomplishment some people feel when Ted Cruz lashes out?
7. **Because it is poetic.** Incivility has a kind of pedestrian beauty. It appeals both to the eye (via metaphor) and the ear (via antithesis). “Romance is rape embellished with meaningful looks” declare the feminists (Cummins & Bindel, 2007). Hurricane Katrina “cleaned up public housing in New Orleans” respond the conservatives (Sasser, 2006). One commentator (Martin, 2010) says the Confederates “were, and forever will be, domestic terrorists,” to which another responds: “Islamic terrorists don’t hate America like liberals do . . . If they had that much energy, they’d have indoor plumbing by now.” When happening upon incivility we find language at play. One could resist its charms, but why?

8. **Because it is commemorative.** Politics continues, seemingly forever. A bill that dies on the floor of Congress finds new life a month later. Via politics, old wars can be fought again and old prejudices never forgotten. Uncivil discourse exploits the wounds that will not heal, constantly calling to mind the indignities of the past. With incivility at one’s side, one can never lose . . . forever. Instead, one can resurrect the past—for example, the Reagan years—lionizing the Gipper as the seer who undid the Soviet Union or denouncing him as the wastrel who accelerated the national debt. With incivility, destiny rides to the fray yet again.

Incivility is not one thing; it is many things. It may seem perverse to focus on its attractions as I have done here, but incivility cannot be defeated until we reckon with its seductions. The most obvious alternative to incivility, of course, is to find something else to do with our time. Incivility is poetic but not very good poetry, so one might instead read some Keats. Incivility is commemorative but its memories are horribly inaccurate, so one might read some Stephen Ambrose as well. There is nothing inherently wrong with the desires mentioned above, but one need not call Barack Obama a Muslim socialist to satisfy them. Indeed, dancing with Ellen Degeneres meets most of these needs and improves cardiovascular fitness as well.

Yes, dancing is silly and politics important. Too important, I argue, for thoughtlessness. No doubt, uncivil discourse has its place—when grievances abound and when avenues for addressing them have been explored and found wanting. But that is gold-plated incivility, the stuff of great revolutions. The kinds of incivility that bother me are the banal sorts, those coarse and unthinking responses to the irritations of everyday life. Especially irksome are
those who market incivility to the masses: Rush Limbaugh, shock-news stations, Howard Stern, gangsta rap, Jon Stewart, Neal Boortz. It is one thing to be uncivil and quite another to export it at a profit.

Above all, incivility must not become fodder for everyday human commerce. We can avoid it with only the slightest effort. Incivility is a boorish indulgence, language divorced from grand purpose. It exacerbates the cross-cutting cleavages already inherent in politics and it is dehumanizing and uncreative as well. It feels good to be uncivil and it televises well, but we humans are meant for bigger things. A serious people, a caring people, an enlightened people, can do better.

CONCLUSION

That, of course, brings us back to C-SPAN, whose archives cry out for more scholarly research but which also stand for the centrality of politics in democratic life. C-SPAN’s founder, Brian Lamb, is a visionary who reverences public dialogue. No doubt he uses the Internet to get information but he also understands that the Web is a simulacrum, a device for hovering above politics but not for being political. Being political requires beings—human ones—who enter the lists replete with names, faces, bodies, and voices. Real politics, everyday politics, important politics is a blood sport because it deals with crucial human issues instead of deferring them.

On their best days, politicians do such work civilly, as they should. Indeed, if one had the patience to collect all the instances of incivility committed during the last year in the United States, I doubt one would find much of it on C-SPAN. Despite their legion imperfections, that is, politicians themselves know how to be civil. They bellow and holler and call each other names from time to time but only occasionally. Perhaps that claim seems odd. Perhaps the reader will point to the evening rants on Fox and MSNBC as counterexamples. But only a dozen or so members of Congress are seen on such shows and they are usually chosen because they behave badly on cue. As they are doing so, however, the other 523 members of Congress are back on Capitol Hill trying to strike a deal.
I try not to be a Pollyanna about politics but I rarely succeed. I have endless admiration for the people who make our laws because I, for one, do not know how much health care should cost or when, or if, we should send troops to Syria. Problems like these are enormously complex and rarely admit to simple solutions. All of us who care about democracy should debate these issues, but we’ve got our own lives to live and so we hire out such work to those who make our laws. They, in turn, do the best they can, deprived of omniscience as they are and hampered, too, by ego and ambition.

Each day, C-SPAN tells us this story of politics and personality. How lucky we are that it does. My mother knew the glories of C-SPAN and she respected it profoundly. So do I. So should we all.

NOTES

1. Portions of this chapter came to life in lectures delivered over the course of several years at the University of Virginia, George Washington University, Texas A&M University, and Louisiana State University. I am indebted to the faculty and students at those institutions for their interest in these matters and for their feedback.

2. The author is the founding director of the Annette Strauss Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. For additional information see http://moody.utexas.edu/strauss.


4. A quotation popularly attributed to Andrea Dworkin.