Pay Attention

Over the next nine months you will be introduced to the nine principles of civility that were selected by the Door County Civility Project based on “Choosing Civility” by P.M. Forni. The nine are included in the Door County Civility Pledge that the Project is asking individuals, businesses, governments, organizations, boards, and the community of Door County to sign and then to follow.

The first principle is PAY ATTENTION. We have all heard this statement often enough beginning in childhood through adulthood from our parents, teachers, family members, bosses, and friends. Generally we believe that is exactly what we are doing and attentively. Yet so often when we are in a conversation with another person, there are a multitude of distraction that take away our focus on what the other person is saying. You are cooking, the phone rings, and you talk with that person while you continue to prepare the meal. Your family is watching TV and your son asks you a question. While you try to answer, your eyes and ears still are keeping up with the program. Computers are so much a part of work and family life. When someone starts a conversation with you while you are working on the computer, you try to do both. Think of all the times that someone is talking to you and you are trying to figure out a problem at work, you are just ready to leave work and are making a mental list of what stops you will need to make on the way home, you are driving in heavy traffic which needs all your concentration, you missed lunch and now your stomach is also talking to you, you are dealing with any number of emotional issues. With our current technology of the cell phone, you are on alert for your ring to answer that phone immediately discarding out attention to the current conversation. You even get distracted by the beauty of our county.

The fact is that quite a bit of our conversations are ones where we are not paying attention. This lack of paying attention does not go unnoticed and has disastrous effects. First let us consider the person who is expecting you to be paying attention. All of us have had that experience with an array of emotions- hurt, angry, uncared for, dismissed, unimportant, unworthy, and sad. These emotions direct our responses with not only the person who is not paying attention, but in all our interactions. We can retreat within ourselves and not share ideas and thoughts, become inattentive ourselves, or be hostile and attacking. Secondly, we lose important information because we have not gotten either an accurate or full understanding of what the person has been saying. Our misinformation leads us both down different planes and future negative emotions for both. True conversation has broken down.

As you can see Pay Attention is an important principle of civility. Someone can begin a conversation with you at any time. More often than not you are not in a mindset to be in a conversation, but someone has started one with you. You need to pause to address your inner self attention- what am I doing and thinking right now, what are my emotions, how am I going to proceed. Next you need to turn your outward attention to that person. It is important to look at the person, notice what you can about this person’s feelings. This puts you in the present moment which allows you to learn what the person says and how one says it. Now you are ready to continue the conversation with this person with the second principle-Listen.

Step one- Pay Attention-Be aware of others and sensitive to the immediate context and actions. Attention is an act of kindness.

Orlaine I. Gabert

Door County Civility Project, doorcountycivilityproject.org