

Caveat Beholder



Harry Reid, Former Majority Leader of the Senate

by James Como

Our personal, social and public conversations too often become toxic game-playing, such as Holier-Than-Thou and Gotcha! The question is: Do you play? Here is the rub. In the movie *The Untouchables* there is a moment when the straight-laced Ness throws Frank Nitti off a roof. Later he declares, "I have become what I beheld."

Lately in public discourse, with Donald Trump as president, we have had a cataclysmic example of exactly that. We have had our bulls in china shops, but none as reckless as he, attacking with vile *ad hominem* and invective, showing no regard for the conventions of normal political discourse. He seemed to revel in pumping venom into the stream of public talk.

Now, I claim two lamentable consequences resulting from this grotesquerie. The first is that the resonance of his genuine achievements was sorely mitigated by his shredding of the social contract. The second was the response to that shredding. Stewards of public talk – anchor people, commentators, editorial writers, even news writers – attacked him, obsessively. His wife was called vile names, he (a sitting president) was insulted with locker room taunts by talk show hosts and national (prime time) anchorpersons.

In short, these unrelenting stewards, in violation of a public trust, became what they beheld but should have known better. Alas, they were already selectively perceptive. Earlier, for example, the late Harry Reid had been a U.S. senator from Nevada and the Majority Leader of the Senate. On the Senate floor he said that presidential candidate George Romney had not paid taxes; “a little birdie,” he said, had told him. It was later proven a lie. His response when confronted with that lie? “Well, it worked, didn’t it?” Not a peep.

Diagnosing the metastasis is one thing, stopping it another. An old-fashioned quality comes to the point: *virtue* as the habit of doing the right thing – including in our conversations. Our ‘expression’ has become so close to our identities that to curb it seems to be to restrict our authenticity. Thus the ‘fulfillment’ of our precious personality is protected at the expense of our very much more precious character. Instead, it would serve us well to remember that the middle of the word ‘communicate’ is *muni*, from the Latin for ‘gift’, as in each to the other.

In that light I offer this, from John Fletcher, Lord Moulton (1844-1921), mathematician, judge, and parliamentarian. In 1924 his essay “Law and Manners” appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

He posits three ‘domains: that of *positive law* telling us what and what not to do; that of *free choice*, “in which we enjoy

complete freedom" (such as whom to marry); and the *Middle Domain*, which he calls *Manners*. "In that domain there is no law which inexorably determines our course of action, and yet we feel that we are not free to choose as we would." Here "the sense of a lack of complete freedom grades from a sense of absolute duty to the matter being all but a question of personal choice."

Then comes a phrase for the ages. This Middle Domain "is the domain of *Obedience to the Unenforceable*. . . . the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself." He continues, "the real greatness of a nation, its true civilization, is measured by the extent of this land."

In short, our community (there again is *muni*) is made by our Manners, "throughout the whole realm of personal action" – including the realm of words.

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