

'The Soul of Civility' Review: Doing Life Together

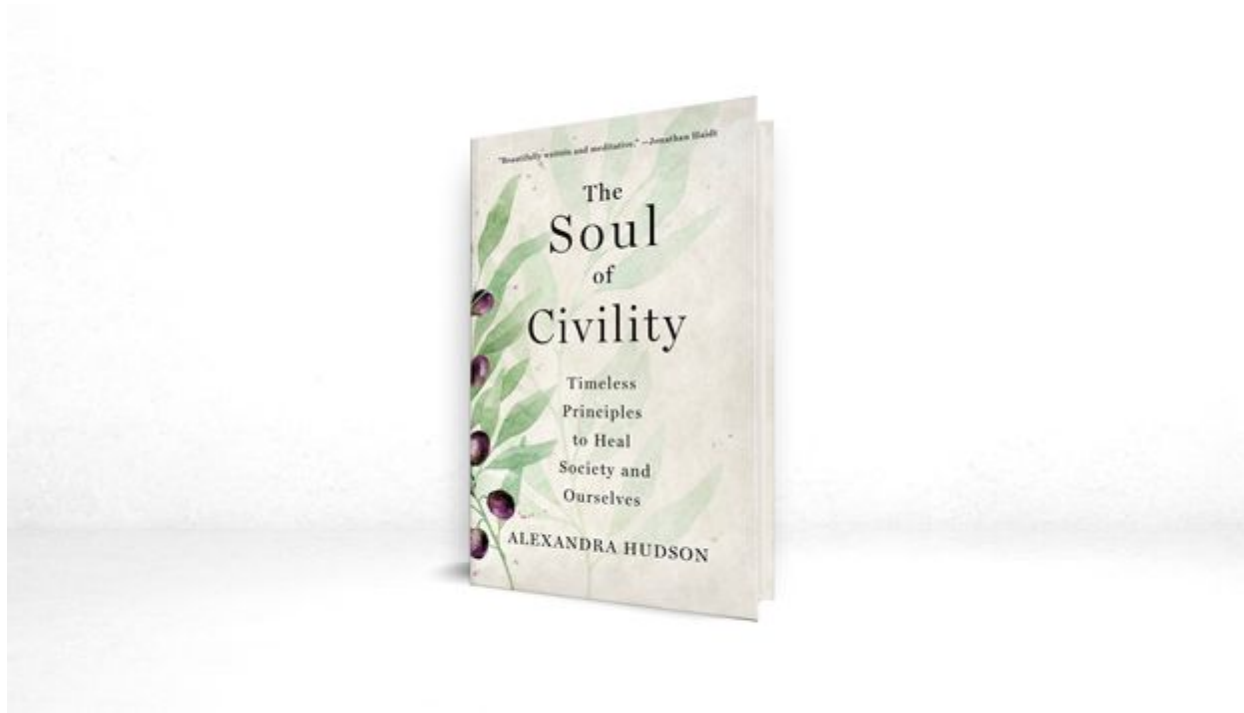
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By

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Since the pandemic, it's common to hear laments that America's social order is breaking down. It is well understood, too, that ours is rapidly becoming a low-trust society, one marked by punitive constraints on free expression and bitterly polarized politics.

Cultural analysts point to the causes of our distress. Alexandra Hudson offers a corrective to it. In "The Soul of Civility," she makes a heartfelt case that Americans are far from the first people to struggle to "do life together" harmoniously and that we individually have the power, even the obligation, to make inward changes to improve our communal lot. She believes we must rededicate ourselves to principles of kindness, self-respect and consideration for others: in short, civility.

By civility, Ms. Hudson, a great-books advocate and adjunct professor in philanthropy at Indiana University, doesn't mean merely making an effort to get along with others by exhibiting politeness, decorum or good manners. These are all emollient practices and certainly not unwelcome, but she wants readers to convert at a deeper level. Civility, she writes, is not a technique but a disposition, "a way of seeing others as beings endowed with dignity and inherently valuable." Embracing this mind-set, she believes, "may be our only hope for navigating and emerging from our fraught and divided present times."

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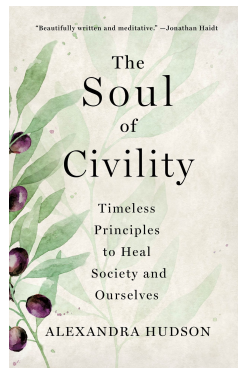
The Soul of Civility: Timeless Principles to Heal Society and Ourselves

By Alexandra Hudson

St. Martin's Press

416 pages

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How does a person suffused with civility behave? He (or she) makes eye contact with others, offers and accepts hospitality, tactfully speaks the truth, welcomes disagreement without rancor, cultivates humility and a habit of curiosity, and avoids dispensing either flattery or abuse. A civil person is a trustworthy friend, a thoughtful conversationalist, a solid citizen, a good egg.

You might think it not a high bar to clear, but it is. That humanity has forever struggled to strike a balance—between passion and propriety, between civility and incivility—is clear from the depth and breadth of the sources that Ms. Hudson draws on to make her case. She cites the precepts of a pharaonic adviser in Egypt who some 4,000 years ago compiled the world's oldest list of maxims for living well. Ptahhotep's instructions apply as well in the era of social media as they must have done in the age of papyrus. "If you meet a disputant in the heat of action . . . pay no attention to his evil speech," he warns. "Your self-control will be the match for his evil utterances."

In fourth-century B.C. Athens, the orator Isocrates counseled: “Be courteous in your manner, and cordial in your address.” Erasmus, the “intellectual superstar” of the Renaissance, sought to convey in his writing (which included a guide to etiquette) the notion that, as Ms. Hudson writes, “virtue and true freedom of the soul consist of self-governance, controlling one’s baser impulses and passions in the name of a higher principle—namely, friendship and community with others.” In our own time, the comedian Larry David, whom Ms. Hudson calls “the most astute modern observer of civility,” illuminates the value of social norms on his television show by breaking them and making viewers wince.

In every part of the world and in every era, it seems, sensible people have concluded that life is pleasanter and more sociable when we control our tempers and strive to respect others whether or not we like them—or, especially in our own excited time, whether or not they share our opinions. If this seems obvious, well, it isn’t. Thinkers across the ages wouldn’t have felt compelled to formulate schemes to inculcate civility and decency were men and women generally not inclined to fly off into excesses of selfish thinking and vile action.

“The Soul of Civility” emanates a spirit of such gentle goodness that, alas, it can be a little treacly. In the hopes of enlisting the reader’s enthusiasm, Ms. Hudson refers somewhat too often to herself and the reader as a kind of cozy team by using phrases such as “in our last chapter,” and “as we’ve learned.” Her writing is otherwise sensitive and intelligent, and she presents useful exemplars not only of admirable conduct but also of deplorable (Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes for her perfidy, the fictional Hannibal Lecter for his cultured barbarism). That she iterates similar arguments mounted by different people unfortunately gives a feeling of sameness to some passages that borders on repetitive. Indeed, a quotation of Marcus Aurelius appears, verbatim, twice in 15 pages.

Still, there’s a lot here. It’s edifying to be reminded of the theological and practical underpinnings of Martin Luther King Jr.’s commitment to nonviolent protest and of Albert Schweitzer’s advocacy for the humanity and dignity of colonized Africans. It’s charming to be reminded of *sprezzatura*, the Italian “art of effortless effort” first formulated in the 16th century, which in its ideal form unites inner sincerity with outward polish. It’s likely to be emboldening, for readers shy of expressing unpopular views against the headwinds of received opinion, to read of the bravura moral example of Edward Coles. Coles was a neighbor of Thomas Jefferson, though a generation younger, who privately and repeatedly reproached the statesman for his hypocrisy in the matter of slavery. In doing this, he fulfilled an important requirement of civility, which is to show respect to oneself.

It is probably too much to hope that the message of “The Soul of Civility” will reach the shoplifters, keyboard warriors, feckless politicians and other authors of our disorder. It is not too much to imagine that each reader, buoyed by Ms. Hudson’s earnest persuasion and the arguments and aphorisms of those she cites, will come away from the book wanting to behave—and to be—a great deal better. And if things get really hot, as Marcus Aurelius reminds us, we always have the option of “having no opinion.”

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Mrs. Gurdon, a Journal contributor, is the author of "The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction."

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