

## CIVILITY LOST

by Jaime Vergara

*December 2016, Mariana Islands.* I was at my neighborhood store getting their 13-year-old who just came from China to speak English, and I'd shared all the pedagogical tricks I knew. She can retain words and speak the language, like naming the goods on display at her store, and pronounce all the words she can read. Well, she can't read either, and she refuses to repeat words she hears, which is the gist of my introductory pedagogy. It now appears that she will have to decide to learn and not because her elders want her to.

Not unlike many of the students I teach to speak English, the first activity of opening mouth and uttering a sound—especially one that was heard before and repeated, is a way of learning to speak the language. Unhappily, especially in Sinosphere (except Korea that is ahead of converting the language from characters to phonics), memory work is first before pronunciation, thus we have a lot of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students who can write but will not speak.

Add the burden of trying to say the “correct” word, particularly the tense in the syntax, and you have a learner ever wary about speaking. Frustrated with my “willing” but non-participating student, I happened to be at the cashier where one shopper had picked up items in a 50% discounted corner and was wondering why a 1.99 item showed up as 1.00 rather than .995, for which the salesgirl explained that she entered all her items together and just deducted 50% off the whole transaction.

Busybody me, I butted in to explain that, perhaps, when .995 showed up, it got rounded up to a 1.00, which would not be the case, but it was a funny way of explaining the matter away.

The shopper took exception to my butting in. It would have stayed that way had she not used the “f” word for my unwelcome entry into her conversation. Before I knew it, I had lost my civility, and after she used the “f” word several times, I too, uttered the word unkindly to her and left with a red face for not knowing any better.

Well, it turned out that the shopper, who was chewing a betel nut with the requisite addition that made her mouth look foul, was not too kind at being interfered with by a “Filipino,” which then got the goat of a Filipina bystander who claimed that I was a Chamorro (I was one of the indigenous people of the Marianno), and how dare betel nut lady castigate me for my ethnicity. The negative discourse resumed.

The bystander who defended me as a Chamorro was someone who came to the store often, and found a heated conversation in her hands. The poor salesgirl had to referee another unpleasant interaction but kept quiet about my being of Philippine descent. She had seen my Hawaii driver's license often enough to know that I was a Filipino but not one of the CWs

(contract workers) that our betel-nut-chewing shopper was definitely not too fond of, but I could easily fit into the educated Chamorro slot.

It was the loss of civility, hers and mine, that characterized the discourse, a quality of the times.

It has been more than a month since we watched the US elections. This was the first time we lost our manners in public, as hecklers did at a Hillary, Trump, or Obama rally that tended to dominate the sound bites or news reporting. That, and the news services paying attention to the fringe, portraying the edge, and staying friendly to the one trailing behind and downgrading the one perceived to be ahead.

In an article I wrote I called the election pathway “misogyny,” one of the believable perspectives on the US voters sending Trump to the White House. On the other hand Hillary and her staff (they pop the champagne corks on election day) took a maternalistic posture with no shortage of arrogance in what was expected to be her coronation into the Oval Office.

Trump was portrayed to be just-right-of-center, even if the Ku Klux Klan went out to campaign for him, but yes, Trump is hardly your dyed-in-the-wool conservative. Hillary was projected as a “criminal” when no one could point to a single charge of a crime she had committed. Both were pictured as being centrist. The Donald was way out to the right as a matter of campaign tactic, and Hillary was left-of-center to keep the Bernie Sanders’ crowd within the fold.

But the 2016 election was America venting nerves, letting out steam, and Hillary Clinton, trying to be the accomplished woman next door to everyone, stayed poker faced above the fray—until she condescended to fist fights and came off awkward and less than a lady. Obama got tired of a heckler, so he gamely told one to go and “organize your own rally.” Hillary and Trump could not stay above the fray, exchanged barbs, and each put the other candidate down. The media had a heyday.

Hillary and Trump survived the idiots who will be there to rattle The Donald the next four years, but they lost their civility like good New Yorkers would. Of late, the Donald has been showing some civil face. He might last the four-year haul.

Civility lost by a betel-nut-chewing female who did not like Pinoys (Filipinos). My civility is also taking time to come back.