



## On Civility: Restorative Reflections

**John-Robert Curtin**

**Ying Kit Chan, Illustrator**

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*On Civility is an elegant poetic guide for developing a personal philosophy.*

John-Robert Curtin's *On Civility* is an insightful, instructive collection of poetry.

Curtin's prose poems are philosophical, drawing on his experiences with mediation and conflict resolution. They're also concerned with self-help; many read like instructions or self-affirmations, placing emphasis on accepting responsibility and creating one's own destiny. Incivility in the workplace, the strengths and failures of communication, and the power of listening are addressed in poems like "On Listening: A Gift of Compassion":

*Listening to understand is a gift that you can bestow  
on others while you receive a tremendous  
return on investment. I learn very little when I am  
listening to respond and at best, I only amplify my own  
ignorance as I convince myself of my own importance.*

There are few traditional poetic techniques present, beyond Curtin's consistent use of enjambment. Instead, universal truths arise in entries that make use of familiar touchstones, including the Christmas song "Do You Hear What I Hear?" Elsewhere, "On Circles" concerns the origins of discussion circles, calling them an outgrowth of early ancestors' use of campfire circles; it contrasts the equality inherent in the structure of a circle with the inequality of a "dominator society" that literally and figuratively elevates some people over others.

Effective metaphors related to the habits of early humans recur. One entry argues that early human groups needed all of their members in order to survive; that insight is applied to modern society in the context of rehabilitating the perpetrators of crimes, as well as their victims.

The entries trend wordy. Buzzwords, including "Restorative Practices" and EQ (Emotional Intelligence), have more of a textbook quality than a poetic one. Witty moments lighten the elsewhere heavy tone: one entry asks whether "converting oxygen to CO2 your primary purpose," while another, "On Being Trumped or Chumped"—an apparent criticism of President Trump—is quick to integrate with the book's overall theme. It makes the essential point that one person's normal is another's abnormal.

The book's design and presentation are understated and appealing. Some pieces begin with quotations from figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Yogi Berra, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Images, including of a Chinese character for "listening" and attractive landscape photographs, also contribute to the book's attractiveness.

Elegant as it distills life lessons for its audience, *On Civility* is a poetic guide for developing a personal philosophy.

PETER DABBENE (May 13, 2020)

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