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EDITORIAL: Start each day with pledge to be civil

This afternoon, a group of volunteers and young people will gather at the McMillan Memorial Library in Wisconsin Rapids to talk about something of critical importance to all of us: being nice to one another.

Not being nice in the traditional sense -- holding a door for someone, or saying "please" and "thank you" the way your mother taught you.

No, these folks are interested in getting people to disagree without being disagreeable. They want to encourage people with different views to share ideas without attacking one another.

The project, sponsored by the Community Foundation of South Wood County, is called Speak Your Peace -- The Civility Project. It is modeled after similar efforts elsewhere, and its motto is "It's not WHAT you say, it's HOW you say it."

That's surely the truth. And we see growing evidence of it every day.

A few years ago, the phrase "road rage" didn't exist. Today, we all not only can identify road rage, we've all probably been a victim or perpetrator.

That thin veneer of glass between one motorist and another seems to encourage rude gestures, shouted epithets and, in extreme cases, physical violence.

But that's just one example. Look around you and you can find dozens more.

While the digital age has shrunk the world by allowing instant communication and interaction with people thousands of miles away, it also has coarsened our communication and allowed us to react emotionally and impetuously.

Who hasn't fired off an e-mail, baring teeth and blustering about someone or something? Before the Internet, you would have had to sit down with pen and paper to write a letter about whatever set you off, and by the time you were finished, you might have cooled down.

Not anymore. Today you rant at the keyboard, hit the send button and move on, leaving wreckage in your wake.

Just look at the Daily Herald's own forum, where vicious personal attacks are par for the course. The anonymity granted by such online chats and blogs seems to offer fertile ground to trolls and flame-throwers.

And don't even get us started on talk radio, on which precious little talking is done. It's high volume, high dudgeon -- and high time we all hit the off switch.

There's some real-world fallout to all this bellicosity: Good ideas that could solve some of the problems we all confront every day are being lost because people of differing views won't talk -- or more accurately, won't listen -- to one another.

For its part, Speak Your Peace offers nine "tools of civility" that address these failures of communication. The project encourages people to:

- Pay attention
- Listen
- Be inclusive
- Don't gossip
- Show respect
- Seek common ground
- Repair damaged relationships
- Use constructive language
- Take responsibility

Few among us would oppose any of these measures, or even the overriding concept that we all should find ways to speak to one another more constructively and collegially.

The trick is to act. And during an election year, with sharp differences in world view bubbling to the surface all around us, it's even more of a challenge.

But it starts with the last item on Speak Your Peace's list: take responsibility.

If you're tired of the bickering, resolve to change your own approach. Put principles before personalities. Refrain from unconstructive criticism.

Remember, it's not WHAT you say, it's HOW you say it.