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TITLE INFORMATION

ON CIVILITY

Restorative Reflections

John-Robert Curtin

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BOOK REVIEW

A paean to civility that couldn't come at a better time.

In 1744, when he was 13, future president George Washington famously wrote out 110 rules of civility, which generally involved propriety and decorum; for example, his 15th rule reads, “Keep your nails clean and short, also your hands and teeth clean.” Curtin, the executive director of the 4Civility Institute, a conflict-management consultancy, cites Washington in his poems on civility, but he has grander aims in mind. Although civility may still have something to do with “manners,” as the author sees it, the concept also encompasses “compassion, dignity, human value, human worth, forgiveness, and self-dignity.” Overall, the book is both an exploration and a celebration of these fundamental values. For the author, one of the key competencies of civility is “listening to understand,” and he devotes multiple poems to how one may develop this skill; in one he writes, “The real gift comes through / abandoning listening to respond / and learning to listen to understand. / I learn very little when my lips are moving, except / perhaps what I already know.” He makes clear in this and in other pieces that listening—and civility in general—is about building genuine, empathetic connections with other people. It's only through such connections, the author says, that one can come to recognize others as indispensable, which is foundational to Curtin's understanding of civility: “The day that you decide that no one should / ever be considered disposable is the day you / change your thinking about everything.” In these days of division and acrimony, the author's message is more valuable than ever, and its call is only amplified by Chan's gorgeous illustrations, which mingle color photographs of natural and human-made surfaces with inkblots—a visual narrative that harmonizes well with Curtin's verse.

A vital discussion of a crucial virtue.

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