

## **A Grassroots, Year Around, Response to Divisiveness**

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### **It's Here**

The actual election day is here. The Gazette adds its voice to the host of those who encourage you to vote. We also thank you if you have voted already. Who knows how long of a haul it will be before all the counting is done, decisions made, and victors announced.

### **Divisiveness**

I have a great deal of concern about the divisiveness of this election. It is natural for people to have differences of opinion and use whatever ethical leverage they have to influence the outcome of an election so that it reflects their values. And it is natural that there will be strong feelings and animosity. However, I wonder about the hidden ways in which the machinery of big-time politics and the behind-the-scenes manipulators have fostered a hateful atmosphere. It may be in the power-mongers best interests to keep citizens fighting, or at minimum, fearful of each other. For instance, there is the liberal-conservative battle. Wow, there has been a lot of energy consumed in the war of words in that arena alone.

A person has to ask, "So what really is a liberal? And what really is a conservative?" And "what is so bad about a liberal? And what is so bad about a conservative?" How often do we stop and really listen to each other and get a feel for what it is that deeply concerns a person whose stripes are different than our own?

It is easy to get caught in the battle about button-pushing issues, focusing on those things that divide us. In doing so, our attention can be diverted from critical issues that we may hold in common.

### **Post-election Attitudes**

No matter who wins the election, the people whose candidates win should not be too smug. They should not rub their victories in the faces of those people whose candidates lose. Nor should those people whose candidates lose be too down-spirited or feel as though the world as we know it will come to an end due to the election of candidates whom they despise. Nor should any conscientious person think that they can duck out of politics once the victors have been determined.

It is likely that a lot of people are tired of politics. That's understandable. I am tired, too. But politics essentially has to do with power and how it is channeled. Whether we view ourselves as political activists or not, we are part of the cauldron of society in our small circles of life and the larger arena of presidential politics. The way we relate to people is a form of channeling our power. The way we use our time is also a form of channeling power, and the way we spend our money is a form of influencing the ballot box of the market place.

The work of channeling power continues after the final verdict is announced regarding who wins and loses this election. There is the on-going work of studying the issues, finding ways to express our views, holding the elected leaders accountable, and doing the everyday work of ethical citizens.

### **Town Government**

There is also the on-going work of local municipal government. This was a year when the voters did not have to decide who would be the mayor or council members in Gilbert. Those decisions will be made in a year from now.

In some ways, the focus on presidential politics has meant that local politics have been off the radar screen. Unfortunately, it seems that what happens in Gilbert at city hall is too often off the radar screen for most citizens. There are few visitors at council meetings, people aware of the issues, or citizens willing to get involved.

### **Seasonal Activism**

An analogy is in order. It is not uncommon for seasonally-concerned people to pick up the phone and call a food pantry or homeless shelter in the weeks before Thanksgiving or Christmas. They want to know if they can provide a turkey or other food for those persons who are less fortunate. Or they want to volunteer to help. A pantry or shelter can be swamped with the food items and volunteers during the holidays; however, there is a need for contributions throughout the year.

It is one thing for people to become informed (or at least think they are informed), get agitated, and become politically involved during a presidential election season. However, there is also the need in the cauldron of society for people to be aware throughout the year of issues and find a way to be involved in the civics of their community, state, and nation. Indeed, there are unsung heroes who do just that, and I have a deep regard for them.

### **Grassroots Peace-making**

There is also a need for peace-making that begins at the grassroots level. I think of the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland who work together for peace. Or there are the Arab-Jewish peacemaking organizations in the Middle East.

The rifts in our nation's ideological fabric go deep, and there is a need to engage in conversations with people who have different leanings than our own. We can attempt to find out who they truly are rather than identifying them with a generalized, often mis-leading, label such as "liberal" or "conservative." We need to have confidence in our own wisdom and ability to reason, but there is also the need to lower our defenses and truly listen. And there will times to agree to disagree. However, at best, the process can be one of seeking common ground and ways to work together on common issues.

### **The Courage to Speak Up**

There used to be a time when a conscientious person would have been afraid to object when someone blurted out a sexist or racist joke at a social event and other people responded with howls of laughter? But times have changed. People do speak up and object to such irreverence.

In these days, it is too easy for like-minded groups of people to get by with generalized and hateful conversations. For instance, a gathering of liberals at a potluck dinner, could generalize about conservatives and dismiss them as rigid or brain-washed. Or there could be a study group of conservatives who generalize about liberals and dismiss them as flaky or ungodly. Or there

can be statements that start out, "Those conservatives, they all believe ..." Or conversely, "Those liberals, they all believe ..."

Hopefully, someone in the group will have the courage to say, at minimum, "Wait a minute, you are generalizing." Or perhaps someone will point to the hatefulness of the conversation.

Engaging in a generalized, hateful conversation can be a means of splitting off from communicating about who we really are.

### **Pointing the Finger**

I have heard many well-intended people talk about how things are different in the Middle East than in our country because "those people are always fighting — they have been fighting for thousands of years." I have also heard the campaign rhetoric that our enemies are hateful people.

It is not often that I like to quote Miss Edna M. Marcum. She was the high school principal, literature and Latin teacher, and junior class advisor when I was in high school. She had been with the Rolfe schools in northwest Iowa for some 55 years before she retired in 1966. She could stare down a whole study hall full of high school students and silence them and stop mischievous behavior in its tracks. Miss Marcum also was an elder of the Presbyterian Church and taught the senior high boys' Sunday school class. I didn't always appreciate the school marm's style of control. Nor have I always appreciated her admonishments. But there is wisdom in some of what she said.

When students were too eager to point a finger of criticism at someone else, she would hold out her hand in a finger-pointing gesture and suggest that while the index finger of an accuser pointed toward the despised other person, her other three fingers were pointing back at herself. Indeed, when we call other people names or make generalities about them, we need to come to terms with how those persons are mirrors that reflect some of our own shadowed side.

In teaching Latin, Miss Marcum was also quick to tell us about the strength of the Roman Empire, how it fell, and how no empire in history has remained in power forever. We students were uncomfortable with the prophetic nature of her remark. We knew that she meant the United States would also fall sometime due to its own corruption.

In his recent message to the people of the United States, Osama bin Laden said, "In conclusion, I tell you in all truth that your security is not in the hands of Kerry, nor Bush, nor al-Qa'ida. No, your security is in your own hands." The remarks remind me of something I thought that Nikita Krushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union in the 1950s, had said. However, I made a few phone calls and searched the Internet and was not able to find the quote. For sure, Krushchev said that his country would bury the United States. But I thought he also said that the United States did not have to fear Russia as much as it had to fear itself — that the deterioration of our country would come from within and not from an outside force.

It does seem that Osama, Nikita, and Miss Marcum would agree (if there were a time warp machine to bring them together to discuss the issues) that our country needs to examine itself and

be strong as a result of good character and ethical behavior and not be tempted to rest its faith in one administration or another.

### **Some Bible-based Thoughts**

A couple of weeks prior to election day, I spoke with a dear friend, who is very different than me when it comes to faith and politics. She had already voted. I was feeling guilty about not getting on the bandwagon to make phone calls or go door to door for my party. I asked if she was going to do any political volunteering. She said that she wasn't. I joked that our lack of political activism this fall would balance each other. But I also wondered if she felt guilty about not getting involved for her party. She responded that she is not worried about the outcome of the election because she understands that God is sovereign and that the world is in God's hands.

I briefly and gently challenged her, saying that God acts through people, including those who engage in political activism. However, I also agreed with her. Indeed, life and the universe are more mysterious than any of us can understand, and there is something bigger at work and longer lasting than any of us can fathom. Regardless of our perspectives on life — whether they are based in world religions, agnosticism, humanism, atheism, earth-centered spirituality, or other — it seems wise to have a little trust in one another and in something bigger than ourselves.

I recall reading a sermon once during the 1980s. I believe it was by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin who served as Chaplain of Yale University during the Viet Nam War. Later, he was the senior minister of New York's Riverside Church. In the sermon, Coffin contended that God was not in the pocket of either the conservatives or the liberals. I assume he would agree that God is not in the pocket of either our nation or our enemies.

I did a quick search of the Internet to see if I could find the sermon. I did not. However, I found another sermon by Coffin that is dated February 16, 1992. It is so pertinent that I feel the need to include the following paragraphs.

... let me recall the words of President Reagan in his Second Inaugural in 1984. He said, "Peace is our highest aspiration. The record is clear, Americans resort to force only when they must. We have never been aggressors."

That would certainly come as news to Native Americans. It would come as news to Blacks; it would come as news to Filipinos, to Cubans, to Nicaraguans, where our Marines landed fourteen times in their history. All of which is to say that no nation, ours or any other, is well served by illusions of righteousness. All nations make decisions based on self-interest and then defend them in the name of morality.

It was good advice for us in our personal relations and for us as a nation in our international relations when St. Augustine said, "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself," a reflection of St. Paul's words, "All have sinned and fallen short..."

Not some, not a majority, not they, that evil empire, but all have sinned and fallen short. In other words, if we are not one in love with other nations in the world, at least we are one with them in sin which is no mean bond because it precludes the possibility of separation through judgment. That is the meaning of the scriptural injunction, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Children are innocent and their innocence is beautiful, but adults should not be innocents. They should know that in the stream of human life it is not innocence but holiness that is our only option.

Nobody can doubt that the world would be a safer and saner place if somehow we Americans got over our self-righteousness in our foreign relations.

### **Listening for the Heart beneath the Venom**

In 1987, Minnesota author, Carol Bly, delivered the annual lecture for the Iowa Humanities Board. It was titled, "Small Towns: a Close Second Look at a Very Good Place." In it, she talked about the need for healthy communications skills and gave the following example:

Associated with the Harvard Medical School, the Center for Psychological Studies in A Nuclear Age is designing workshops for high-level Americans and Russians and others, in which family-therapy skills are used. One spectacular project was a workshop in Moscow. The participants were members of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War: the idea of the workshop designers — Dr. Richard Chasin of the Center and Soviet sociologist Nikolai Popov and Soviet psychiatrist Marat Vartanyan, Deputy Director of the All-Union Research Center for Psychiatry — was to use family-therapy methods for de-stereotyping. In addition to the workshops, the Center produces and distributes publications on group process and the use of interpersonal skills in explosive, political circumstances. An interesting priority of the Center is to urge the idea that it is not sane to take a reasonable, businesslike attitude towards nuclear war: such reasonableness is spurious.

So much for the use of social-work practice far away. It is invigorating to know of it, but what I would like to do this evening is show you a scene in rural Minnesota. It is slightly, but not a great deal, changed from the actual scene which took place. I was trying, for the first time in my life, to use just two of the simplest social-work skills: questioning-getting data and feeling, for the sake of empathy — and then making sure I made a mental picture of the other person's story.

Let us say we are sitting in a classical American small-town place. It is the VFW Lounge. Here we are, with the quarter-inch woodgrain paneling, the gold-color eagle over the bar. We can have set-ups or we can have bourbon and seven, or brandy and gingerale. We are crowded warmly into a booth. The Post Commander is there. He is a grumpy fellow, I think, who is nicer to his

lion-colored Labrador bitch than he is to people. There is a shy woman there who is sergeant-at-arms for the VFW Auxiliary. It is curious that diffident people do that job very well: they would not be so pushy as to serve up front at the Fair stand. They don't feel comfortable with the higher-ups who dominate the church circles making Dorcas Kits. But they can take hold in a womanly way at the VFW Auxiliary meetings. I have seen them carry our gigantic fifty stars around the room, squaring the comers of their march. If they had to, they could remove the flag from a coffin, fold it into the heart-breaking triangle, and take it firmly across the undertaker's green grass cloth and present it, on behalf of the President of the United States, to someone's widow.

Our sergeant-at-arms is sitting here cheerfully. Jack Slippy, a man who has recently lost his aged father, is here. We know him as the dumb hand who, if you put him up on a tractor, even a comparatively simple one like a Deere 3120, can do about \$500 worth of damage in an hour. But now we know him also as a person dignified by a family death. A few of you — and I — are jammed into the booth. Finally, Jack's wife, Bernice, is here. Her style with Jack is this: whenever he opens his mouth to say anything, she nudges his elbow with her elbow — an easy act since all our elbows are on the table, and Bernice says to Jack, "You just shut it, Jack."

Perhaps we are getting a little sauced. Even so it is an uneasy alliance, because I know the Post Commander probably thinks I am a communist. There are two levels of communist: there is an outright communist and then there is "some kind of a communist."

Suddenly Jack Slippy says "You know, those environmentalists are a bunch of communists!"

Bernice shoves her elbow into his elbow. "Jack, you just shut it," she says promptly.

The Post Commander says, "I've heard that some of those guys are pretty pink, though." He adds, "If you ask me."

This is a conversation in which none of the traditional humanities behaviors work well. If I assign to Jack the stereotype of ignorant, hostile plebe, I have dishonored him and done nothing to make any change. Worse, at the moment when I assign him some role like that, I am assigning myself the role of educated truth-knower and superior person — and that does me no good. When Bernice Slippy tells Jack to shut it, she is simply acting out of old, bad small-town values: do not talk about politics or religion. And worse, when your husband says something with any intensity, call it off somehow. The sergeant-at-arms is enacting another small-town value: she is saying nothing because she believes that talk, whether about communists or environmentalists, isn't much.

I have decided to exercise my poor beginner's grasp at social-work skills. "Which environmentalists did you mean, Jack?" I ask. "The ones in our county or the ones in Carver County?"

Jack says: "I just mean generally. Bunch of commies." Then he realizes that sounds dumb, so he gets redder in the face. "All I know," he says loudly, "is they are wrecking everything for the farmer."

The Post Commander says they are a bunch of city slicks who don't understand rural problems.

"Did you mean the environmentalists working on the slough project?" I ask. I look at Jack, since he brought it up, and he has the most noticeable feeling of anyone in the booth.

"All I know is," Jack shouts, "we're going to lose everything that means anything to Americans!"

Then he adds, "If the bank takes your relatives' farm I'm going to lose my job." I recognize the first accurate thing that has been said. I also recognize genuine anger.

"I'd be very mad if I were going to lose my farm. Or lose my job. I'd be very mad," I say. "I'd also be scared, I think."

Jack looks at me with his jerking eyebrows. Various emotions go by like freight in his face. He looks angry still, and a little pleased, and generally pleasantly excited.

Now I am guessing everyone is thinking about anger and something that makes them angry. I am looking at the sergeant-at-arms, trying to guess: if she is angry about something what would that be? I pretend I am the sergeant-at-arms and I think, "So how would you like to live in this town all your life and serve in the Auxiliary and in Aid all these years and been canning for forty years if you count the summer I started helping my mother — how would you feel if some city girl, some hot-shot Home Extension agent; came to your Homemakers' Meeting and told everyone it was dangerous to do open-kettle canning? Who does she think she is with her permanent around the sides and back, and then a regular old Heine haircut in the front so she looks crazy? She is pretty, and young, and not yet tired. Anyone can do canning if they have all the fancy equipment she's got."

I am still day-dreaming through a possible anger for the sergeant-at-arms, when the Post Commander says, "I got to say that everything the environmentalists do isn't all that bad." He adds: "They are preserving the slough. I go in there a lot with Silver."

I swing into a question for him, for fear he will stop talking, "Is Silver your tan-colored Labrador?"

"Silver and I," he says, we go in there, not just to hunt, either. We go in there pretty much all year round. She gets up birds for the fun. When it's frozen we go in on the ice."

The sergeant-at-arms says, "Dogs are funny on ice. They try to hang on with their toenails but they lose it anyway."

"We go in there," the Post Commander says, "and it is very beautiful in there." What happened in this conversation, I think, is that anger which was being genuinely felt got inappropriately attached to communists and environmentalists. The anger itself, however, was genuine. It needed a little quiet questioning in order for the anger to move over to where it really belonged — about losing farm jobs. Then, when the anger was spoken about accurately, it was laid to rest: when we talk accurately about anger, much of its desperate quality disappears. It leaves space for other emotions to come take their usual, obliging places in our heads. In this conversation, the Post Commander found space to remember that he enjoys nature. Love of nature entered the booth. Amusement at dogs entered the booth. We had a mental image of the slough.

I have tried to move several such conversations from the original, hostile, projective remark about some supposed enemy to a particular, accurate estimate of the same subject. The invariable side effect has been gradual, affectionate recall of some more positive experience — such as prowling about a slough. The pleasant anecdote, however, never shows up until the original hostile feeling has been questioned, allowed to settle, to find its proper level. Surely — if such pathetically simple, beginners' procedures as I know of can make such change — surely it would be wise to learn all the social-work skills we can!

Yet how odd it is to ask a thoughtful audience, gathered through the generosity of a Humanities Board, to start learning family-therapy process! It sounds very eccentric indeed. But then I remember the widow's comment, "I never realized how much he meant to me until he was taken away" and I think: we must try any process in the world if it will improve our imaginations.

If the Harvard people are wholeheartedly trying family process with Soviet and American groups, we may as well give it a shot: we can learn the skills, teach them to our teachers, and practice them in our lives. I suggest we get trained family therapy people to teach interpersonal skills to our third and fourth grade teachers, to seniors in high school — who can enjoy experimenting with them in small groups — and I suggest we hire trained social workers to take some of our adult groups through day-long workshops.

## **The Golden Rule**

The answer in the midst of divisiveness is not that everyone will agree or like one another. However, a little active listening and respect for people who differ from us can go a long ways. To do so would be a way of honoring the Golden Rule.\*

### **Christianity**

All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7:1

### **Confucianism**

Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state.

Analects 12:2

### **Buddhism**

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

Udana-Varga 5,1

### **Hinduism**

This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you.

Mahabharata 5,1517

### **Islam**

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.

Sunnah

### **Judaism**

What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.

Talmud, Shabbat 31d

### **Taoism**

Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

Tai Shang Kan Yin P'ien

### **Zoroastrianism**

That nature alone is good which refrains from doing another whatsoever is not good for itself.

Dadisten-I-dinik, 94,5

\*This information about the Golden Rule is from the Internet at:  
<http://www.teachingvalues.com/goldenrule.html>.

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