

Commentary... Across the great divide

By Kathryn Godsiff
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Have you ever signed up for something and immediately regretted it? Wondered if you could just not show up to whatever you just signed up for? This happened to me recently when I responded to what felt like a healthy challenge for some conservative citizens to turn up to a politically motivated training session.

Citizens 4 Community recently held a workshop called Across The Divide. Its purpose: To train and prove to participants that civil political discourse is possible. As soon as I hit “send” on my registration, visions of shouted family political discussions danced in my head. And from what I’d seen and heard lately, I doubted if a community could be different from a family.

But, being generally an optimist, I thought it might make a nice change to attempt conversations with liberals that didn’t end up with rolled eyes and expressions of disbelief at each other’s views. So I turned up to City Hall and parked my truck next to another large and dusty one.

Even though Sisters often votes red on issues, conservatives tend to be fairly non-vocal. We’ll keep our thoughts either to ourselves or shared only with those of like persuasion. The

workshop organizer, Robyn Holdman, recognized that this could be an uncomfortable night for many participants and was quick to assure those of us with the deer-in-the-headlight look that it was a safe place to be.

The facilitator, Heidi Venture, gave us some background on the “divide” and the issues and values that create it. She then put us through some icebreaker and sorting-out-of-perspective exercises, and finally had us stand red on one side of the room, blue on the other. There were just seven of us conservatives and I was the only woman. Nineteen liberals stood across from us. This ratio is apparently very common at these things. I suppose that could be a reason why conservatives often don’t feel heard.

Turning up to the conversation is a great place to start.

Moderate conservatives have been referred to as the Silent Majority. I don’t know if that label still is true. What I do know is that we are generally quite polite and don’t want to lose friends over political issues. So we choose to disengage rather than disagree. But I take exception to the perception that silence is complicity. There are other ways to make change besides protests, rallies or social media comments. We go into ugly places and create beauty. We look after our land and resources. We stand up for the underdog, sometimes,

and we respect authority. Sitting somewhere in the middle isn’t the same as sitting on a fence and liberals don’t own the caring agenda. There, I said it.

There are times when speaking feels like a waste of time. Disgust and dehumanizing are tactics used by both sides to make it OK to say terrible things to one another. Heidi admitted that liberals, on the whole, say mean things to conservatives more readily than conservatives will to liberals. No matter who said what and when, the whole scheme of nastiness is being addressed in active workshops like this all across the world. That gives me hope.

The whole point of Across the Divide was to learn some listening and speaking skills to hear and be heard. Compassionate Listening sounded a bit woo-woo to me, but really all it turned out to be is listening with intent and realizing when you need to turn off the chatter and turn on your ears. We all need to practice that. That night we all practiced together and it was good.

So there is work to be done from all of us. I’m pretty sure there will be ongoing discussions even after the election hype is over. Whether we can continue across the divide without a facilitator remains to be seen.

I encourage you to turn up and find out.

ART: How we determine meaning has shifted over centuries

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us to conceptualize the meaning of art. However, he cautions that fine art, the only art worthy of discussion in his estimation, must be considered by how it was created, which he further declares as necessarily following established artistic traditions. With this final point, for the first time a philosopher clearly defined and located the particular thing that is responsible for a work of art’s meaning: the artist.

A quite large piece of pottery in the gallery that my wife and I own comes from a Native American tribe of

New Mexico. The narrow neck is sculpted so that it depicts a duck. Among the paintings around this water vessel are a number of deer symbols, each with a heart line. Only the Paynesta family of the Zuni Pueblo, among the many tribes and pottery making families of the Southwest, has the right to paint the deer with heart line motif on pottery.

The vessel’s traditions and crafting process — gathering of local earth materials for the clay, hand coiling and then pinching to form the pot, firing it in a homemade adobe oven with saved animal dung, painting it with collected local earth or plant materials—goes back at least a millennium, perhaps two, and is

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