

The politics of shattered jaws

My partner left a family wedding with a broken jaw. How can we bridge political differences without injury?

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I didn't plan on making Victoria my home; it just kind of happened. I was going to move to a bigger city once I was done school, but I love the Island too much. The sea is always close here, and I can walk everywhere. Political candidates fight over who's more "green." Whenever a bus pulls up to the stop, there's often a polite standoff; no one wants to board first, and everyone says "thank you" when they get off.

I often joke about how living in Victoria is like living in a bubble. Anyone who lives downtown, walks its streets, or struggles to pay rent knows we have problems, but citizens are engaged. We speak extensively about civic issues and try to work together to find solutions.

The joke that we live in a progressive political bubble here in the capital city became a little too serious for me in August. I had taken my boyfriend Matt to meet my extended family at a wedding. He tried to get to know a couple of my relatives. But a tense conversation went downhill, and he came home with a jaw broken in four places. He needed a two-hour surgery and four metal plates to put it back together. As we came out onto the open part of Highway One that looks over View Royal and offers the first glimpse of the Victoria harbour, I heard myself say, "let's never leave again."

Nearly every person I told in Victoria reacted with shock at the incident that led to his injury. Nearly every health worker we encountered through the three days in and out of hospitals asked if we were going to press charges. But where I'm from, fights were a normal occurrence at school and at parties. Mouth off and you might get beat down. For his part, Matt is from an increasingly rough part of the mainland, and reactions from some of his family members ran along the lines of, "well you must have said something pretty stupid."

Whether due to alcohol or shock, he doesn't remember what he said or anything that happened. But it doesn't matter: there is nothing anyone could say that would make

beating him up an acceptable response. He's also not a fighter, while the others have histories of violence that we've always written off as "boys will be boys" or something about having a temper.

There were three of them, and only one of him. The fight only stopped because I showed up and stopped it. One of them seemed more upset about my boyfriend exiting the situation with "his cousin" (well, me) than he was about severely injuring his cousin's partner.

Growing up "up island," I never felt like I belonged. The scenery is beautiful, but at times it feels like the mountain walls surrounding the picturesque valleys mirror those hemming in their residents' world views. Trucks outnumber cars. Nearly everyone has a friend or family member who works, or worked, in oil and gas in Alberta. Everyone plays or watches hockey. For 15 years my hometown was represented by a Conservative MP who denies both climate change and evolution. Most people don't talk about politics much, except to offer some refrain about how certain political parties pledge to protect jobs.

It used to be considered rude to talk politics in polite company. But it's clearly something people are struggling with across the province. Kai Nagata, the Dogwood Initiative's energy and democracy director, penned a December 2013 article titled "Six ways to keep the pipeline debate on track," about how to talk about the contentious Northern Gateway Pipeline over Christmas dinner. This fall, CBC published an online "Toolkit for when Thanksgiving dinner turns into election talk." The list goes on. What these articles also make clear is that progressives are often struggling to find a way to talk with their stereotypically older and more conservative relatives. But for many, it's just not worth it (see the Wiki on "How to Avoid Politics with Stubborn Relatives").

If we don't learn how to have hard conversations and challenge each other in a respectful way, what's at stake could be much worse as things simmer below the surface. I have had disagreements with my relatives that hadn't always gone well. It's hard not to

think about how some of the animosity and unresolved issues arising from those conversations could have contributed to Matt's broken jaw.

It's difficult to talk about these things and not sound like you think you're better than people. But when it comes to distancing yourself from sexism, racism, and regressive politics, what's wrong with being better than that? I've learned a lot in the almost 10 years since I left that my hometown, but more important and more difficult is all the unlearning I've had to do, which has positively affected not only the way I see the world and its problems, but also how I see myself in the world. (And this process is certainly ongoing.)

Equally, in the last several years I have felt increasingly isolated at family get-togethers. My efforts to confront racism and problematic ways of thinking have devolved into battles with devil's advocates and me in tears.

I've been told to shut up, and that me "and my little Facebook politics aren't going to change anything," whatever that means. I cry when I get frustrated or angry, so there have been a lot of tears. This tends to make everything more awkward and "embarrassing" for others. I don't want to paint myself as a victim, and I haven't always acted admirably, but it's frustrating, it's exhausting, and in the end it didn't seem to have meant much.

But should we just swallow the world whole, as-is? I am told to respect other peoples' opinions, but I think it shows more respect to challenge them to refine their position than immediately dismiss it as flawed. And by this I do not mean playing the classic devil's advocate by discounting someone's personal experience or arguing them into the ground—all of which usually involves verbally abusive behavior.

We're entitled to our opinions. But when your opinion comes from a sexist and racist world view that harms others, we need to talk. When we retreat into entrenched partisan positions and see challenges as personal attacks, we all lose the opportunity to grow personally and as a society.

We're told not to give up on family, and

that blood is thicker than water. But water's a lot easier to drink. Or at least that's how it seemed as I watched the person I love the most puke up the blood he swallowed in an emergency room at 3 a.m. Family is important, but it's hard to understand what that means when they do harmful things that your friends would never consider. Why do we have to stay attached to people that cause us harm?

I don't want to give up on people I grew up with, but at the same time I don't know if I will ever even be able to look the people who hurt Matt in the eye again.

My boyfriend's face shouldn't be a stepping stone in their journey to becoming a better person. A few drinks and a fiery temper aren't justifications for losing control and becoming verbally and physically abusive (something I must remember as well). We are adults.

I was told that they are not evil people, that they just did a bad thing. When the action fits a pattern of behavior and world view, however, it's hard for me to see them as necessarily good. The idea of withdrawing from my family isn't an easy option for me; it's devastating. I had a pretty ideal childhood, and now all those memories are tainted. We spent so many family dinners and camping trips together, and now that will never happen again. They will never know my children. I won't know theirs.

In some ways, I wish I could return to that time when we were kids camping, sitting down to family dinners together. Encouraging critical thinking and respectful disagreement can begin when we're very young; I see this in the young people I coach in roller derby and in some of my friends who now have kids. People who lash out usually feel trapped. Give people the words to express themselves and they often will. I'm still struggling to help them and myself to see how larger webs of oppression affect us all.

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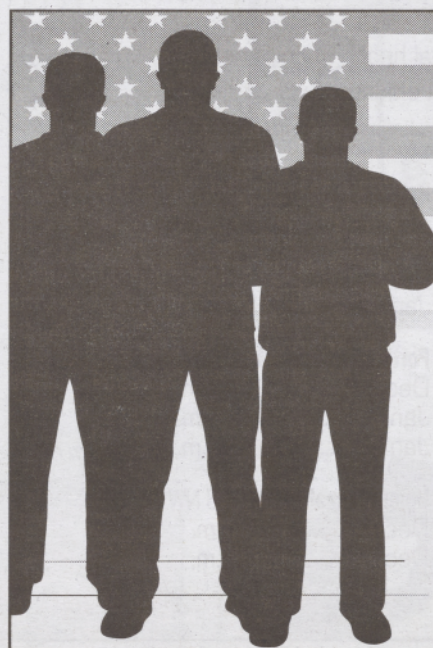
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