

Communiversality

Categories: Uncategorized

As I write this we are less than one week away from one of the most sharply fought and nasty elections in recent memory. It is hard to watch commentary on it without feeling like you should take a shower. The dilemma for many voters is best summed up by a story I heard where a mother said her child had asked her if she was going to vote for the liar or the crazy man.

While I have my own views and will be voting with more enthusiasm than many (largely because I have direct experience with one candidate and know them beyond the cartoon character that has been presented) I think the real issues in this election will emerge after November 8. Regardless of the outcome, large swaths of the electorate will feel crushed and angry.

Among the many problems this election has highlighted is the fact we were a divided country. Many commentators have discussed that most Trump voters don't know anyone who is voting for Hillary and most Hillary voters cannot fathom why anyone would vote for Trump. This division into our own tribes has meant that there is a vast divide that must be bridged.

The motto of America is "E Pluribus Unum"-out of the many, one. Today we are suffering from a lot of "Pluribus" and not nearly enough "Unum." So what's a country to do?

There have been many analyses done as to what has happened. We see the fracturing of the middle class, impacted by globalism and technology. Our population is becoming more obviously diverse, which has led to the loss of power of those who once felt in control. And last, but certainly not least, is a media that reports as if everything is a sport with daily winners and losers being reported and when the score is too lopsided they put their fingers on the scale to make it more interesting. They favor ratings over rationality.

So what are we to do? What does the mother of that child who asked who she is voting for tell her child? I think there are several things we can aspire to. First we have to work a bit harder at understanding those who disagree with us. We might not be able to convince them to see the world as we do, but if we could exhibit a modicum of empathy for our fellow man that would be a good start. Perhaps one of the most important subjects we should teach in school is empathy. How can we help out children put themselves in the place of someone with whom they disagree? There are lessons and programs on this that must be incorporated into our schools.

Another need is to reaffirm the principles that this country is founded upon. One study found that only 36% of Americans could name the three branches of government and nearly two thirds didn't know which party controlled Congress. Comedians have made hay of the fact that many Americans know more about the singing group, the Supremes, than they do the Supreme Court. But this is no laughing matter. One of the basic duties of school is to teach the next generation to take responsibility for our country. That is hard to do when they are ignorant of its basic founding beliefs. I am reminded of what the author, Benjamin Barber once said. "Public schools are not there to serve the public; they are there to create the public."

In trying to explain America to people in other countries I have visited, I have pointed out there is an inherent tension created by our Founding Fathers. It is the tension between the power of states and the power of the federal government-localism and federalism, but it is really more basic than that. It is summarized in the Pledge of Allegiance when we recite, "With liberty and justice for all." Personal

liberty is at the core of what it means to be an American. It is summarized in the flag of New Hampshire, "Don't Tread on Me." Our liberty was why we fought the Revolution against England. It is seen in our holding to the various Bill of Rights that our founders laid down.

Yet, there is also that nagging "And justice for all" that we must remember. That reminds us that our liberty stops at the doorstep of our neighbor. Further, it is impossible to have liberty without having justice. And liberty is the prerequisite for justice. When we ask our children to recite the pledge, we should take time on occasion to have them talk about what it means and to remember that our country is built upon the balance between the one and many.

Finally we must recapture the understanding that there is a balance between personal responsibility and communal responsibility. I once explained this in terms of our children that there are things they must be taught to do for themselves and things we must do for them. They must grow up with a sense of personal responsibility. They shouldn't blame others for their problems and failures. Yet, they can't do everything for themselves-we must do it for them. That is the role of adults and the role of government. We can't build our own roads or create our own armies or police forces. That is the role of government. A while we must remain empathic to others and to share what we have with them-to be our brother's keepers, in a complex and large society such as ours the welfare of those who have less should be a common responsibility also.

It is clear that diversity is the core of our country. It is a diversity made up of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation and religion. It is the "Pluribus" that our forefathers anticipated but could hardly imagine. But for our country to continue to function we must try to recapture that sense of community that binds us together-our "Unum." We must find a way to combine our diversity and our community to create a "Communiversity" that will take us past the troubled water we are currently riding. And, as with every other crises that our country has faced, the solution will be found in the classrooms of America as we work with our children to find that golden mean.