Gates, Not Fences

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Dear Faithful Colleagues,

I live in Montgomery County, Virginia, in the southwest quadrant of the state. The town of Blacksburg and my campus, Virginia Tech, reside within its borders. Adjacent to the northwest is Giles County, where my daughter spends almost every day tending to, training, and riding her horse, Dagwood. The populations in these neighboring counties are illustrative of the divergent worldviews and politics dominating our country's current dialogue. Here's one example: in the Virginia general election that just concluded, the winning gubernatorial candidate gained a staggering 27 percent more support in my county than in the one just next door.

In this polarizing time, I have found myself grateful and humbled by trips with my daughter to Giles County, where the prevailing politics and lived experiences run contrary to my own. Without these journeys, and the people I've gotten to know and care for there, I worry my human tendency to stereotype (at best), or vilify (at worst), would win the day. As many of you reading this may also concede, troubling times in which we fail to listen and understand others as fellow travelers on life’s journey sow the seeds of fear, hate, and sometimes violence.

Yet even in my gratitude for these experiences, I must also acknowledge my own discomfort. As an educator, I’m realizing how easy it has been for me to insist that our students find relationships with those from different backgrounds without recognizing how challenging it can be. In my interview with Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College’s President Emerita, she reminded me that “We know that when young people have the opportunity to engage in sustained dialogue over the course of the semester, we can get beyond discomfort to really start to understand the experiences of others, and hopefully become motivated to interrupt the cycle of racism and other ‘isms’ in our society.” Surprisingly, even unintentionally, my trips to the horse barn in Giles County are interrupting a potentially destructive cycle by enlarging my sustained experiences. To put it simply, good fences may make good neighbors, but it’s the gates in them that open the way for friends.

In this discouraging era of division, I find myself drawn to reading the works of Martin Luther King, a hero for peace, justice, and equality. His book *Strength to Love* has been both destabilizing and convincing. In it, King asserts that goodness may be found even in our worst enemy and, more importantly, “...that there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us” (p. 45). In the end, we might also discover that the person we perceive as our “enemy” isn’t as much at all. And, in our
friendship, we may discover our worldviews begin to bend and change thanks to our growing understanding of each other.

As I think of the grandest purposes of higher education, I can’t help but to be drawn to the real possibility that justice, humanity, and love might get loose if we construct learning environments beyond our natural fences—through gateways through which differing worldviews traverse. Returning to Martin Luther King’s wisdom, justice for sure comes through legislation and court decrees to bring people together as physical neighbors, “…but it cannot bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality, which are the barriers to a truly integrated society.” (p. 29). While we may be surprised to find goodness, and perhaps sobered to find evil, on both sides of the fence, this is the correct judgment that will eventually render the fences useless. What a wide and wondrous field in which to roam.

With Hope,

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Executive Editor
@About_Campus

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