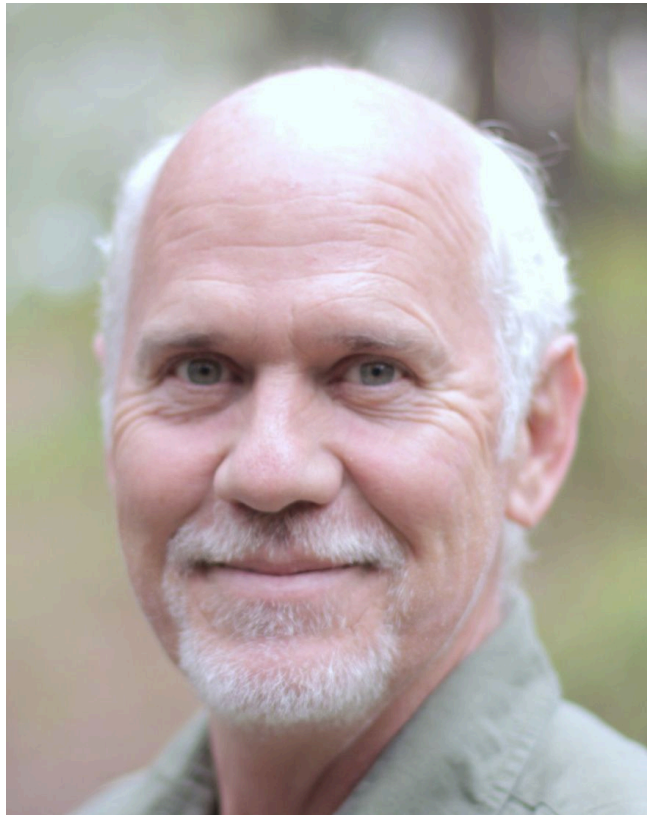

In My View: The value of civil discourse

August 7, 2023



I was taking the sign down for the Democratic Headquarters Grand Opening when a guy in a pickup truck drove by and yelled, “F... you Democrats!”

This generalized hostility makes no sense. This man doesn’t know me or what I believe. He doesn’t care. He hates all Democrats. This is just sad.

I occasionally counsel people not to compartmentalize huge groups of people into one little box. This is a lazy and simplistic crutch to try to make sense of a complicated world. All Democrats are not the same, just as all Republicans are not the same.

Everybody is different and you must speak with them and listen to recognize that. I always find it illuminating to talk to people with ideas and beliefs that differ from mine. There is value in civil discourse.

Meet the Readers

I was pleased to meet the number of people who came to the Democratic Party Grand Opening in response to the invitation in my column. It was a great surprise that the Chair of the California Democratic Party, Rusty

Hicks, accepted my invitation and attended to speak. Rusty lives in Arcata and is a strong ally on rural issues.

The most unanticipated guest was a visitor I will call Mike.

He entered the room wearing an anti-Biden T-shirt, which was conspicuously out of place at a Democratic event.

I introduced myself and asked him how he heard about the event. He said, “You invited me in your column.” So I did. I thanked him for reading my column.

Cordial Conversation

Though Mike is a Republican, we had a very cordial conversation. Mike said that he does not always agree with what I write, but I give him credit for reading opinions that he does not agree with. This demonstrates an open mind. I also give him props for boldly attending a Democratic Party function.

Mike said he liked my recent column about the untimely death of Jonah, the young farmer in Minnesota. He agreed with my statement that, “All deaths matter.”

Mike did take exception to my implication that unvaccinated people were responsible for increasing COVID deaths. I disagreed with him on this point, but he did not make a fuss or disrupt the event. He was a perfectly well-behaved guest. He had a beverage and left peacefully when he was ready.

Progressive Democrats

I spoke with another reader who came to this event. I’ll call him Michael. He told me that the Democratic Party was too conservative. Michael is a self-proclaimed progressive Democrat. This is a cohort committed to championing more progressive policies within the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party has a big tent and welcomes a diversity of views and opinions. Progressive Democrats are an important part of this.

When I was younger, I worked as an environmental advocate, and I know that in progressive advocacy you uncompromisingly fight for the ideal. It is useful to set a high bar and vigilantly challenge the world to meet it.

Change is Slow

Change happens more slowly than one hopes. Sometimes progress is made in small incremental steps in the right direction. Compromise is often necessary to get consensus.

I remember years ago being annoyed with my friend Senator Wes Chesbro, when he told me “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” As an advocate, I wanted perfection, and it was my job to fight for it.

It is when idealism meets reality that moderate Democrats are forged. Just as progress is made, it can also be jerked away. Maintaining forward momentum requires constant vigilance.

These are the times when we need those people young and old who resiliently retain their idealism and optimism that we can make a better world if we fight hard enough for it.

What's important?

When I gave my speech at this event, I asked audience members to call out what they thought were the major issues to be addressed in our community. People were shy to speak out, but they had plenty of ideas.

We gave our guests a piece of paper that asked, "What's important to you?" I will highlight a few of these anonymous comments.

"Donald Trump's demise" is the only suggestion that I disagree with. I want to address this one head on. In politics I never wish that anyone should die. This is where I draw the line.

In Trump's case or cases, I believe he should get a fair trial. If convicted, he should go to jail. He is presumed innocent until proven guilty, but no one is above the law.

Positive Ambitions

The person I disagree with also offered a more laudable ambition to change republican's attitudes toward education. Another has lofty hopes that "our politicians can learn compromise." and we can "stop division in our country." One wants to "keep education open. Don't throw out books for whatever reason."

There are suggestions that locally we must be respectful of resource use, address climate change, keep trees, recycle, use electric busses, and "get this wind farm offshore a reality."

Several people prioritize providing LGBTQ+ resources, better and more affordable healthcare and aid for the homeless, including a local homeless shelter.

On national issues, some aim to protect the right to an abortion and the rights of disabled persons.

Others want to fight cuts to social security and Medicare. There was also a call to improve our treatment of asylum seekers. "Tax the rich" was proposed to provide debt relief.

What Will We Do?

These are all important issues to address, but what will we do to make it happen?

If we continue to communicate respectfully, find common purpose and work together, we can make progress.

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