

Writers on the Range: Some people just like to get things done

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Although I've lived in a small Western town for 30 years now, I have never known much about one of its fundamental institutions, the service club. Many small-town residents still center their lives on Lions, Elks, Rotary or similar organizations.

Not me: I'm not a joiner. Yet as our national culture moves farther away from such settings for broad discussions, I worry that I'm part of the problem.

A while ago when I was asked to speak at our local Rotary Club, I hesitated, picturing white guys networking with each other and complaining about newcomers. But I had published a book, and publishers instruct authors to market wherever you can.

Upon arrival, I cataloged the changes since my last Rotary visit decades ago: The president was a 20-something woman, we ordered off a menu, and people seemed less guarded.

Our local Rotary, I learned, was known as relatively liberal, and some of the older men seemed pretty vigorous. The faces reflected the town's lily-white complexion, but I noticed that the room contained Republicans and Democrats, evangelicals and atheists, entrepreneurs and socialist-leaning nonprofit workers, feminists and fans of traditional gender roles.

Of course we didn't talk about any of that. As one man said, the point of the club was to avoid ideology in order to focus on projects that help people. Perhaps that's why they'd invited an author — to be supportive of local literature.

So we talked about something close to my heart, and as it turned out, to theirs. My book, *Natural Rivals*, chronicles a 1890s collaboration between Sierra Club founder John Muir and U.S. Forest Service founder Gifford Pinchot. The two men are often seen as enemies: Muir's preservation philosophy dictated a hands-off policy to nature, while Pinchot advocated aggressive management of natural resources to provide for human needs.

So when Muir and Pinchot camped together in 1896, alongside Montana's Lake McDonald in what would later become Glacier National Park, did they argue about whether to cut trees or dam valleys? No. They set aside their ideological differences to focus on a bigger threat.

The then-new idea of public lands — national parks, national forests, and other lands held collectively and managed with public involvement by our democratic government — was controversial. While disagreeing about the priorities for those lands, Muir and Pinchot were united in believing that public lands mattered.

The Rotarians I met immediately connected with this message. That's what lively small town folk do: Set aside differences to get things done.

By contrast, in metropolitan areas, I've found that people resist the message about collaborating on common goals, especially when I suggest it could work today. Surely the 1890s were different, they say. Ideologies were different, or personalities were different, or the stakes were not as high.

To me, the difference is that today we cluster in like-minded neighborhoods. Our stores, restaurants and media are all ideologically segregated. We wrap our identity in ideology. And we forget how to find common ground.

I say "we" because I do it, too. My attempted justification is the one I mentioned: I'm not a joiner.

But John Muir wasn't a joiner either. The individualistic mountaineer wasn't even an official member of the blue-ribbon commission visiting Montana's Lake McDonald. He just decided to tag along so that he could converse with — and listen to — people who disagreed with him.

In the dramatic results of those conversations, Muir's essays and interviews of 1896 and 1897 merged his ideas with Pinchot's to help persuade citizens of the value of public lands.

If we still think of today's Rotarians as old-fashioned, maybe it's because they attract members of all stripes who embrace idealistic values about helping people help themselves. I learned, for example, that they work

to end the scourge of polio internationally while providing scholarships to high school kids. And they don't have a political test for pitching in.

They just pick their causes, and then they fight for them.

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