

The Biggest Problem

Written by Margaret Evans

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I catch a lot of grief for all the time I spend on Facebook. It's probably well-deserved. When you enjoy something as much as I do Facebook, it can't possibly be good for you, right?

But for a columnist – and someone who's endlessly fascinated by humans and how they think – it comes in handy professionally. No, seriously. Yesterday, I found myself marveling, as I often do, at the diverse array of opinions about a diverse array of topics expressed by my diverse array of FB friends on my homepage. There'd been a theory creeping up on me for a while, and I decided to test it right there on my wall. Why Facebook? I was looking for a broad sampling of regular people. I wanted to take a poll.

We all know how “divided” we are as a nation, right? We hear about it daily from the talking heads of cable TV and the bombastic voices of talk radio, and we see it written all over the internet. The media have determined that we all fall into neat categories – right and left, with some of us noncommittal types wavering and dithering in the middle (which is yet another category). Not only have our media lords proclaimed it thus, they've in large part created the dynamic, which is nothing if not self-perpetuating. We all want to belong. We want to feel at home. Everybody wants to be among those who speak their language. Whether it be a cable news channel, a radio station, or a special spot in the blogosphere, we've all got our comfy-cozy little oases where we go to relax, kick back and have our favorite biases massaged.

That's okay; I'm not complaining. It is what it is, for better and worse. But what I like about Facebook is that it's enabled me to cultivate a different kind of oasis – one not based on shared ideology or interest, but simply on shared humanity. Far from one of the “intentional communities” that populate our media landscape, my FB page is more like an old-fashioned neighborhood – one that developed organically. There are all sorts of people there, with all sorts

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of lifestyles, interests and beliefs. Yes, they sometimes speak in ways that tip you off to their politics – you can often guess which oasis they frequent – but this idea of “division,” this tendency to see people as either “this” or “that” (and to tune the “thats” out) is far less pervasive. As a result, I actually learn stuff – not the least of which is that it *is* possible for people with very different views to influence each other... and even enjoy each other’s company.

So, that’s the good news. For the bad news, let’s return to that creeping theory I mentioned earlier. I’ve been thinking, lately, that this infamous “division” in our country is not exactly what it’s cracked up to be. Oh, don’t get me wrong – it definitely exists. *And how*. But we tend to think it stems from our disagreements over how to solve the country’s problems. (Should we tax more or spend less? That sort of thing.) What I’m finding, instead, is that the *real* division stems from a failure to agree on what the country’s problems *are*.

Liberals and conservatives simply don’t prioritize the same things – not even close – and the more time they spend in their media-designed gated communities, the less they understand – or even recognize – each other’s concerns. You can watch Fox News and MSNBC at the exact same time on the exact same night, and instead of hearing different perspectives on the same news stories – which is what you’d expect – it’s very likely you’ll see coverage of completely different topics. Almost like you’re living in two different countries with two different sets of issues. How do we, as a nation, come up with solutions when we don’t even acknowledge the same problems?

Don’t look at me! I’m just a lowly journalist. As I write this, the comments are rolling in behind the “survey question” I posted on Facebook a couple of hours ago. I asked my FB friends: “If you had to name just ONE thing, what would you say is the biggest problem facing our country today?” Here are some of the responses, so far:

“Poverty.”

“Unemployment.”

“Not enough money going to public education.”

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“Thinking that throwing money at a problem solves it.”

“Republicans. The generation that came of age in the 1980s, and was reared on the gross overemphasis on money in pop culture – *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, *Jackie Collins* – and the simplistic aphorisms of Ronald Reagan – “Government isn’t the solution, it’s the problem” – are now the generation in power. They’re doing everything they can to be among the cool rich kids; as a consequence, they’re killing the middle class and making the poor suffer.”

“A sense of entitlement. The work ethic my parents and grandparents taught me has all but disappeared. Social programs were intended to help people through hard times, not to sustain people forever.”

"A cultural net present value that doesn't sufficiently value the future over the present. This is seen in our tolerance of extremely high debt levels – federal, state, local, corporate, and consumer – and in our willingness to delay dealing with climate change past the point when scientists predict mass extinction within 300 years.”

“The takers outnumber the makers.”

“Our environment. Without it, nothing else matters.”

“I think the rapidly declining honey bee population is a bigger problem than politics, economics, natural disasters, or any of the other raging issues today combined. If we lose the honeybees, we have no food supply. Period.”

“The politicians are so out of touch with the populace that they have no sense of financial, moral or ethical control.”

“I wonder sometimes if we even strive to be virtuous anymore? Even just the basics like honesty, loyalty and compassion. I think we sometimes forget that striving for virtue is an

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action!"

"An entitlement state that is a massive ponzi scheme and a quasi-fascistic crony capitalist system which yields private profits but socialized losses, both built upon unsustainable debt and irresponsible monetary policy."

"The fact that we consider health care a privilege and not a basic human right - the cost of which we all share without passing judgment."

"The exponential and unsustainable growth of entitlements (e.g., Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid). They are bankrupting us."

"Corporate control of our political system. Without out a doubt, the biggest problem..."

"We're searching for happiness or meaning in every possible corner, and missing all the beauty around us every second of every day. Romanticizing our rugged individual, we've forgotten that we really are interdependent, that we are a part of a larger family, so the compassion and kindness that goes along with that understanding suffers, creating the cycle of a more desperate search for happiness and meaning."

"Becoming a nation under gods, rather than God."

"The fact that people seem to think that not being religious means you lack morals and common decency."

"Moral decline and lack of spirituality."

"I'd say education and the increasing intrusion of religious thought into secular business (which

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goes hand-in-hand with education, to some extent).”

“I see our problems rooted in spiritual terms. We have no self-control because we allow the self to control us.”

“The biggest problem in this country is me. Fortunately it is a problem over which I can exercise some control, so I am working on it every day.”

“The original problem: sin.”

Do you have whiplash yet? What a bunch of smart, thoughtful responses – but they’re all over the map. (Much like my smart, thoughtful FB friends.) Still, it’s good to know that people care... even if they care about different things. As for me, I’m with those who see our main problems as spiritual. I don’t have confidence that our government will solve them, nor do I place much hope, anymore, in politics of any stripe. While conducting this survey, I stumbled over something I’d posted long ago on my FB profile page – a line from “Spirits in the Material World” by The Police. *“There is no political solution... to our troubled evolution,”* I’d written in the blank next to “political views,” and I think it was during a moment of frustration. It seemed dead right to me at the time, and it still does.

But I find I’m no longer frustrated about it. In fact, I’m strangely, wonderfully peaceful.

Kind of like a dog who finally stopped barking up the wrong tree.

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