

The Two Americas (and me)

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 03 July 2012 11:52 - Last Updated Tuesday, 03 July 2012 14:33



You regular readers know that many of my big ideas – and the occasional little epiphany – come to me while I’m exercising. The fact that I’ve been a complete slug this summer explains a lot about the recent caliber of this column...

But I did happen to be at the Y on the morning the Supreme Court announced its ruling on the Affordable Care Act (or “Obamacare” if you prefer).

We’d just returned from vacation, and this was my first strenuous physical activity in a week. I’d been pretty slack about mental activity, too, so on my way to the Y, I listened to the build-up to the SCOTUS decision on NPR. Now I was engaged in a physical/mental workout, striding back and forth on the elliptical machine while toggling between MSNBC and Fox News, awaiting the big announcement. (Y’all know I prefer a diversity of sources. I thrive on cognitive dissonance.)

Both networks agreed – yes, really! – that this was a momentous occasion. “One of the most significant moments in the history of the Supreme Court,” said Chris Matthews (or maybe it was Megyn Kelly?). “A decision that will affect 300 million Americans,” said... somebody else. “A

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truly historic moment,” declared... I forget.

Hearing these breathless proclamations, I felt my heart start to pound. (Okay, it was already pounding. I'd been horizontal on a chaise lounge for five days.) I glanced down the row of ellipticals and treadmills and those other steppy-thingies, hoping to share this unforgettable American moment with my brothers and sisters of the Y...

Nobody was watching.

I saw 'Regis and Kelly,' a 'Real Housewives' rerun, some cooking show and ESPN. But no news. What was going on here? These were YMCA members! People who actually *care* about healthcare.

(A thought passed through my mind – fleetingly – that *not following politics* might be an intentional health strategy. Hmmm... Must ponder.)

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‘That’s okay,’ I thought. ‘I’m not really alone. Millions of other Americans are in front of their TV sets, online, or in their cars, awaiting this historic announcement. We are having a communal experience, whether we know it or not.’

My communal experience was slightly diluted by the fact that I’d forgotten my ear buds again, and was relegated to reading closed captions on the elliptical’s small TV screen. It has become increasingly clear to me that this is not the best way to get your news. (But it does make Mika Brzezinski a bit more bearable.) I had just switched over to Fox when the closed captions told me that the Supreme Court had struck down the individual mandate.

‘Whoa! This is huge,’ I thought. ‘Without the mandate, the whole thing falls apart! They must be losing their minds over at MSNBC! Gotta go check it out!’

So I did. But they weren’t. Losing their minds, that is. They didn’t even seem to know that the mandate had been struck down. According to the closed captions, MSNBC was still in wait-and-see mode... their reporter was still standing outside the court, waiting for the decision. Weird.

I switched back over to Fox. Now the words “Supreme Court Finds the Individual Mandate Unconstitutional” were emblazoned in a big red box beneath the eerily pristine visage of Megyn Kelly, and a panel of pundits appeared to be discussing the ramifications of the ruling. Again, I only had captions to go by, but the faces on screen looked excited.

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Meanwhile, back at MSNBC... still nothing. Curiouser and curiouser.

This went on for several frustrating minutes – this manic switching back and forth between channels. Fox was discussing, MSNBC was waiting. Discussing, waiting, discussing, waiting. Finally, there was some action at MSNBC... in the form of a box featuring the headline: “Court Upholds Individual Mandate.”

Huh?! I know what they say about these two networks – that they don’t just have different perspectives, they have different *facts* (and I largely agree) – but this discrepancy seemed a bit extreme even for these shameless masters of spin. Either the mandate had been upheld... or not. You couldn’t have it both ways.

Or... maybe you could. I read the captions at MSNBC and found that the Court had, indeed, ruled the individual mandate unconstitutional under the commerce clause. But a bit further into the decision, the Court had ruled that the mandate *was* constitutional under the “power to tax” clause. (Or something like that.)

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No way! This was like watching a sporting event. Fox had totally jumped the gun! I rushed back over to see if they were eating crow yet. Well, sort of. But not exactly. There, in the big red box beneath Megyn Kelly's flawless face, were the new words, "Individual Mandate Will Be a Tax."

Hah! I could almost hear the honchos at Fox spinning away: "There! We may be stuck with the mandate, but now we can officially call it a tax! That's almost better than losing it!" Only, I couldn't actually hear anybody saying anything. The closed captions on my TV screen had suddenly petered out. I popped back over to MSNBC just in time to see they'd amended *their* original headline ("Court Upholds Individual Mandate") to read... "Individual Mandate Will Be a Tax." Hey, that looked familiar. Back over to Fox. Yep – same headline.

Finally, the two networks were reporting the exact same message. And the talking heads on both channels were... smiling. MSNBC had its mandate and Fox had the word "tax." It was one of those rare win-win moments in American politics.

Heartwarming. I got a little weepy.

I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I know I shouldn't make light of this subject. Healthcare is serious. Very serious. Very, very...

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Bwahahahahaha...

Oh, somebody stop me! Again, I apologize. But, in my view, our country's split personality has become so pronounced – so “bipolar” – that it borders on the absurd... or the tragic. You can either laugh about it... or cry. Laughter suits me better lately.

As I drove home from the Y that morning, listeners were calling in to NPR to express their intense joy at the SCOTUS ruling, praising Chief Justice John Roberts – so often their villain – with words like “brave,” “heroic” and “patriotic” for voting with the liberal justices to uphold the healthcare law.

When I arrived home, I headed to Facebook, where the sentiment was somewhat different. From my news feed: *“Freedom died today when SCOTUS upheld Obamacare”... “John Marshall was right: ‘The power to tax is the power to destroy’... “Sad day in America if you value freedom and liberty....”* And my favorite: *“Don’t tread on me.”* Complete with the coiled snake.

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Back in the other America, my progressive FB friends were celebrating – not just the SCOTUS decision, but also the Fox News faux pas... and Rush Limbaugh's vow to leave the country. They were lauding Chief Justice Roberts (seriously!) and mocking CNN (I know!) for initially reporting the mandate struck down, like Fox. I felt like I was in Bizarro World.

But then, when it comes to politics, I almost always do these days. That, or the Twilight Zone... or some strange set of parallel universes, a la that sci-fi show "Fringe." I live in a maddening cosmos where Chief Justice Roberts is a courageous patriot... and a traitor to the cause of freedom. Where President Obama is a moderate, pragmatic leader... and a dastardly ideologue with a secret agenda. A girl could go crazy in this cosmos.

I know... I know... Nobody's forcing me to play on both sides of the fence. I should stop my bellyaching and choose a side. Everybody else has, it seems.

For one group of people I love and respect, Obama's healthcare plan represents the end of the world as we know it. For another group of people I love and respect, it's the dawn of a brave new world.

I think I just said the same thing twice, but in two different languages – American and American. I speak them both. A mixed blessing, at best.

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It's almost like speaking neither.

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