



By Margaret Evans, Editor

As a columnist, I'm what they call a "generalist." I know a little about a lot, and a lot about very little. I'm extremely interested, but only moderately informed. (When you spread your curiosity so thin, your knowledge tends to be wide, not deep.) So, you'll have to go elsewhere, reader, for your experts and specialists, your connoisseurs and aficionados. Here on this page, it's all amateur hour, all the time.

And I have learned an important lesson during my 15 years as a professional amateur: Some topics should really be left to the experts. In years past, I have been known to pontificate on all manner of subjects about which I knew very little. Of course, I didn't know at the time how little I knew. Bless my heart. (Shudder.)

Having grown older and wiser – or at least more wizened – I now understand that most "issues" of the day are far more complex than we are led to believe by our various representatives in the media, or even academia. These days, as my knowledge of a particular issue grows, my commitment to my position usually shrinks. I say "position," because we all start somewhere – don't we? – even if that starting point is shaky ground, at best? We Americans are encouraged to take positions – no matter how ill informed – on everything under the sun, and to boldly proclaim those proud, stately positions throughout the hills and vales of the virtual village where so many of us spend way too much time.

Speaking of which . . . if there's one area where I do feel like a semi-specialist, it's social media. And I've noticed that many people form their "starting positions" according to the general mood of their online communities. And they form those online communities in the same way they once gravitated toward tables in the high school cafeteria. *Who else is sitting there? How are they*

dressed? What music do they listen to?

(In

other words:

Are they like me?

) This is a perfectly normal way to congregate – we're tribal by nature – but for those of us who hung out with the preppies, the freaks,

and

the geeks, it's not always that easy. People like us tend to cultivate large, sprawling Facebook nations populated by graduates of every table in the lunchroom. We couldn't decide where to sit back then, and we're not quite sure where to stand today. So, for our "starting positions," we often just go with our gut.

(This, of course, all happens *before* we actually start reading and thinking about the issue du jour – which, if my observations are correct, some never bother to do at all. As long as the "position" has the ol' tribal seal of approval, it's good to go for many people.)

But let's get back to the experts, those who have transcended the cafeteria mentality – with all its peer pressure – by putting in years of education and experience in a specialized field. In my opinion, these people – and *only* these people – have earned the authority to mount their soapboxes and preach their positions. Which, of course, doesn't stop everybody else and his brother from doing it, too.

But not me. Not anymore. You will no longer see me holding forth here on complex topics that are nearly impossible for the layperson – *this* layperson, anyway – to comprehend. The economy? Nope. Climate change? No way. Obamacare? As if! The Israeli/Palestinian conflict? *Are you crazy?*

This does not mean I'll stop reading and thinking and *caring* about all the heavy topics that regularly get bandied about like badminton birdies by people who should know better – people who, like me, are old enough and smart enough to know what they don't know. It just means I'll keep my semi-to-ill-educated opinions about that stuff to myself. Or share them with the pal sitting next to me at the bar. Or yell them at my TV screen. If you ever catch me writing anything about these convoluted mega-issues, it will probably be in the form of a question. I have many, many questions. And some of them aren't even rhetorical.

I know I will catch a lot of flack for what I'm saying. Here on the eve of another Independence Day, I should be touting the virtues of democracy . . . celebrating the canny intelligence of the

common man. ("This is Amurka, dagnabbit! We don't need no stinkin' experts!") I should be lauding the Internet – and especially social media – for giving equal voice to every man, woman and child . . . for leveling our national discourse.

Because, boy, has it ever been leveled. Smashed to smithereens. And that's not all that's been smashed.

I hesitate to put this in print, for it's a shameful admission, but the last time I remember feeling profoundly patriotic – with that "proud to be an American" swelling in my heart – was just after 9/11. Obviously, that was a special circumstance – even Europeans had the warm fuzzies for us then – but I don't recall feeling anywhere *near* that good about my country since. Granted, much has happened in the last decade to tarnish our national image, both at home and abroad, but I truly believe the rise of social media has made the biggest difference for me. Before Facebook and Twitter, I simply had no idea how much Americans hated each other.

No idea.

It was a rude awakening for a naïve southern girl. I still haven't quite gotten over it – that sad revelation that my country wasn't the great big happy family I'd envisioned.

These, of course, are just the musings of an amateur. Had I been an expert – in political science, economics, sociology, *anything* – perhaps I'd have been better attuned to the long-simmering tensions and animosities between this group and that one, these ideologues and those. I acknowledge I wasn't paying enough attention. Like most Americans, I was just going about my business – making a living, caring for my family, playing with my friends, etc. Sure, I stayed mildly informed. I read the paper and watched the nightly news. But the people there seemed so nice and dignified and objective. (This was before cable news reared its ugly head, too . . . at least in my life.) I didn't realize, back then – and we're only talking a decade ago – that Republicans hated Democrats, Democrats hated Republicans, and everybody hated Southerners. I didn't know that certain women hated feminists and feminists hated certain women . . . that libertarian conservatives hated social conservatives . . . that some Christians hated other Christians, and vice versa. I was blissfully unaware that so many people disliked me, based solely on my subset of identities, or that I was supposed to dislike them, based on theirs.

Now that I am aware of all this inner-familial hostility, I'm not sure I'm any better off. All I know is that I feel a little less sentimental about my dear old homeland. Lee Greenwood's schmaltzy anthem doesn't make me well up quite like it used to. (Thank God, because that was just embarrassing.)

Amateur Hour

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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Nevertheless, this Fourth of July I shall once again draw near to the ones I love, throw something tasty on the grill, watch fireworks slice the darkness. I'll raise a toast to the Founding Fathers, the Republicans and the Democrats, the experts and the amateurs, Americans all. I'll keep my big mouth shut unless I know what I'm talking about . . . or somebody brings a guitar. And I'll try to stay off Facebook for a few hours.

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