



By Margaret Evans, Editor

I've had this interesting thing happening to me on Facebook lately. People have been sending me private messages, hoping to chat about one political issue or another – eager to get my take or just to vent. It's becoming a fairly regular occurrence.

Some of these people are friends, others merely acquaintances or readers of this paper. Some of them are serious partisans – from both parties – while others are more moderate, not quite set in their views. What they all have in common is a sincere and good-hearted desire to talk politics – to actually hash out ideas and think and grow – in a safe place where they won't be judged, or more specifically, *misjudged*. They no longer feel this is possible in a public forum . . . even one like Facebook, where one is supposed to be surrounded by one's "friends."

They're right. It's ugly out there, people.

Another thing I've noticed about these private messengers is that they often venture opinions "in confidence" that do not fall rigidly in line with their professed political identification. For instance, a well-known progressive might write saying he's disappointed the Democrats don't care more about protecting religious freedom. Or a vocal conservative might write expressing her chagrin that Republicans put so much faith in the free market. These partisans don't feel comfortable airing such apostasies in public . . . but they're desperate for conversation, and they know me as someone who openly struggles, and has, on many occasions, cried "a pox on both your houses!"

(There's a certain freedom in being a political vagabond in a country where politics, for many, has become a dogmatic religion. Like Hester Prynne living on the outskirts of town with a scarlet A on her chest, I tend to draw confessions from all sorts of converts, agnostics and heretics. I count it an honor – it almost feels like a calling – and your secrets are safe with me.)

My point? According to my Facebook message box, there seems to be a groundswell of folks who feel not only politically unmoored, as our two main parties grow ever more estranged, but also cowed and silenced by the hostile mob on social media.

And really, Facebook is the *best* of the lot. Don't even get me started on Twitter. Expecting to engage in a meaningful, civil discussion on Twitter is like going to Arby's for fine dining. I mean, they have the meats, but . . .

To be honest, Twitter scares me a little. It's like this ideological warzone that never sleeps, with rhetorical bombs flying left and right (or, rather, *from* the left *at* the right, and vice versa) 24 hours a day. And most of these bombs are such very *crude* weapons. When you have to make your point in 140 characters or less, nuances and niceties are the first to go.

I guess Twitter was named for the sound that birds make in the trees. It's a clever allusion, but the more I learn about birds, the more I realize the reference is an insult to our avian friends.

(This is the part where I completely change the subject, but not exactly.)

Back in July, I wrote a column here called "For the Birds," in which I discussed my burgeoning obsession with the winged wonders that gave nasty ol' Twitter its name. Near the end of that column, I wrote, "There is a bird that sings to me every morning on my walk – it's been singing to me for years, as if calling to me with some task, some assignment. I haven't been able to identify the bird, but its song sounds like this: *'We need you, we need you, we need you.'*" □

Well, as so often happens – lucky me! – a reader wrote me with more information, saying it

was probably the Carolina wren I was hearing. I wrote back thanking him, but assured him it couldn't possibly be the Carolina wren. Said I'd watched several YouTube videos of that particular bird, and its song was quite different from the one I'd been hearing.

To which my reader – who seriously knows his birds – replied with the following:

□□ *"It turns out that Carolina wrens (like many songbirds) have a repertoire of approximately 10 – 20 songs. □ These wrens live here year-round, and each male/female pair maintains a territory of about 2-3 acres. Consequently a good percentage of the wrens in a given community are related and share quite a few of their songs; and then there is also the occasional newcomer who moves in from afar and sets up a new territory.*

□□ *"Here is where the story gets interesting: When birds sing, they are either trying to attract a mate or defending/delineating their territory. When a wren sings, its neighbor (who it's on good terms with) will respond by singing a song that they both share, but NOT the same song the first bird sang. Responding with the exact same song is considered a threat to the first bird's territory and you will often see a face-to-face bird confrontation when two birds sing the same song back and forth. Singing a song that none of your neighbors know immediately identifies you as a newcomer and the birds in surrounding territories may gang up and try to drive you out. So it behooves a bird to learn the songs of their neighbors and to keep track of which songs you share with whom. So if you want to keep the peace, when your neighbor sings, you respond with a song you know you both share. (But not the same song)."*

How impressive is that? So civilized and refined. The birds have got it all figured out, baby! They respect each other's familial turf (and individuality and dialect), while still fostering a strong sense of community. While they occasionally join together to protect their shared territorial borders from outside threat, they intentionally "watch their language" in an effort to keep the peace. And they do it all *through song!*

Birds, y'all. They have better communication skills – and even better *community* skills – than we do. Wouldn't it be nice if we humans, the next time we found ourselves on Twitter, were to emulate our betters for whom it's named?

Or maybe we should all just get off the computer, go outside, and look at some birds. After all, it's spring.

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Conversations, Online and In Trees

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