

The Spaces Between

Written by Margaret Evans

Monday, 05 February 2018 20:59 - Last Updated Thursday, 08 February 2018 13:46



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Last week, a reader dropped me a line to tell me that I'm too timid, I don't stand for anything of substance, I need to do some soul searching, and I'm wasting my platform.

That'll put a damper on your morning.

I get lots of feedback from readers, most of it surprisingly positive. That doesn't mean I delude myself that I don't have plenty of critics. I just figure most of the folks who hate my writing either stopped reading me years ago or are too nice to give me the verbal flogging they think I deserve. Bless their hearts; I appreciate the silence. The critic who lives in my head is so noisy and relentless, it's a wonder I ever get a word on paper as it is.

But this isn't about hurt feelings. It's about challenging what I see as a popular misconception in contemporary society: That we must all be choosing sides, all the time, and proclaiming those choices loudly and aggressively on our various platforms. With the rise of social media has come this notion that speaking out against "those people" regularly – and with gusto! – is a cultural imperative, and that to abstain is not just a sign of weakness, but a moral failing.

To support this idea, folks often trot out the famous Edmund Burke quote, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Well, guess what? I agree with Burke. And I acknowledge that, for a writer, "saying nothing" can be the equivalent of "doing nothing." But I

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would also argue that evil takes many forms, and when it comes to opinion writing, there are many ways to “do something.”

The reader who wrote last week was particularly irked that I’m not using my platform to castigate Donald Trump and his supporters. And it’s true; I’m not. Before Trump’s election, I criticized the man often enough, but these days, I simply have no impulse to add my voice to the ever-more-deafening cacophony of anti-Trumpism. In fact, I make a conscious effort not to. Does that mean I’m wasting my platform?

Something to ponder.

In my last column, I explored the connection between personality and politics – including why some people are naturally drawn to movements while others aren’t – and made the case that both our major political orientations are necessary to a functioning society. I based my argument on social science.

I wrote that column in hopes of promoting mutual understanding, thereby reducing prejudice and hatred between committed partisans. This seems like a pretty important pursuit to me, especially now, and not a waste of time or effort. I was heartened by all the enthusiastic responses I received, the aforementioned email notwithstanding. In today’s dangerously polarized America – where the loudest, most extreme voices suck up all the air – I’ve found there are many, many people longing for a space where they can just . . . breathe. They’re hungry for humane conversation and friendly collaboration, for common ground and a sense of common purpose. You could even call it a “movement,” I suppose, but it’s not organized and it doesn’t have a hashtag.

In keeping with that spirit – and my own personality – I confess I hardly ever think of this column as a “platform.” It’s more like a place to think out loud. Play with ideas. Test-drive new information. Share passing fancies and occasional epiphanies. My “positions” are never carved in stone and I’ve been known to change my mind . . . and to say so. And always, always, I’ve reserved my right to be wrong.

So if, in fact, I must view this page as a platform, then I suppose those are some of the things I “fight” for. The right to explore a controversial idea. The right to look at the other side of a story.

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The right to examine the dark underbelly of a popular opinion. If I must “speak out,” let it be for the right to honor complexity . . . the right to be uncertain, to be undecided . . . and even the right to be wrong.

I'll go one step further. I hereby boldly assert that we all have the right to do these things *without being drummed out of the human community*.

How's that for timid?

I'm not going to lie. The specter of “wasting my platform” has been haunting me for a week now. It forced me to go back and read some recent columns, and indeed, some themes emerged. Over the past year, I've written about fake news and confirmation bias (and the need to “dig deeper”); our national “anger problem” (which I find even scarier than our national gun problem); an NPR exec who immersed himself in red state culture for a year and learned to love it; the solar eclipse that brought dueling Americans together in peace and wonder for a few short minutes. I wrote a tribute to a beloved friend who died too young and a piece about my family's eye-opening trip to Italy. I reviewed a beautiful book by black naturalist/activist Drew Lanham, did a column on the simply joys of the Great British Baking Show, and wrote a lot about birds. Looking back, it seems I've been using my platform – if you can call it a platform – to preserve the spaces between. Between black and white. Between “us” and “them.” Between red state and blue state. Between conservative and progressive. Between Democrat and Republican. Even the spaces between pro-Trump and anti-Trump. I truly believe it's in these spaces where most of us dwell, most of the time. And in a world that seems hell-bent on dividing us, it's in these spaces where we find our common humanity.

The internet – the way we communicate there – tends to roll right over those sacred spaces like a bulldozer. I believe we need them, now more than ever, and I'm moved to protect them. I recognize that for some readers, those with deep and passionate political convictions, this will seem like a wasted platform . . . and I, like a writer who stands for nothing of substance. I have to live with that.

Thankfully, not everyone sees my approach as a cop-out. I came across an article at Quartz the other day, “In Praise of Slow Thinking in the Internet Age,” where Ephrat Livni writes: “In reactionary times, slowness, responsiveness rather than reactivity, is a radical rejection of the internet's perpetual call to action: Always be choosing sides. Deliberate undecidedness, refusing to choose and know it all, is a kind of intellectual rebellion against the relentless pressure to get with the socially appropriate program—whatever it happens to be within your ideological and informational bubbles.”

So, go ahead and call me timid. I prefer to think of myself as a rebel.