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GETTING ALONG IN AMERICA

Extremism is not what we believe

A tale from rural Wisconsin.

By MIKE MILES

Now that the extreme left and extreme right have been shooting each other in the streets, perhaps it is time to take a closer look at what we have in common rather than what divides us. I have been involved in nonviolent social change movements for almost 40 years, have been arrested more times than I can remember, and have spent cumulatively over a year in jails and prisons for my actions. I want to share a story of how two people who would be assumed to be polar opposites came together for a moment of clarity and mutual respect.

I was driving a school bus that had been converted into a mobile peace center for a peace walk across southern Wisconsin. It was a huge, colorful billboard festooned with phrases and images that unmistakably labeled it as antiwar. I was parked along a highway at the end of a day waiting to take the walkers to a church where we were staying overnight. That's when the captain showed up.

A pickup truck swung in front of the bus, parked, and a clearly agitated driver got out to give me a piece of his mind. He was a captain in the Wisconsin Air National Guard, and he had taken great offense at our bus, the walkers and me especially as the face of a message he was so incensed with. When he finished his tirade, I thanked him for taking the time to personally engage with us. He got back in his truck and made sure to punch the accelerator, throwing gravel all over the front of the bus. Fortunately, this was not to be the end of our encounter.

About an hour later I was running down a bucolic road continuing my training for an upcoming marathon. I decided to turn around at the next driveway, and that is when I saw his truck parked by his house and children playing in the yard. It was with a moment of trepidation that I decided



Violence has broken out on both sides, and America is dangerously close to the point of no return.

to run up his rather lengthy driveway. It seemed to me that continuing our abruptly ended conversation on the roadside was the right thing to do.

The look on his face was stunned, and I started by saying that clearly this was an unexpected opportunity, seeing as I couldn't possibly know where he lived. He had the legal upper hand, since I was trespassing on his property, his children were present, and he couldn't know what I was up to or what kind of person I was. Was he going to need to protect his family from me? He invited me to go on.

I told him about my mentors in nonviolence, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Jesus, Dorothy Day, Philip Berrigan, Liz McAlister and Kathy Kelly. I told him about actions I had taken that had resulted in being arrested and spending time in jail. I told him about taking medicine to children in Iraq during the United Nations sanctions and being with parents of children dying in hospitals because of actions taken by my government, actions that I didn't agree with.

I told him of my understanding of the Geneva and Hague Conventions

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that direct soldiers how it is illegal to engage civilians in combat and that they must refuse orders to do so. I told him that I was willing to accept the consequences of my convictions, that I tried my best to seek out the truth and to act in good faith with my understanding of those truths.

When I was done, I had apparently told him something that had changed his mind. While our approaches to peacemaking were worlds apart, he needed to hear that I was willing to pay the cost of my convictions. He needed to hear that I was not an armchair activist casting stones and derision from a safe distance at his colleagues who were willing to sacrifice their lives if that was required of them. Our mistaken assumptions about each other needed to be deconstructed. The stereotypes needed to be discarded.

We parted with a handshake and pleasantries that caught us both completely off our guard. It was, to say

to seek out other hopes and competing narratives, pride and confidence in what we believe, what we believe to be against total war, something to seek a common human

I am a member of the United Nations. I have been in many trainings we have had, deep canvassing, out of California, and I am working on a soundly defeated. I had to learn how to be a leader who were adaptable and their ideas. I found a method that works to find common ground. It was a story. It was a story that if the information that

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MARK VANCELEAVE • Star Tribune

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the least, an astonishing encounter.

It is time for we Americans to take a step back before the present moment spins totally out of control. It is time to seek out other voices, other heroes, other hopes and dreams, to alter competing narratives that are stuck in pride and confusion. Extremism is not what we believe; it is how we believe what we believe. It is a good thing to be against totalitarianism. It is a good thing to be anti-fascist. It is a better thing to seek solutions that value our common humanity.

I am a member of Wisconsin Farmers Union. I have been participating in trainings we have been doing called deep canvassing. The practice came out of California in 2008 when activists working on Proposition 8 were soundly defeated. They decided they had to learn how to talk to the people who were adamantly against them and their ideas. They came up with a method that allowed opponents to try to find common ground by sharing stories. It was clear that telling people they were wrong, and convincing them that if they just had a little more information they could make the cor-

rect choice, wasn't working.

Why is this an issue that is important to farmers? The rural areas where we live are as polarized as the urban centers, but there aren't as many of us, so we are forever being ignored by the people in charge. Because there are fewer of us, we are more dependent on our neighbors and families for day-to-day interaction. We aren't anonymous apartment dwellers or living in intentional isolation in the exurbs.

We miss the days of common purpose working together during planting season or harvesting together. Some of the worst food deserts exist where food (or I should I say commodities used as feedstock in industrial processes) is grown. The animosities that we shouldn't have are fed to us by media conglomerates that are mostly based in mega-populated areas. We need to walk away from our screens for a while and help each other bale hay or round up animals that have broken a fence and gotten out on the road.

In the end we all, urban and rural dwellers alike, have everything to lose if we don't find common ground in the simple necessities of life: adequate food, housing, health care, a clean environment, and the joy of sharing community with friends and neighbors. We are facing an unprecedented moment of circumstances seemingly beyond our control, stripping us of our common humanity.

We've seen it happen before, so we can't pretend we don't know where this could all end up. Somehow it all boils down to which is the dominant human motivator: love or hate? My experience as one who has tried to be as engaged with the full breadth and depth of the human condition as I can is that if love is not the answer then we've just asked the wrong question. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. My hope is that whatever breakthrough that needs to happen comes quickly. We seem to be running out of time to do the right thing.

Mike Miles, of Luck, Wis., is a farmer and activist.