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Lessons from Appomattox: Can we find harmony among discord? Do we even want to?



In this Nov. 8, 2012 photo, Jim Elder, left, laughs with shop owner Bryan Baine at Baine's Books in Appomattox, Va. In the heart of this historic village, townspeople gather for coffee and conversation in the Main Street institution and, every Thursday after sundown, an open mic night draws performers from near and far.

By Associated Press, Published: SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 8:13 AM ET

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APPOMATTOX, Va. — Baine's Books sits in the heart of this historic village, a Main Street institution where townspeople gather for coffee and conversation and, every Thursday after sundown, an open mic night that draws performers from near and far with guitars and banjos in hand, bluegrass and blues on their lips.

Talk of church and school, and most certainly music, almost always takes precedence at Baine's. But we've stopped in at election time, and Lib Elder is at a corner table tucking into a chicken pot pie, an Obama-Biden button pinned to her blouse right next to her heart.

She knows without asking why a reporter has come to this corner of southern Virginia to write about an election that divided America among so many lines.

Red or blue. Left or right. Big government or small. Tea party or Occupy. Ninety-nine percent or 1. Employed or out-of-work. Black or white or brown.

This is, after all, "where our nation reunited," said Elder, her voice tinged with slight sarcasm as she quotes the slogan adorning every sign into the town where, on Palm Sunday 1865, Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant, marking the beginning of the end of the Civil War.

It's a nice idea, that a place could symbolize peace and harmony and, even, healing after what was inarguably the most divisive time in our nation's history.

It's just not something that Elder finds particularly authentic after another cutthroat election year across these "united" states.

The acrimony is still too fresh and far too raw. There was the family member, related by marriage, who accused Elder of "hating" her country because she had sent him a fundraising email for Barack Obama; Elder mistakenly believed he was a Democrat. And the white teenagers at the Appomattox Railroad Festival who saw her Obama button and jeered: "You know he's black, don't you?"

Peace and harmony? Elder, for one, doesn't see them. Not in Appomattox. Not in America. Not even now that Election 2012 is behind us at last.

"I think we are much more divided," said Elder, who heard similar concerns when she made get-out-the-vote calls during the campaign. "It's not that people hate the election. ... They just hate everybody screaming all the time. It's harder to hear anything, the louder you get."

And these days, she added: "Everybody's voice is louder."

It's a familiar election-year narrative, that Americans — not just the candidates, not just the parties, not just the pundits who shriek at us from partisan programming — but everyday Americans themselves are divided by an ever-widening gulf. We see it in the narrow margin separating winner from loser on Tuesday.

Exit polling also seems only to reaffirm these chasms. On one side we have women, the poor, people of color, urbanites, young voters and non-churchgoers. On the other we have men, those who are rich and white, rural Americans, senior citizens and those who attend church regularly.

Said Republican strategist and CNN commentator Alex Castellanos as he visibly agonized over this on election night: The country, "right now, it is split into pieces."

But is all of this an every-four-year phenomenon that goes away when the yard signs come down and the Facebook tirades finally end, or at least subside? Can we do as our leaders do? Debate with fingers thrust in each other's faces, tearing one another apart, and then shake hands, return to our corners and somehow attempt to live and work together once more?

In this slice of Virginia, a literal battlefield turned electoral battleground, there are those who are no longer sure.

They, like Elder, sense that something has changed. That the much-discussed polarization of this election will live on long past it, in ways depicted by more than a mark on a ballot.

Friendships may wilt, suggested local lawyer Michael Brickhill, as some "fade out of social circles that you no longer feel comfortable with ... if there are strong differences of opinion."

He recalled a business dinner in California not long ago in which the group agreed not to invite a guy who'd been ranting about the election.

"They were really, really afraid that he would not be able to relate on the common ground that we had formed," which had nothing to do with politics, Brickhill said.

Others may be hesitant to, at least publicly, brand themselves by party identity, said Bryan Baine, a former composition instructor who now owns the bookstore in Appomattox.

“Why wouldn’t you be increasingly reluctant to put that label on yourself if it means this whole bunch over here is going to make assumptions about you or that whole bunch is going to make assumptions about you just because you said you were a Republican or Democrat?” he said.

Young and old, black and white, Republican or Democrat, so many in the area found accord on the notion of discord — even if the lens through which they viewed this division was filtered by their own unique perspectives and experiences.

Madeline Abbitt, a lobbyist who works in Richmond but lives in Appomattox County, sees polarization as a rural vs. urban issue. “I could look at the people in my condo unit (in Richmond) and I bet out of about 300 people, two might know what a deer is,” she said, only half-joking about those who likely oppose hunting and groups such as the National Rifle Association. “And you get out here, and you may know two or three people who know a gay couple.”

Joe Day, the African-American chair of the Appomattox County Democratic Committee, views America’s differences through the prism of race. He recalls the slurs scrawled across Obama signs in 2008 and finds little progress in race relations four years later, even with the president’s re-election.

“It’s still racism,” said Day, bemoaning the percentage of black teens in detention centers and a lack of black faces in city jobs. “Mr. Obama might be the first black president and we might’ve seen history. But there’s no unity in America.”

Jan Greene, visiting the Appomattox Court House National Historic Park on her way to a convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, sees parallels between what divided us in the 1800s and today. “I think especially in the South we are still very resentful of big government,” said Greene, who lives in Bradenton, Fla. “Washington has taken over more and more aspects of our lives.” Still, she added, “The South doesn’t have the strength to rise again.”

Brickhill, the lawyer, lives in nearby Lynchburg, home to Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist Church. Before the election, The Lynchburg Ledger newspaper published a column called “Can a Christian Vote for a Mormon?” — making the case for why those in the local Christian community could vote for Mitt Romney for president, even if a “Mormon would be unacceptable” in any leadership position in a Christian church.

Brickhill finds his community polarized along religious lines, certainly, but also “politically, socially, socio-economically. We’re polarized by our affinity for local collegiate teams. It’s either Virginia or Virginia Tech, and we are on the dividing line here.”

Perhaps these deep divisions have always been there, stemming from long-ago wounds that never mended or stereotypes formed via our peers or our parents or the place we call home.

Perhaps we just feel more divided because, as Elder suggested, we are more exposed to our dissimilarities in this very loud Facebook, Twitter, anonymous-online-comment-driven world, where everyone seems more emboldened to point out our many differences no matter the consequences.

And yet there are consequences, and so the question begs asking: Where is the line between a polarized America that is productive and one that is destructive?

Among the many lines dividing us, where and when do we draw this one in the sand?

“Democracy is not about achieving agreement. It’s about figuring out how to live together when we don’t agree,” said social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who wrote a pre-election column in *The New York Times* dishearteningly titled: “Look How Far We’ve Come Apart.”

Haidt is among those who believe that polarization itself isn’t a bad thing. “The competition between ideas can be healthy,” he noted, “or it can turn toxic.”

Unfortunately all signs before this election were pointing toward toxic. He cited a few studies, including research showing that Congress is more ideologically polarized than at any time since the end of the Civil War, a downward spiral that began with the cultural wars of the 1960s and ‘70s during which the Democrats became “the party of civil rights” and the Republicans aligned themselves with the religious right.

Of course it’s tempting to write that off as a Washington problem among the so-called political “elites.” Not so. Everyday Americans feel more hostility and dislike toward those from the opposite party than at any time since the American National Election Studies began polling on the subject in the 1970s.

And these feelings go beyond where one side or the other comes down on any particular issue.

“Politics has become a litmus test now for all kinds of things,” said Shanto Iyengar, a political scientist at Stanford whose research on polarization finds the lines blurring between political differences and how one chooses to relate on a personal level.

Take online dating: “People don’t say anything about politics,” he said, because “you’re risking turning off a whole bunch of people.” Or consider cross-party marriages. Analyzing polling data, Iyengar found that whereas in 1960 about 5 percent of Americans would be upset if their child married someone from the other party, in 2010 that rose to nearly 40 percent.

“Fifty years ago when people were asked that question they just laughed ...’Why would I care about the party politics of my future son-in-law?’

“But today,” he said, “they care.”

This plays out every day in communities big and small across America, in myriad ways that remind us that division doesn’t end when the polls close on Election Day.

In Montana, Helena resident John Driscoll was so taken aback by a truck driver’s reaction to his Obama bumper sticker that he wrote a letter about it to a local newspaper. Driscoll had pulled over with a flat tire, and the truck driver stopped to assist but then admitted: “If I’d known you were Obama people I wouldn’t have stopped.” Later, at a tire repair shop, another man stared at the sticker — and then at Driscoll — and sniffed, “You can’t be serious.”

“It’s those kinds of things that tell you something, I guess,” Driscoll, a former Democratic legislator in Montana, said in an interview. “People are generally very respectful of each other and I think they still are, but not so much that I didn’t want to write that letter.”

In his book, “The Big Sort,” author Bill Bishop reveals how and why Americans have segregated themselves geographically, economically, religiously, socially and, yes, politically into like-minded communities. In one example, he writes about a Texas Republican who was ostracized from an Internet listserv in a liberal Austin neighborhood after he recommended a candidate for the board of the local community college.

“Within the day, the newsgroup reacted in a way that wasn’t as much ideological as biological,” wrote Bishop. This man “wasn’t just someone to be argued against. For the protection of the group, he needed to be isolated, sealed off, and expelled.”

“Politics,” said Bishop, “has become more about belonging to a tribe than it is about policy. And people will do almost anything to remain in their tribe.”

After all, he added: “How do you compromise on your identity?”

Pennsylvania librarian Roz Warren explored that very idea in a column she wrote this election year for a women’s website, revisiting the moment she discovered that her now daughter-in-law was a Republican. The lifelong Democrat found herself not only questioning how she’d raised her son — “loving a Republican was the one thing our son could have done to profoundly shock both his parents,” Warren wrote — but re-examining her own attachment to political identity and the perhaps skewed importance it had in her life.

Of course, Warren said in an interview, what matters far more than her daughter-in-law’s political preference is her heart — and her love for Warren’s son.

Besides, her son has now informed her, both he and his wife consider themselves independents.

“I feel very optimistic about the fact that the next generation perceives itself as independents ... the focus being on, ‘Let’s you and I talk about issues that matter to us and not identify ourselves as Democrats and Republicans’ ... with all the baggage that that entails,” she said. “Perhaps there is some hope.”

Just outside of the town of Appomattox, past the rolling hills where American once fought American, is the monument that gives this community its place in history. National Park Service Ranger Ernie Price’s office window looks out over the house where Lee and Grant arrived at the terms of surrender.

Price understands clearly the relevance between what divided Americans then and now: The many questions over government’s role in our lives, and ongoing disputes over racial inequality and freedom and individual rights over the greater good of the nation.

He also sees lessons that today’s leaders might take from what happened at Appomattox in 1865, in the cordiality exhibited by the two generals, and the compromises they were able to reach. In the respect bestowed by one-time enemies when each army saluted the other as the rebel troops laid down their arms before their Union adversaries.

“Just days before these guys were shooting at each other,” he noted.

The metaphor can hardly be missed.

Within hours of this election, Romney and Obama and Republican and Democratic leaders in Washington were talking about unity and compromise, about promising to do their part to find bipartisan solutions to the many problems facing the nation. But only time will tell whether our long-standing gridlock ends with some sort of deal and a collective salute.

In the meantime, what of the rest of us? Can we, too, if not erase our many lines in the sand find reason enough to cross over them every now and again?

Some see that as unlikely, fearing the animosity that has been growing across parties and among people these past years will only worsen over the next four.

Bryan Baine isn't one of those.

There were no Romney or Obama signs gracing the windows and walls this election year at his bookstore on Main Street. Rather, his shelves are filled with books by Rachel Maddow, host on left-leaning MSNBC, and Rick Warren, the evangelical pastor. There's a memoir by former Republican President George W. Bush, and biographies of Bob Dylan.

Baine knows how most in town might label him politically, but he prefers nowadays to just not say one way or the other — or even talk politics with his neighbor-customers.

“There so much I'd rather talk to you about. What music you listen to. What your family's like. What literature you read. Those are much more interesting to me than who you vote for or what you think about abortion or gay marriage or whatever the hot button issue is,” he said. “In small towns we have to live with each other, and I think most of us are able to look at the person who has a different position and still move on.”

His Thursday open mic nights are the perfect example. “You'll be sitting there and there'll be people that you can peg as pretty conservative or as a hippie, and one might be playing bass and one's playing mandolin.

“Democrats and Republicans. Together,” he said. “Just not talking politics.”

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Another installment in the occasional series “American Pulse,” plumbing deeper currents in American politics in this election year.

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