

The middle of the road less traveled lately...



Kathy Simons (2018 WTS-LA President), Photo © John Livzey, 2018

Consider the brain. A significant portion of everyone's brain is used solely for facial recognition. If you've driven on the 101 or the 10 Freeway during rush hour recently, you know how little most people are using their brains for that. So they must be saving them for something. But the point is that during our early primate era facial recognition—the identification of friend or foe—was often a life-or-death decision. So, we are biologically predisposed to discriminate, to tell the difference in appearance. Education, civility, and sensitivity determine what we do with the information our brain reflexively discerns. Now what am I on about, I hear you cry?

Decency. Respect. Dignity. Generosity. Accepting that a difference of opinion is not a declaration of war. I mean, what in the hell is going on right now in our nation? We no longer just identify by philosophy or party affiliation. People must now choose sides and never even consider another position. Everything is a pitched battle with a winner-take-all result. You must be for or against something with no consideration of another opinion. Maybe it's the influence of the computer age, but when did we all become so binary politically? When did we become so intolerant? Why must all communications be so charged and aggressive? Why must every argument be a zero-sum game? Rhetorical questions all, here's my answer anyway.

It's funny. At a time like this I find myself turning to someone who demonstrated his humanity largely on the battlefield (and then in office). But in my experience, people that have actually gone to war—have suffered through the horrors of combat—are far more likely to be civil and inclined to talk than those that have never been. In any case, President Dwight Eisenhower better illustrated what I'm trying to say. "People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. Actually all human problems, excepting morals, come into the gray areas. Things are not all black and white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extreme, right and left, are in the gutters."

Wow. Can you imagine him saying that on the Senate floor today? On CNN? Fox? The Internet? Forget about it. But one thing is clear: something has to change. Fair enough. How?

I never thought I'd say this, but I miss the gray areas. More precisely, I miss compromise. Seeming like a lost art at this point, we have to return to the civility of negotiation, of accepting that we'll get some of what we want by giving up some of what we have. But how do we get back to that? How do we convince both sides to take a breath, step back, and return to a place where everything doesn't become a battle royale? It needs to start at the most granular level, the most cellular level even. It starts with the individual.

To thine own self be cool. And then be cool with others. No, I'm not saying that you've got to run up and hug everyone you disagree with. And I'm also not saying that you should immediately concede every argument. No, not at all. Stand up for what you believe in, fight for it. But do it in a way that demonstrates

an understanding that the people on the other side of the argument are exactly that, people. They have lives. They have families. They may even have a dog. That sounds simple, too simple. But it's only the first step. And remember what the Buddhists advise, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step...

So, take that step. And then another and another and another. Bring this new civility, this new understanding to work, to the gym, to the 405, to Dodger Stadium (even if the Giants are in town), and then to the world. At first, you will meet resistance. That's natural. Expect it. Plan for it. Keep a stiff upper lip, take the high road, and keep on with the plan. Once we all start doing this, we'll reach a critical mass and join together collectively to make some real positive, lasting change. But there's one other place where we can use this to effect real change.

WTS-LA represents true diversity and strength within our industry. We understand what it means to mentor, to support, and to advocate for the underdog. We embrace and foster our mission to advance women, to help them move into leadership roles. We do this not only to level a very old playing field, but also for the greater good of the industry and our society at large. We fight the good fight, because it's the right thing to do. We do well by doing good, but we also always consider the people we're trying to reach and change. And that's exactly what we should be doing in creating this new kind of discourse. Use WTS-LA as a model to go out into the world and drive compromise in the nicest, most effective ways.

No man or woman is an island. We must all come together to make this work, to make our government work, to make our society work. Differences exist. And yes, we notice them. That's natural. But what we do with that information determines who we are as people. So, notice those differences, but also honor and celebrate them. Start with yourself. Tend your own garden. And then reach out to others, treating them the same way you wish to be treated. As Eisenhower said, the middle of the road is where the most usable ground is. Let's once again take that ground back and use the middle of the road that is so untraveled of late to foster greater understanding and civility.