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Michael Shelton: Embrace 'diversity of thought'

By MICHAEL SHELTON, Guest Columnist
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We live in a society that is increasingly polarized, as the historic events recent weeks have shown. The vital and controversial issues of marriage equality, the Confederate flag, Obamacare and gun control all captured the headlines. In the process, they demonstrated that creating a community that values respect and civility is more important than ever.



Many years ago, the columnist Peggy Noonan described the secret of President Reagan's success as "... his character, his courage, his kindness, his persistence and his honesty ...". In other words, he played well with others. How many of us can say that these days? The truth is, many of us don't want to play with the people we disagree with at all.

Embracing Our Differences is now entering its 13th season of promoting acceptance with a popular outdoor art exhibit and a series of educator workshops and educational outreaches. We celebrate diversity—from the need to address the historic inequities of whole groups of people, to the imperative of accepting each unique individual for who they are.

I'm proud of that message, but much work remains to be done. We must never forget that one of America's greatest sources of strength is an inclusive, pluralistic culture embracing a host of values and beliefs. In other words, "diversity of thought." And respect for those who think differently.

Respect for those you disagree with is the hallmark of a civilized society. It isn't easy, depending on where you live and what you believe — especially when others might not respect you. However hard it is, a civic discourse starts from a search for common ground. Not conformity.

It's OK to "agree to disagree"—although being disagreeable isn't. Passion for your convictions and respect for those who don't hold them are not mutually exclusive. History has repeatedly shown the destructive threat of conflicting beliefs in communities that lack civility and respect. Rejecting our differences tears society apart. Embracing our differences holds us together.

Civility is owed not to a person's opinions but to the person. Just because we may be convinced that our opponent is wrong, he or she is still a person deserving of respect and dignity. The just response is not to demonize our opponent but to engage in meaningful conversation. Treating any issue as a zero-sum game where one can only "win" at the expense of another is actually a "no-win" for all of us.

We can't avoid conflict in society any more than we can in our own family. But just as families must learn to settle their differences without inflicting needless damage, so must our society find constructive ways of resolving our public disputes.

That is why the work of Embracing Our Differences remains vital. From our very beginning, we've espoused Gandhi's philosophy that "you must be the change you

wish to see in the world.” We can put his philosophy into action by working together, respecting one another and negotiating our differences in good faith and mutual respect. Indeed, isn’t it all about learning to play well with others to build a better future for our community, for our country and for our children?

Communities thrive on active participation and engagement. It’s never easy, but we look forward to 2016 and keeping the cultural dialogue alive. This goes beyond getting positive ideas out there. Genuine respect is more than a way of thinking, after all. It only transforms our lives when it becomes the way we act.

Michael J. Shelton is executive director of Embracing Our Differences.

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