

Reflection On Civic Action

FROM MY PERSPECTIVE - Don Morrison

My late father was a large, loud, jolly man who could charm any stranger, blabber on any topic and fill any room with his vast personality. When I was a moody adolescent, he embarrassed the heck out of me. That may be why I've long preferred the solitude of a book to the terror of walking into a room full of strangers or, worse, having to engage with them. Sure, I've taught myself to do these things, but never with much relish, let alone mustard. People confound me. I prefer the quiet certainty of print. Which could be why I spent my working years moving words around a page. They didn't care how socially reluctant I was. And they allowed me to address multitudes without having to confront anybody in person.

So when my fearless, politically engaged wife announced that I would be knocking on doors with her during the 2018 mid-term elections, I put up the usual objection. As a journalist, though mostly retired, I felt an obligation to avoid direct involvement in partisan campaigns. She was having none of it. I knocked. Good thing, too. I learned more about people, civic engagement and the state of America than I could have in a year of reading, or writing, Op-Ed pieces.

Our first assignment was a heavily Black neighborhood of crumbling sidewalks and aging cars. The streets radiated fatigue, defeat. Not the people. Though many had already sent in their ballots, they still wanted to talk. And talk. A frequent theme was dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, as well as a blazing hope that the election would change all that. And how, if it didn't, they would fight on. Troublingly, a number of our new acquaintances were sick, or caring for ailing relatives, and weren't sure they would get to the polls. Even those with jobs had lousy health insurance, or none, and couldn't afford to take time off to deal with an illness anyway.

The next day we were in a mostly Hispanic precinct, where the streets were slightly leafier, the cars marginally newer. We were armed with a script in Spanish, but most of our prospects spoke English well. The ones who dared. Behind too many doors we could hear kids playing and adults talking. But when we knocked... silence, not even a floor squeak. The door stayed closed. Clearly, these people were afraid of something – ICE, most likely. Many of them were no doubt foreign-born, but we were working from a list of legal, registered voters. What, we wondered, had this country become?

We spent our final day in a prosperous high-rise enclave. Nearly all the prospects we met were welcoming, including folks who supported the other party. We even had a nice conversation with the condo-board president who threw us out of his building – after learning that I, with unexpected garrulousness, had sweet-talked our way past lobby security. Still, he thanked us for our efforts. We should have thanked him, and the scores of other citizens we met. If I gained anything from my brush with electoral foot-soldiering, it was a realization that Americans are irrepressibly nice, especially when confronting each other in person. We are better people – kinder, less divided, more open-minded – than we appear to be on social media or in the minds of “America-is-divided” commentators. As the week wore on, I found myself looking forward to the challenge of untried doors. After all, pleasant revelations might lurk behind them: a twinkly old coquette with sharp opinions and freshly baked cookies; a weary mom eager for adult conversation; a tattooed high-school dropout who reads Axios and Politico.

When the 2020 campaign dawned, I couldn't wait to knock on doors again. We all know what happened to that idea. Even phone-banking was off-limits. (Robo-calls are up, so people don't answer their phones much anymore.) My wife has started writing postcards to registered voters, reminding them to vote early. She misses the human contact, but at least it's something. Because of my execrable handwriting, I was not allowed to help.

So I walk the quiet streets in my mask, gazing wistfully at all the closed doors. Oh, I also write checks to worthy candidates in marginal districts, sign up for Zoom rallies, and even volunteer at a few charitable organizations. Still, for an unreformed poli sci major, it's not quite the same.

Nice thing about civic engagement is that, done right, it's face-to-face. None of the unfettered nastiness of social media and cable talk shows. Instead, with somebody looking you in the eye, you feel an urge to be civil, to listen, smile, find common ground. It's like a first date. Or a Thanksgiving dinner, only with people you don't know well enough to hate.

That is why, next election year, you just might find me knocking on your door. I know we'll have a good chat, now that I've conquered my youthful reluctance to engage with humanity. I may even show up without my wife. Even then, I won't really be alone. There will be a large, loud, jolly man behind me.