

What happened to the maverick spirit in Wisconsin politics?

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MADISON - The answer is asking the right questions.

I distinctly remember a strong independent streak. I remember when there were Republicans who supported abortion rights and Democrats who were anti-abortion. I remember a Republican in a red vest who signed the nation's first statewide gay rights law more than 30 years ago. I remember a famously frugal Democrat who lampooned wasteful government spending. Now your average politician does whatever wealthy donors want for fear of losing their financial backing and whatever party leaders demand for fear of being punished with a primary election opponent.

How did so many of us come to see teachers as public enemies? Whenever a teacher told my parents I messed up in school, they always took the teacher's word over mine. Always. Behind every story of a life well lived, there always seems to be the inspiration and guidance of a very special teacher or two. Whatever the war is, if teachers are the enemy, you are fighting for the wrong side.

How come we need so many gates and locks and walls? How'd so many scaredy cats take up residence in the home of the brave? Growing up on the farm, we didn't have locks on our doors. After landing in Normandy on D-Day and fighting in the Battle of the Bulge and the Battle of Remagen, my dad put down guns and swore he'd never pick one up again. If he heard sounds of trouble in the middle of the night, he'd grab a baseball bat and march into the

darkness to restore order. Now we have gated communities with home security systems and video surveillance.

Why have we become so suspicious and fearful of strangers? My mom *always* had a fresh-baked cake or pie on hand in case someone came calling. Extending hospitality to strangers was a duty. I get why little children are told not to talk to strangers. I don't get why so many adults think they shouldn't either.

When and why did we become so quick to judge and eager to condemn others? We're all human. We all make mistakes. But we grow less and less willing to cut anyone some slack. In his book

[*One Summer: America, 1927*](#)

author Bill Bryson wrote there "may never have been another time in the nation's history when more people disliked more other people from more directions and for less reason." It's starting to feel like the 1920s again in that regard.

What happened to neighbors helping neighbors? In my book [*Blue Jeans in High Places*](#) I write about a neighbor who put aside his own work to come to our aid as we struggled to harvest corn in muddy fields, mere weeks after his father hung himself from a rafter in a shed upon learning the bank was foreclosing on the family farm. That kind of manifestation of reverence for the common good seems increasingly hard to find in this age of greed and self-absorption.

How'd we let ourselves get so addicted to entertainment? As our collective hunger to be entertained continues to grow, our thirst for news and knowledge and human interaction is diminishing. For evidence, look no further than the evolution of television programming in America. TV feeds us what we are hungry for. Today's menu is nothing if not an alarm bell.

What happened to saving for a rainy day, picking up after ourselves and putting things back where we found them? Somewhere along the line, a whole lot of us decided to reject those teachings from our childhood. We want it all, and we want it now. Buy today, pay tomorrow. At the same time, we are growing increasingly disconnected from the land. We don't see ourselves as guests on this planet, we see ourselves as owners. That arrogance not only threatens Earth, it imperils the human species.

Why and how have so many of us come to feel so helpless in the face of political corruption and economic inequality, and somehow unworthy to be agents of change?

Our country has faced impossibly difficult-to-solve problems and mammoth crises many times before, and past generations of Americans consistently rose to the occasion and came up with solutions and brought about a better day. They were less educated than we are, had less money than we do, and had far fewer means of communication. Yet they proved smart enough, showed themselves to be plenty enterprising, and found ways to make their voices heard. Time after time, through the sheer force of will, they made America a better country.

Why not us, why not here, and why not now?

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