

Joining Hands and Respecting Difference

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Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the need for a divided state and nation to join hands with people whose beliefs are different from our own to the challenges we face.

ALMA, WI - “We try very hard to not have political discussions at our family gatherings,” my friend told me over dinner.

“How sad,” I replied. This comment – one I’ve heard many times in past months – stood in sharp contrast to the enthusiastic spirit of community I felt the night before.

I joined many neighbors in celebrating the release of a new album of local music. The accomplishment is a collaboration of three local musicians – Yata, Sinz and Orfield - in a delightful compilation entitled Dancing in the Light.

The crowd was enthusiastic, clapping in time with the music. One couple joined hands to dance even among the standing-room-only crowd.

As we left the concert, neighbors reminded each other of the dinner coming up in Alma. Parishioners at St John’s Lutheran Church will join hands to host a fundraiser for the victims of the flood in Buffalo County.

Somehow, we must figure out a way of taking the “joining of hands” from our local

neighborhoods and apply it to the big decisions we make at the state and national levels.

By the time you read this, the election will be over. However, I am writing before Election Day. I do not yet know the outcome. What I do know is that we must find way to unite a divided state and nation...to join hands with people whose beliefs are different from our own.

To understand something of how we can join hands while respecting our differences, I turned to the French Nobel Prize winning author Albert Camus:

“Yes, the essential thing is to leave room, however limited it may be, for the exchange of views that is still possible; the essential thing is to bring about an easing of the situation, however slight and temporary it may be. And to achieve that, each of us must preach pacification to his people.” ... “After all, Gandhi proved that it is possible to fight for one’s people and win without for a moment losing the world’s respect.”

Mr. Camus wrote these words during the struggle for Algerian independence. Colonialism was ending. It was a time of terrorism and difficult Arab-European relations. His words are still relevant.

“Problems must be seen in relation to the future, without endlessly going back over the errors of the past.”

We share much. For example, we share our love of our community; of music that reflects our neighborhood; of our concern for flood victims.

In addition, we share a concern about the future: of economic imbalance, of needs unmet, of public dollars unwisely spent.

“When fighting for your truth, you must take care not to kill it with the very arms you are using to defend it.”

Force will never convince another of the truth. Minds are changed with honest dialogue that respects the opinion of others.

“I shall not try to change anything that I think or anything that you think (insofar as I can judge of it) in order to reach a reconciliation that would be agreeable to all. On the contrary, what I feel like telling you today is that the world needs real dialogue, that falsehood is just as much the opposite of dialogue as is silence, and that the only possible dialogue is the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds.”

We join hands to celebrate the music of our neighborhood. We collect needed funds for our neighbors suffering tragedy. Can we move this “real dialogue” to the next level?

Somehow, we must begin.

As Gandhi said, “You must be the change you want to see in the world.”

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