

My turn

A failure to speak

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The “crime” was a virtual cross-cultural mugging. It was committed in broad daylight and in the presence of passive onlookers. In the moment, I lacked either the presence of mind or the courage to act in defense of its victim.

As I looked on in stunned silence, a member of my “tribe” of relatively recently settled so-called “Anglo” émigrés to these Northern New Mexico mountains assaulted the dignity of a member of one of Taos’ indigenous groups. The distracted store clerk had committed the apparently unforgivable sin of failing to respond fully to a patron’s minor request. The irritated customer asserted that she had made her demand clear and that the clerk had been unacceptably inattentive. Her words to him found their mark as surely as would a slap in the face. They reverberate in my memory still.

“Boy, you need to clean out your ears,” she declared.

Though deeply disturbed by what I had witnessed, I failed to speak.

Along with countless others, I adore life in Taos. I am continually awed and amazed by the rich, full, and stimulating Taos life that is ours. That, however, is only part of the story. Another chapter in the continuing saga is pointedly less attractive. The open secret back-story is a tale of sub-surface tensions between different cultural groups that make this valley their home.

I confess to at least a bit of naiveté in assuming that life in Taos would automatically contain opportunities for significant connections beyond members of my own cultural group. How wrong could I be?

Not only does close connection with members of other ethnic groups persistently elude me, but our little jewel of a town actually turns out to be something of a self-segregated community.

While the tendency to stick with one’s own kind may generally be in the natural order of things, Taos takes it to a remarkable level. Different cultures seem largely to avoid significant intermingling.

Some degree of intergroup hostility may not be far beneath the surface. Disturbingly, I am slowly coming to understand that as a newcomer, some see me as an interloper and likely usurper. What, then, may be the solution? Nobody is going anywhere anytime soon, not those

who have been here for generations, nor those who got here as soon as they could.

Empty platitudes (“Can’t we all just get along?”) are of dubious value. Ultimately, like it or not, we find ourselves, in the same precious little lifeboat, struggling to stay afloat, while seeking a way for oil and water to mix.

Yet, despite diversity-driven binds and grinds, our deeper human bond ultimately transcends our differences. In critical situations we regularly put difference aside and rush to aid and protect one another.

Cultural allegiances notwithstanding, first responders automatically aid all who are in peril. More mundanely, as strangers of varied backgrounds approach one another in automobiles on our roadways, we reflexively depend upon our shared humanity and reciprocal responsibilities for our very survival.

My fellow “tribesmen” complain of slights and insults that they, too, experience. Though their grievances undoubtedly also have validity, pointing fingers at others just will not get us anywhere.

It is always easier to recognize the transgressions of others. Nevertheless, we must begin with awareness of our own errors and omissions.

It may be that those who have been here long before we relative newcomers arrived may also choose to do the same: call out offending members of their own group. If not now, when?

Individually, I may not be able to do much to mitigate our differences. But I can personally better understand and respect the traditions and sensibilities of my neighbors.

I can resolve to call out “my own” when they are disrespectful of my neighbors’ values and customs. In the grocery store on that heartbreaking day, I wish that I had done just that. I continue to carry the shame and dishonor of my failure to speak out.

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