**2/15/21**

By Paula Green

“I am a staunch supporter on the right and have been filled of conflict and distress here in our Happy Valley with the full weight of the left.” That was how a self-identified conservative, midlife white male living in our region partially identified himself when he emailed in response to my op-ed “How Do We Heal Now?” published in the *Gazette* on January 20.

“You are the first and only voice printed in our paper over the last year or so who has offered not only such a nonpartisan view but a very insightful and thought-provoking one as well,” he wrote. “You have hit on the crux of the matter with your understanding that there are stories on all sides. I have worked my whole life to mostly do what is right and yet now am called bigoted and hateful. I see no light at the end of the tunnel.”

My correspondent described himself as a Trump supporter. He objects to the assumption that he is racist or homophobic, attributes he feels have been slapped on him by the progressive community in the Valley. The labeling hurts, he added, and it escalates his alienation. Touched by his tone, I answered, and we’ve now had five cordial and mutually supportive email exchanges. I tell his story with his permission so that we can all grapple with the implications.

What can we progressives learn from how we are perceived by others that is worthy of self-examination and potentially modifying our views? How do we vigorously disagree with political positions and destructive actions while refraining from dehumanization and self-righteousness? In my work as a peace builder overseas, I learned to recognize dignity as fundamental to human well-being and its absence as a contributing cause to social ills ranging from self-rejection to hatred and war. Since dignity is not self-appointed but is confirmed and upheld by others, a harmonious society requires we grant it to one another.

In the 1960s War on Poverty, reporters and photographers, often well-meaning, swarmed Appalachia, generating shame through stereotyped stories and images projected worldwide. Sixty years later, in the Hands Across the Hills dialogue exchanges between residents of Leverett and Letcher County KY, we learn how the remnants of humiliation mark Appalachian history, influence their collective self-image and significantly impact their voting patterns. Witnessing this legacy reinforces the need for sensitivity and respect as we engage across differences.

A favorite insight from our dialogue is that a person is larger than their vote, and that voting choices, like all of our behaviors, are complexly determined. Part of what shapes a vote is the sting of rejection by those who see stereotypes and miss the rich human biography that lies beneath. This goes both ways, as progressives are also simplistically labeled and judged. Our challenge is to understand this dynamic and to take responsibility for our role in the dance. The harm of mutually destructive simplifications reminds us to monitor our own steady stream of judging and dividing, a far more productive investment than trying to change others.

Our country is now caught in left-right feedback loops of escalating reactivity. Exacerbating the situation, politicians and media appeal to an increasingly divided public and inflame matters by amplifying polarization, creating even more separation. Dialogue groups help but are too small to balance out the political rewards of those who stoke hatred for their own gain.

When I consider where we are as a country today, it seems clear that my conservative correspondent, our friends in Kentucky, and millions of others are telling us that our country needs an overhaul. Too many people are hurting, and the solution is not just interpersonal, as important as that is. What is needed is a new vision for our economic, political, and social policies, all of which are on life support. Until we get these structures right, blaming and demonizing each other provides too easy a reach, an outlet for our frustration. If citizens learn to articulate our interests and worldviews so as to be understood across divides, we will discover ample common ground for building a more just and decent society.

Belonging is a key human need. We might practice it more widely, draw larger circles with more open arms. We can add to our social wealth by reducing the exclusive nature of institutions we impact: educational, medical, legal, political, commercial, psychosocial, religious. We realize the promise of democracy by enlarging our community to include the knowledge and experience of everyone.  Boundaries, albeit hardened now, are malleable. We’d all be well advised to recognize our own worldview with a healthy regard for its limitations, prioritize justice, listen for the deep story, and expand our compassion.

*Paula Green, who founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and is Professor Emerita at the School for International Training, now consults on bridging activities and facilitates Hands Across the Hills.*