



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Well, that was fast.

In our last issue, I opined: “If people with very different values and principles are going to live together in the same country (and even the same small towns) without killing each other... I believe we must learn to be *more* than just tolerant; we must learn to be forgiving. If we expect to survive as a nation, we must cultivate a spirit of forgiveness as if our very lives depended on it. Because they do.”

That column hit the street the morning of January 6th, a day that will live in infamy. To coin a phrase. I feared I was being somewhat prescient when I wrote it – that violence was, in fact, on the horizon – but I had no idea how quickly it would come.

I’m writing *this* column on the Monday before Wednesday’s inauguration. I can’t begin to imagine what madness might transpire between now and then. Forgive me if this piece already reads like last week’s warmed over hash. I always strive for “timely yet timeless,” but I never dreamed of times like these.

Frankly, I’m at a loss. I’ve been writing this column for over 20 years, and for at least half that time – longer, actually – our country’s divisions have been my white whale. The topic I just can’t quit chasing. I’ve written essays with titles like “[Our National Infection](#),” “[A Dispatch from the Backlash](#),” “[When](#)

[Things Fall Apart,](#)

” and “

[The Hate Debate.](#)

” When I wasn’t writing about motherhood, movies, choral singing, or birding, I was writing about “

[Our American Tribe](#)

” or “

[Bridges Over Troubled Water](#)

” or “

[The Spaces Between](#)

” our political rocks and hard places.

It has been my obsession. Unintentionally, almost accidentally, I have made it my life’s work to understand our national divisions – and the people on either side of them. I’ve devoured reams and reams of political commentary, social psychology, theology, philosophy, history, and anything else I could get my hands on. Anything that might help me understand. I’ve hosted a virtual salon on my Facebook page for over a decade now, where people of both our major political tribes regularly come to joust. I have thrown myself into the fray, time and time again, trying to mediate between lefties and righties . . . typically to the aggravation of both. While others have blocked, unfriended, and unfollowed their social media platforms into sleek, cordial echo chambers, I have kept my virtual doors wide open, to the increasing detriment of my mental and spiritual health.

Why? I’m not sure, exactly. Maybe because the real-life stakes are so high for me? (I have beloved family members on both sides of the divide. Dear friends, too.) Maybe because I’m excessively curious about people and what drives them? Maybe I’m excessively driven, myself? Or maybe I’m just a flat-out masochist.

Whatever the reason, I never felt like I had a choice. I was compelled. Called. I couldn’t imagine another way. I could never fathom how others so easily accepted the slogans, stereotypes, and simplifications foisted on us by our national media. Or how they so enthusiastically “took a stand” on one side of the divide, completely devaluing – even dismissing – the concerns of the other side. Or how they so blithely cut friends and family members out of their lives for taking the “wrong” position. (Some people even brag about it on Facebook!)

For years, I nursed this bizarre illusion that a middle-aged woman sitting at her computer in Beaufort, South Carolina could hold the whole dang country together with her bare hands – especially all the people she loved – if she could only read widely enough, listen hard enough, empathize fully enough, and pound her keyboard with enough intensity. Looking back, I have to laugh at that woman, even as my heart breaks for her lost innocence and idealism. (“Her” is me,

in case you're not following.) I've now given up any notion that I can somehow "change the world" with my words – or even make a dent in it – but the bone-deep need to understand still drives me. I suppose it always will.

Three years ago, a reader wrote to tell me that I was too timid, that I stood for nothing of substance, that I was wasting my platform. She was angry that I didn't use this page to regularly castigate Donald Trump and his supporters. And maybe she was right. Maybe I should have. But my heart and my gut told me otherwise. My reading, my listening, my thinking, even my praying ... They all led me down a different path. And one thing I still believe is that a writer must follow her own path.

Here are some things I've learned along mine:

Tribalism is deep in our DNA. In evolutionary terms, we're barely post-caveman. It's almost a miracle we've transcended our tribal instincts enough to create the (relatively) free and just society we enjoy today. And as we've seen recently, that free and just society is incredibly fragile. In our efforts to perfect it, I pray we don't destroy it. (Lately, I've begun to think of America as a game of Jenga; I wonder how many pieces of our foundation we can remove before the whole shebang comes crashing down.)

Another thing I've learned: Our political orientations are also in our DNA. They're literally genetic. No, DNA is not your political *destiny* – experience is important, too – but we are all products of nurture *and* nature. And guess what?

Society needs conservatives

and

liberals! This is why their respective personality traits – yes, personality drives politics – have not been bred out of the human animal. Natural selection continues to "select" for conservatives and liberals and the moderates in between. We need each other to survive. I could go into all sorts of fancy details about why that's true – google Moral Foundations Theory if you're interested – but it basically comes down to balance.

You might say, "But Donald Trump is none of those things – conservative, liberal, *or* moderate." And you would be right. Donald Trump has led a populist movement, which is something else entirely. But populist movements don't arise in a vacuum. There are reasons a man like Donald Trump came to power – social, cultural, and economic reasons. I don't believe those reasons will simply evaporate when he leaves the White House.

Over the past decade, various demons have been unleashed, and I fear they're here to stay a

while. Trump undoubtedly emboldened those demons, but he didn't create them. There are plenty of smart people trying to answer the question: How did we get here? I've been reading and reading, but so far, I'm not wholly satisfied with their answers. (I know. I'm a cheeky so-and-so, aren't I?)

So I will continue to dig and ponder and, as always, share my findings with you. (This is my obsession, remember?) Stay tuned. And please, please, dear reader . . . stay safe this week.