

Culture of Peace: A path towards deconstructing 'deplorables'

By Jeff Golden Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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The evening I heard Hillary Clinton call Donald Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables” (later clarifying that she only meant *some* of them) was the moment I started bracing for President Donald Trump. Trump himself couldn’t have written her a better script for driving home his foundational theme to voters: *“The elite running this country — the media, the so-called ‘experts,’ the liberals — think you’re pathetic. That you’re stupid and selfish. That you’re wrong. Well, come along with me and we’ll show them who’s wrong.”*

Trump’s movement, among other things, was a ferocious middle finger to this loosely-defined “elite” and a primal scream: *TAKE US SERIOUSLY*. But because of the particulars of much of what they were saying, we couldn’t. What, we asked each other, is with these people? And every one of the countless times they were called bigots, sexists and idiots, they dove a little deeper into the Trump bunker, and some people on the margin moved in their direction.

Here’s my question. Would we intensely non-Trump people have reacted very differently? When we’re deplored as — you pick — lazy “takers,” America- or business-haters, clueless elitists — do we open up or shut down to what the “deplorers” want us to hear?

If you hear that question as some kind of equivalency argument, that Clinton and Trump supporters were abusive and fact-free in more or less equal measure, please don’t. I heard the same streams of racism, misogyny and Orwellian jive in Trump’s campaign that you did. What is roughly the same is how we react when we’re tossed in a basket of deplorables. At best we shut down to possible breakthroughs. At worst we return fire, triggering more reactive scorn from the other side in a spiral that can take us down ... like it just did. My guess is that more than a few Trump voters are unhappy with where all this has brought us.

So now what? What comes to me is a line from St. Francis' famous prayer: "Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek ... to be understood as to understand." Few principles are easier to appreciate and harder to put into practice. And at this painful moment, it could be that not many of us want to. These people just harnessed truly dark human instincts to win the election and *we're* supposed to reach out to *them*? Really?

Our challenge, whenever it is we're ready to take it on, is to affirm the full humanity of people that Trump won over while rejecting some of what they believe and want. That includes those in his camp who seem unhinged by people of color who are thriving, up to and especially our president for the next two months, while they themselves fall behind. They ate up this year's racist, xenophobic rhetoric, both upfront and coded. Can we find a way to accept what they're feeling while fiercely opposing much of what they want to do to set things straight?

That's the narrow path that Gandhi, King and Mandela walked. The fact that we always fall back on those three names shows how narrow and elusive it is. Having become clear that no other path is likely to lead to the world we want for our children, millions of people are looking for it. Some, like those involved in the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC), are working tenaciously to build it. They're striving to move past the hopelessness and cynicism that's calling to us right now, to embed St. Francis' wisdom about the power of understanding into everyday life.

The ACPC takes this work on not because it's easy but because it's necessary. There's no worthwhile alternative to unwinding the spiral of reciprocal scorn that's brought us to where we are today. ACPC would welcome your energy and inner wisdom.

Jeff Golden, a longtime Ashland resident, hosts and produces the weekly PBS series "Immense Possibilities" (www.immensepossibilities.org). Email comments and questions to ashlandcpc@gmail.com, or drop by the commission office at 33 1st St., Suite 1. The ACPC website is www.ashlandcpc.org; like the commission on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission; follow at twitter.com/AshlandPeace on Twitter.



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