

An Open & Shut Case

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



By now, you probably know that Panini's restaurant was robbed last week. It happened sometime after the Crave Cupcake Boutique break-in, but before the Domino's Pizza heist. (I know, I know... What's the world coming to?)

I learned of the Panini's robbery when I saw a shocking picture of their shattered back door – along with a short report of the incident – on Facebook. Upset, I promptly shared the picture on my own FB page, with the simple comment, “Wow.”

In my mind, it was not a suggestive “wow,” nor a confrontational “wow,” nor a “wow” infused with any kind of innuendo whatsoever. It was more like a “dang” or a “yikes” or a “whoa.” You know, just your basic “wow.”

After that, I left my computer for a while – yes, it happens – and when I returned, a long thread of comments had materialized beneath my post. A discussion was raging – without me! – and, at first glance, it looked... political. (Uh oh.) Now, I have been accused, on occasion, of being a *provocateur*

– someone who intentionally creates and attracts controversy – and while I quibble with the “intentionally” part, I certainly understand whence the accusation comes. But in this instance, I must assure you I was completely innocent of any nefarious motive. Furthermore, I was dumbfounded. It had never occurred to me that a simple post sharing info about a local robbery would spiral into a heated political throw-down.

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The first commenter had likened the Panini's robbers to the protesters at Occupy Wall Street. "It's the same mentality," said my FB friend.

Um, okay. (Huh?)

The next commenter argued that the robbery was an example of "why everyone should have a concealed weapon permit."

(Despite the fact that it happened in the wee hours of the morning, when nobody was there to brandish – or not brandish – said hypothetical concealed weapon?)

A more sympathetic commenter had chimed in to say that, "if the economy doesn't pick up, we will see these problems all over... People have to eat. Desperate people do desperate things."

With that, a discussion of "desperate" had ensued.

"Desperate," said one friend, "is saying, okay, I guess I'll have to take this minimum wage job because there's nothing out there. Ignorant is saying, 'I'm gonna rob this store for a couple hundred or thousand dollars and hope I don't spend that many days for dollars in jail.'"

"Actually," another friend had countered, "desperate is saying, 'I'll take this job, because I want to work, but it won't provide for even the most basic needs of my family, so then I don't qualify for aid, and my kids need shoes, and I think robbing a place for 2K split among four people is worth the risk.' THAT'S DESPERATE."

"No!" yet another comment followed. "That is immoral and selfish, because in the end all that happens is that society just erodes more. There was a lot of desperation during the Depression, but people in general had a sense of respect for themselves, their neighbors and their

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community.”

Somewhere along the line, somebody had posted a picture of a cancer patient who'd been unable to get treatment – despite being insured – until his illness put him out of work, qualifying him for Medicaid. This, as an example of our screwed up system. The one that's breeding restaurant robbers. And Wall Street occupiers. (Same mentality, remember?)

Someone else had posted to say that her husband had chased some young vandals from their property just the night before, and that those vandals had been white. This, to remind us that desperation – and selfishness and immorality – are color blind.

And the comments went on and on. At some point, a friend had popped in to ask: “How did this post become a political thing?”

Good question.

Most of this was taking place, mind you, while I was away from my computer. That's how Facebook works. If you don't “police your area,” your area takes on a life of its own, for better or worse.

When I returned to my desk to find my Panini's post hemorrhaging comments, I also found a personal email from one of the commenters – who happens to be a good friend in real life – telling me that she had decided to “block” my FB page. To block a page is basically to hide it from your (the blocker's) sight... and to hide your own page from the sight of the blockee. “It's not you,” she told me. “I just can't handle the vitriol.”

Wow. (For the second time that day, there was that word.)

I had never been blocked before. It was a terrible feeling. Especially being blocked by a friend. (Not just an FB friend, but a real-life one.) The fact that it wasn't “me” but the “vitriol”... well, that

didn't help much, really. It was my FB page. I was responsible for the vitriol. The vitriol, like the buck, stopped here.

Another friend had written to say she appreciated my willingness to provide a "forum for all these different voices and opinions." They were kind words, but cold comfort at that moment. I had been blocked. Virtually erased. My soul needed searching.

In my anguish, I began reading back over the discussion thread in question. Maybe I would just delete the whole darn thing. Get rid of it altogether. I was so shaken by this "blocking" experience, I wanted to take serious action. Some kind of atonement seemed in order.

But as I read through the thread, it slowly dawned on me: I didn't think it was all that vitriolic. Now, granted, some of my FB threads have been. (I have a wide range of FB friends with an even wider range of opinions.) But this? Well, sure, there were some sloppy stereotypes... some exaggerated comparisons... but nobody was particularly rude or insulting. I guess I've become desensitized, because, to me, the discussion seemed much tamer than what you hear on cable news most nights – and far more diverse. It was a robust conversation with lots of different perspectives represented – some I agreed with, some I didn't. In my judgment, there was nothing beyond the pale.

But, "the pale" is in the eye of the beholder, isn't it? One person's "robust" is another person's "vitriolic." If I'm going to dish it out – or allow others to – I have to learn to take it. Blocking may be less subtle – more absolute – but it's just another form of expression.

I have no real point to make here, except this: It ain't easy hosting an online salon. So why do I do it? I guess I can't help myself. I have a near-obsessive passion for new ideas (and old ones, too) and an endless curiosity about what people think... and why. At a time when most folks seem to be migrating into contemporary "tribes" – the kind organized around similar values, beliefs and political priorities – I have an innate ornery streak that resists that impulse... that abhors an echo chamber and craves variety. I believe all ideas – even bad ones – have a right to be expressed, if only so they can duke it out with the other, better, ideas... and get clobbered. So I have an "open door policy" on Facebook. I neither block nor un-friend, and I seldom delete. (Though I sometimes chastise and I often apologize.) This is a choice I've made, this open door policy. But that choice has not come without a price. Choices never do.

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And some days, I confess, I wonder if I'm doing the right thing. Especially those days when my "open door" gets me shut out.

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