



By Margaret Evans, Editor

It's getting down to crunch time, people. And I'm not talking about a pleasant stroll through the autumn leaves.

After what feels like the longest, most grueling and demoralizing election season anybody can remember – and some of us are pretty old – the big event is almost upon us. Finally.

A sense of impending relief should be hovering on the psychic horizon, right? We should be glimpsing a flicker of light in the darkness . . . or at the end of the tunnel . . . or wherever. There should be some light.

It's almost over and things can get back to normal.

Only, what does that mean anymore? Normal? If this election season's taught us anything, it's just how unraveled we are as a country. No longer just "divided," we seem to be in tatters. Contentious special interests, battling identity groups, contradictory cultural narratives . . . A country in shreds and shards.

Many months ago, before Donald Trump seized the GOP nomination, things were looking a little less grim in that department. It actually felt as if Trump – in some weird, unexpected way – was bringing the country together. Democrats and Republicans alike – in my world, anyway – seemed united in their mutual distaste for The Donald, even as he inexplicably continued to eliminate his competitors – Little, Lyin', Low-Energy, and the like – one after another.

We were all bewildered. What was going on here? My liberal friends, in a bout of collective amnesia, were suddenly misty-eyed and nostalgic over Mitt Romney, John McCain and the “good” Republicans of yore. My conservative friends were just plain distraught. All over social media, conservatives and liberals were having a kumbaya moment, officially branded as #NeverTrump. Bernie Sanders was still in the race, too, and in many quarters, this cross-party harmony was stoked by a shared lack of enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton.

But then Trump nailed the nomination. And Hillary nailed hers. Suddenly, the bipartisan hand-holding and footsy-playing came to a screeching halt. My Dem friends who’d been Berners, and very down on Hillary, were now rising to her cause. My Republican friends who’d supported anybody but Trump were . . . stumped. They still found Trump appalling, but now he was their party’s nominee. And Hillary was still Hillary. Lies. Scandals. Corruption. Progressive judges.

What to do?

Responses have been all over the map. I’ve watched dedicated NeverTrumpers painfully morph into MaybeTrumpers and even ProbablyTrumpers. (The mental gymnastics were dazzling to behold.) I’ve seen others become reluctant Hillary voters – not proud, but resigned. (“She’s not insane” is their mantra.) Still others have pledged their allegiance to libertarians Gary Johnson and Bill Weld, despite Johnson’s recurring “Aleppo moments.” (Ironically, this advocate for legalizing marijuana is like a walking advertisement that it truly does kill brain cells.)

And then there are The Undecided. Yes, they exist. I’m involved in a “private Facebook group” with hundreds of my fellow graduates of the University of the South (“Sewanee”), where alumni of all ages and ideological persuasions somehow manage to talk politics without eviscerating one another. It’s a rare and beautiful thing – possibly the only community of its kind in all of cyberspace. It was there I learned that many fine, educated, imminently thoughtful people are still in limbo about this election. Decidedly undecided.

Maybe it’s because Sewanee’s motto is engraved on all our hearts – *Ecce Quam Bonum*: “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity” – that all these undecided folks felt our group was a “safe space” in which to confess their indecision? All I know is that once the question was asked, the floodgates opened, and undecided voters came pouring in. Drove. I think the discussion thread may still be going, over a week later.

Undecided?

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Who knew? It's not the kind of thing you can just announce to Facebook Nation at large. The peer pressure is too intense. Facebook is like a high school hallway, and the cool kids are in charge. Like all cool kids throughout history, they are self-confident, strongly opinionated, 100% certain of their correctness, and unconcerned about alienating the incorrect. They make the rules about what can and can't be said, about which ideas are in bounds and which are beyond the pale. They are the gatekeepers of acceptable conversation. Outliers, beware.

Most of the cool kids are firmly – decidedly – in the Hillary camp. This is fine. What's *not* fine, in my opinion – and here I ensure my continued uncool status – is the public shaming and haranguing of the undecided.

From a recent scan of my newsfeed: *"If you'd actually consider voting for that moron, unfriend me now!" . . . "If you're undecided, you're an active supporter racism and bigotry!" . . . "How could any decent human being possibly be undecided at this point?"*

Well, to quote a beloved rock band from my youth, I understand about indecision. As an over-analyzing, pros-and-cons weighing, balance-obsessed moderate (and a Libra, natch), Indecision is my middle name. I may or may not have made up my mind about this election – if I had, I wouldn't tell – but I am compelled, with every fiber of my ambivalent being, to defend those who haven't. In case you've not noticed, intellectual intimidation (I call it "thought bullying") is my arch nemesis and I will probably be fighting it on my deathbed. It's just who I am. Like Martin Luther, "I can do no other." While I love a strong, passionate argument, political peer pressure in the form of personal insult (see paragraph above) will always rile me up.

So, I proposed the following thought experiment to a progressive friend of mine who truly seemed incapable of believing a "decent person" could be undecided – or planning to vote third party, which he considered irresponsible and selfish:

"Imagine the roles were reversed," I told him. "Imagine Trump was running as the Democrat – the party that represents the progressive values you hold to be good and true – and Hillary was running as the Republican, representing the conservative values you abhor. Would you easily and happily vote for Trump, despite his terrible behavior and low character. . . . or would you vote for Hillary, the more experienced, less "crazy," more acceptable candidate, despite knowing she would push a conservative agenda and possibly fill three seats on the Supreme

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Court? If you can imagine yourself in that reverse scenario, you can understand why many Americans currently find themselves in an almost impossible situation."

My progressive friend thought about it and said, "Hmmm... You're right. In the scenario you describe, I don't know what I'd do. I suppose I'd have to vote for a third party candidate."

See, y'all? It *can* be done. We can put ourselves in other people's shoes, see through their eyes, and even think with their brains if we really try. And when we do, we come to understand them. And only when we understand them do we have any real chance of changing their minds. (Or changing our own, which is sometimes good, too.) Insulting, shaming and belittling really don't work. I promise. They just force people to simmer in silence or go underground . . . or find a "private Facebook group." But empathetic persuasion? That just might do the trick. It might preserve a relationship, too, and relationships matter. Maybe more than anything.

In a month, we'll elect ourselves a new president that many Americans find deeply uninspiring. That's a given. What's not a given is what kind of country that new president will lead. Will we put aside our differences and rise to this challenging moment, remembering the founding ideals that bind us together as a nation? Or will we continue disrespecting and dehumanizing each other – and degrading those cherished ideals – until the land of the free and the home of the brave is just a line from an old song we once knew?

I'm undecided.