

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Occasionally I take the liberty of departing from my responses to reader's letters, and writing instead an essay about an issue that inspires me, or touches my heart. Last year, I wrote about the incredible sense of community that I experienced as Hurricane Isabel made her targeted and unrelenting approach to the Outer Banks. A few weeks ago, I wrote about the importance of long-time friends, as I relaxed on the beach surrounded by people I've known and loved for more than twenty-five years.

But today, I am compelled by less positive and uplifting reflections. In fact, I'm mad, and perhaps you are too. I'm totally over these elections--and I'll tell you why--but first I must explain myself. I have strong political views, have learned everything I can about the issues, listened to both sides, and have reached personal decisions, for national, state, and local candidates. I feel confident in my choices.

Being a fan of the democratic process, I get excited in election years. I look forward to the discourse, the debates, the exchange of ideas and opinions. Over the years, I can remember many vigorous discussions around my family's dinner table, and thoughtful, passionate debates with friends. Even with ardent opinions being expressed, I felt assured of being heard and of learning something from someone with a different viewpoint. In these discussions, I was confident that my views were respected, even if they weren't shared. Not so this year. It's startlingly brutal out there: a feeding frenzy of meanness.

These are the most divisive and negative times politically that I can remember. First someone threw my political yard sign in the ditch (my neighbor plucked it out and I repaired it, then repositioned it inside my Invisible Fence so that my dog may say a fine how-de-do to any other jerks who would express their politics in such a crude – and illegal -- way). Then, the driver of a pickup truck sporting the opposite party bumper sticker, roared up next to me on the Interstate, pointed to my bumper sticker and flipped me off. C'mon! Is this kind of political expression that Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he wrote, "Reflection, with information, is all which our countrymen need, to bring themselves and their affairs to rights." What happened to reflection? What happened to information?

Democracy depends upon active respectful discourse, honest expression of opinion, a willingness to speak up, and perhaps most importantly, an ability to listen and reflect. Some people I know – on both sides of the aisle – can't even abide talking with their friends and neighbors who disagree with them politically. One good friend of mine has all but written off her neighbors, after they donned their car with decals proclaiming their commitment to "the other side." "But, Susan," I said, "These people bring you orange juice when you're sick. They take care of your dog when you're out of town." "Hmmmpph!!!" was all she could say. Now we all love Susan, but no one would watch the debates with her for reasons you can perhaps imagine.

In all but our local races, our statewide and national leaders have set the stage for meanness and put-downs. Half-truths, outright lies, character assassinations, and a focus on what's wrong with the other guy (rather than what a candidate stands for), have become the norm. As a society, have we morphed from a democracy that celebrates differences of opinion and is informed by discussion and thoughtful contemplation into

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one that is fed by sound bytes, and demonizes those who disagree? I'm afraid this might be true, and it scares me.

In years past, I might have hosted a dialogue among my friends and neighbors. Let's do our civic duty. Let's really understand the issues, so that we can make the best possible choices during these dangerous times. But given the harshness of this election season, I may take a pass. However, I feel confident that most people share my sense of disappointment with the brutality of this political climate. I'm more inclined than ever to hope that – collectively – we will be more compassionate, more tolerant of opposing opinions, more willing to listen, and more thoughtful in 2008. In the meantime -- I've vowed that I won't rip down anyone else's political yard signs -- but I'll just sadly say, "Shut up, and vote."

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.