

A columnist asks readers for advice on connecting to people

Lawrence Brown

Columnist

I've been teaching at the Academy for Lifelong Learning for five years now. Teachers in the program don't get paid — it's a labor of love. I'm finding almost everything I do in retirement is like that. What could be better than to love what you do and the people you do it with? Here we all are, mostly products of the 60s, perfectly poised to have some of the best bull sessions we ever had since we left school.

Instructors get to decide what courses we want to teach, and a kind of academic free market takes effect after that. Adult students get to sign up for whatever courses interest them, and that's how we find out whether we had a good idea or not.

During the summer, I try to write my own textbooks for the classes I'm about to teach. One of my classes this fall is 'A History of Women.' (I deliberately didn't call it *the* history of women. There are so many ways to approach it.)

It was in the process of researching and then teaching about the Women's Suffrage movement, and then the Sexual Revolution of the 60s, that a problem appeared. So in the time I have left, my dear readers, I'd like to bring you all into my room upstairs at the college for a good bull session.

You see, while John Adams was away at the Constitutional Convention, his wife Abigail wrote to him to 'remember the ladies' and to be sure that they had representation in the new government he was helping design. They had a strong marriage, and she loved him very much — and yet she admonished him, 'Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.'

We hear the voices of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others in the women's suffrage movement that started just before the Civil War. 'Women have been the great unpaid labor of the world.' Then the great Civil War came and almost three-quarters of a million men on both sides lost their lives in the argument over whether Blacks were entitled to any civil rights at all. Despite all the racial prejudice and ignorance of the time, it was easier to imagine black men as fellow citizens than it was to imagine citizenship for any woman at all.

Last summer, I lost a number of people dear to me, and when I had the energy and clarity to do it, I wrote this book. The more I studied, the more clearly I found — almost everywhere and always — the legal and cultural and spiritual subjugation of women to the men around them. Certainly, this was the foundational assertion of the Women's Liberation Movement, of feminism.

And here, I got stuck. How can feminists see men as responsible for women's suffering — not just at the present moment, but historically, theologically, socially and politically *-without hating them?*

The answer can't be the suppression of uncomfortable history. Besides, we have the realities of the present moment. According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately one in four American women will experience completed or attempted rape in their lifetime. The global percentage: one in three.

Slowly, I am realizing that the issue of feminism is part of a larger picture where Americans have needed love and not gotten it. Since the 1960s, the liberal movement has tried to protect minorities of all sorts, racial, ethnic, spiritual and sexual. God knows, this has needed doing. *But protect them from whom?* From everybody else, it seems... from the great working class of ordinary Americans who built the coalition that supported Franklin Roosevelt through the Depression. In short, liberalism found millions of people too ignorant and bigoted to love. So, liberals stopped loving them. If conservatives are honest, they can make a similar critique.

More than we are suffering from a political crisis, we are suffering from a *spiritual* one... from a vast and catastrophic failure of love. The culture wars, however effective they have been politically, have turned us into a self-polarizing society that weaponizes every new event, every new thought, as ammunition to use against those with whom we disagree. We have torched the common ground between us.

And yet the same historical study I've been making documents over and over again how, under all sorts of social conditions, men and women have learned to love each other. A woman sings of her lover in *A Song of Solomon*, 'A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night between my breasts.'

In so many ways, we have learned to love each other in the midst of economic collapse and political oppression. We've learned to love each other even when the arrangements for that love have been lopsided and unfair. Now, we must learn how to love and forgive each other when we disagree.

How we do that – how we convince our neighbors to do that? I just don't know. But this is a local paper. You have my contact email at the bottom of this column. I'm looking for answers — and asking you to send me some. It's easy to say the things I've just said. Talk is cheap. *How can we pull ourselves back from the brink?* Practical ideas, solutions. *How can we approach people with whom we disagree and get better outcomes?*

A simple script would be nice. I won't use your names.

Write me with your ideas and I will collate and organize them as best I can — and share them with you all in a future column. I'll look forward to hearing from you.

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