

Chicago Tribune

Subscribe

54°F

Friday, October 25th 2024

eNewspaper

Naperville Sun Opinion

David McGrath: Be careful who you talk to because these days friendly banter can turn ugly quickly



Marianne McGrath, wife of columnist David McGrath, has the kind of face that invites strangers to talk to her but it's a gift that can also get her in trouble when those strangers get political, her husband says. (David McGrath)



By **DAVID MCGRATH**

UPDATED: October 24, 2024 at 10:21 a.m.

My wife Marianne does not want me to grocery shop with her. She's too nice to tell me but I suspect she doesn't care for my running commentary ("I can buy two laying hens for what these eggs cost!"), which is well-intentioned but not always appreciated.

Recently, she was forced to abide my company when the weekly shopping was combined with getting the newest COVID vaccination, which was available at our grocery store. As we pushed a cart down the cookies/coffee/cereal aisle, a woman paused to compliment Marianne's purse.

It's one of those droopy sacks with wooden beads, but Marianne's warm smile routinely seems to invite people to stop and talk. It happens at restaurants, on airplanes, standing in line at the bank and on the sidewalk during her morning walk: small talk about the weather, cute dogs, kids, athletic shoes, a hair bobble.

Her friendliness also apparently works remotely: When I overheard her telling someone on the phone about her trip to Norway, it turned out to be a customer service representative for DirecTV. Clearly she possesses a

gift. I know this because when I've tried myself to recreate her magic by smiling at passers-by, they invariably they speed up.

But a virtue like my wife's comity can also pose problems, especially in our current politically charged atmosphere. In September, for example, we were having a cocktail at the bar of a popular restaurant while waiting for a table when a 50ish, dark-haired man immediately engaged her in conversation. While Marianne and her new BFF chatted away, I was free to sip a Goose Island IPA and watch a reality show on a big-screen TV

That was until I heard the dark-haired man's voice rising.

"Why did you come here?"

The tone sounded odd, and I turned to see him rise from his barstool.

"Liberals don't belong," he said. "We don't want you here."

He was standing over my wife. So, I stood too, making myself big the way they tell you to in Grizzly Country. There was scant danger of a fight. Yes, he was upset and a little threatening. But I had made a strict resolution to avoid violence: Ever since I grew old enough for Medicare and ever since all 50 states legalized conceal and carry.

Fortunately, the beeper alerting us our table was ready began vibrating and flashing. We both picked up our drinks and walked to the hostess station. Marianne was quiet, smiling sadly, till I broached the subject.

“What got him started?”

“Michelle Obama.”

“Not again!”

She liked my joke, and related how she and her neighbor at the bar were bonding over North Carolina, where he was from and where she has a sister in Durham and another in Asheville. But after he inquired as to her

hometown and learned she was from Illinois, he made a sour face:

“Obama Country?”

To which she diplomatically replied: “Come on, people love Michelle.”

She thought, perhaps based on their budding friendship, he’d be cool and trade banter as I do with my brother about the Bears and the Packers.

Instead, he lost it.

We’ve experienced similar clashes over the past year in restaurants, the car wash or just about anywhere in Florida where we now reside. It’s happened when one of the regulars at Jerry’s Tiki Hut decided to visit each table to show off his “Let’s Go Brandon” T-shirt; and when a fisherman in Boca Grande assumed I’d be as thrilled as he was about bumping into TV commentator Tucker Carlson; and when our neighbor next door was chagrined that we did not share his view of the “dumb Mexican” at the end of the block.

“Nice” people turning offensive after assuming that since we’re white and of a certain age, we were on their side. And in Marianne’s case, they always seem to think — or hope, apparently — that she’s one of them. A member of their tribe.

When we’re “outed,” we are reviled as if we’re traitors.

It’s become a concern. A Public Religion Research Institute study found that 32% of Republicans who support former President Donald Trump think political violence is acceptable as do 8% of Democrats. The resulting atmosphere is toxic and volatile, with potential for another Jan. 6.

But there is a solution. It’s not new or radical. It’s very old, in fact, a proven elixir predating even the Constitution and originating with President George Washington. It’s the emergence of a normal, dignified leader who commands respect, who cares for all of us and who can unite us in pursuit of commonalities like prosperity, fairness and happiness.

I have a feeling there’s someone out there who fills the bill perfectly.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of the newly released book "Far Enough Away," a collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.

Originally Published: October 23, 2024 at 5:12 p.m.