

Lunch with David Akadjian

In the days after a tragedy that occurred within a family at my church I became all too aware that the news of the tragedy and the circumstances surrounding it was attracting the attention of a national and even a world-wide audience. It was painful in and of itself to walk with this family through the worst nightmare any parent could ever imagine. Add to that a public outcry that would place this family in the crossfire of a contentious and difficult social issue that has tested the very fabric of the culture in which we live. Largely due to the fact that the story emerging from the tragedy was rife with misinformation, assumption and exaggeration, the family, the church and even I personally began to receive harsh criticism and blame from people who didn't know anything about any of us. Yet by phone, by email, on social media and by any and all means of contact we received numerous messages assigning blame, insults and defamations as well as wishes for our death. Many of the messages were angry outcries from people who felt that our religion caused this tragedy and many that are similar to it. A few were just mean spirited and intended to inflict injury. Some told heartbreaking stories of their own mistreatment and abuse at the hands of people who claimed to be Christians but acted otherwise. Then there were a few who were different. They seemed to be trying to comprehend both sides of the issue. Their language was different, more respectful. They seemed to be foregoing the opportunity to jump on the attack wagon preferring instead to acknowledge that at the center of the event was a human tragedy claiming victims beyond the deceased and not a mere social debate. I was intrigued by that group. There was something important in their response; something more than the chest pounding calls for retribution. They were seeking peace. Their hearts beat with the same passion as mine for people of all walks, beliefs, orientations, and religions to seek peaceful paths, to tolerate one another's differences and to be willing to bear with each other's weaknesses in love. I firmly believe that in doing so we will find many more ways we are alike than we do ways in which we differ. We may also find in taking the risk of building relationships to one another that within the confines of a loving, trusting relationship we may find workable solutions for those struggles that continue to confound us.

One of the voices of peace responded to an editorial I wrote that was printed in the local newspaper. The online version of the paper gave the opportunity for people to respond to the article. There were of course several who voiced their approval, affirming the path of peace and there were others who voiced disapproval, harshly in some instances, assigning blame for our social ills on me and others like me. Again there was that middle voice, not agreeing or disagreeing but seeking to understand. One of those voices belonged to a man named David Akadjian. In his response, David did not appear to have the same conservative view of politics or religion as do I but he did seem to have that same heart for peace. In one instance he responded to one of the harsher critics who posted on the article and called out gently where the critic might have misunderstood the message. *Rather than take a turn with the flamethrower he guided the individual accurately back to my main point.*

"Interesting...someone who doesn't necessarily agree with me but is seeking to calm the tone of the rhetoric," I thought.

David and I traded a few comments in the public venue. His comments were challenging but kept a very respectful tone. There was a friends request on Facebook and a few email messages shared. In all communications he continued to maintain his conciliatory manner.

I began to think that while we may not agree on many things, David and I could always share a passion for peace and for relationships that are healing.

One day I received an email from him that read, *"I live in Cincinnati and have for many years. In many ways, we are a city of walls: urban/suburban, white/black, east/west, Ohio/Kentucky, gay/straight, Republican/Democrat, etc.*

One of the things I think is the biggest shame is that so often we don't talk to people outside of these walls. This is why your post spoke to me.

I don't know if anything would come of it, but I'd be interested in talking with you more about how to help bridge the walls. Would you be interested in discussing over lunch."

I have to admit that his offer caught me by surprise. It is one thing to engage banter over electronic and social media but face to face is a different thing all together. After prayerful consideration I decided to accept his offer and talk to him. Even if it turned out to be an opportunity for him to accuse or humiliate me, it would only be an hour out of my life. I was willing to risk it for the hope that I was right about his passion for peace.

As it turned out, I was right.

David and I met at a quaint local diner once featured on "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives" on the Food Network called [Blue Ash Chili](#). When I first met him he greeted me with a smile and a handshake. There didn't appear to be cameras or recorders in the area and very soon after our conversation started I was able to lower my guard and just talk.

In our conversation we found that we had several interests in common. We love the outdoors, we both have been put off by pushy religious people and we both have a passion for bringing people together.

David told me about his writing for an online magazine called "Daily Kos". He said that he feels his role in working largely with social and political liberals and progressives is to help them tame their rhetoric and temper their reactions to those of other points of view seeking to understand rather than demolish that with which they disagree or don't understand. "Wow," I thought, "Conservative Christianity could use a big dose of that kind of thinking as well!"

We both shared the belief that facilitating dialogue that would bring people together despite differences is a huge need in our culture. We discussed that the 'walls' to which my editorial piece referred was not the issues themselves but the way we choose to process the issues from different sides. Dialogue that is blaming, hate-filled and injurious deepens the chasms between us and builds the walls that grow higher and higher with each word. I felt David and I embraced the concept I was going for in my article by listening to the story of one another's lives and understanding where we come from and how our context could lead us to our interpretation of our surroundings and our beliefs about issues that at times separate us. We agreed that we don't have to see eye to eye to appreciate and respect the beauty of each other's perspective. Trying to change each other's beliefs would be frustrating and almost certainly fail but letting a loving and respectful relationship change us both is powerful and (I believe) effective.

Change in our communities can never happen with an “I have nothing to change and you have to change everything,” attitude. It must be about embracing each other in community and being open and willing to change for the good of the other and the greater good of our world.

I left the restaurant thankful for David and many who are like him. I still believe we share the same heart and hope we can continue to work together to facilitate real change for the good of our community and our world. From our conversation I know he takes a lot of criticism from those aligned with his point of view as well as those from the other side. I appreciate his willingness to withstand the questioning of motives, the barrage of reasoning and at times harshness and disrespect for the greater good of speaking calm into each dispute, respectful decorum into each discussion and peace into our community and our world.