

Changing Minds Is Easier to Do When Yours Is Open

FORUM COLUMN

By Victoria Pynchon

It was hot, really hot, trudging the blacktop separating dozens of apartment buildings in Henderson, Nev., the day before the election. We volunteers had lists of people who were probable Obama supporters, but many of whom wavered back and forth between him and McCain. If the person at the door said he or she was voting for McCain, I wished their candidate luck and moved on. We were getting supporters out to vote, not trying to convince McCain voters to change their minds.

I probably looked pretty disheveled and blown out from the heat when, shortly after noon, I knocked on the door of Building 12. A gray-haired Caucasian 60-something woman in a faded house coat opened the door; an African-American boy around 10 clinging to her side.

"I just decided last night to vote for McCain," she said, but she didn't close the door. I was about to wish her candidate "good luck" when she added, "my son keeps trying to talk me into voting for Obama but he scares me." She didn't appear to be asking me to go away.

"Are you worried about national security?" I asked, as the kid drifted back to the television set in the darkened living room.

"No, no," she laughed, "I just think he must hate America. I'm concerned about health care and education - you know - I was a foster child from the time I was 2 years old - but that Michelle, she seems like a radical to me."

"I'm concerned about health care myself," I replied, telling a story about one of my husband's former partners who, in the wake of his law firm's collapse, facing imminent surgery for a recently diagnosed cancer is suddenly without insurance coverage. With a pre-existing condition. "Just what Obama's mother had to worry about when she was dying of cancer," I said, "whether her health insurance would cover her medical bills because her carrier was claiming she had a pre-existing condition."

Sheila, that was her name, clucked her tongue, and talked again about what it was like growing up without parents.

"Barack had it slightly better than you," I acknowledged, "he had a mother."

"And grandparents," she quickly added. "That's a family. He had a family. It makes all the difference in the world."

We talked more about her childhood - her alcoholic mother and father; her father's refusal to identify her own grandparents for the foster parent agency under whose jurisdiction she spent her difficult childhood. I told her how my dad had left us when I was 9, but also how he'd gone from high-school drop-out to attorney and finally judge because that was the kind of opportunity America offered and continues to provide.

We'd nearly come to the end of our chat when Sheila asked me how I'd become a lawyer with just a single parent. "Grandparents," I'd responded, smiling, glancing in at her foster son, to whom she could only rightly be called a grandmother.

And why was I going door to door for Obama in this heat, she finally asked, leading me to tell the story of my own early grassroots activism; my service with Vista, the American Peace Corps, during the "second wave" women's movement in the early 1970s.

And then, for no reason I can put my finger on I added, "those experiences and 15 years of sobriety." She lit up then. "I'm a friend of Lois'" she allowed - the politely "anonymous" way to say she's a member of Alanon.

"Darn you!" she cried. "Now I'm going to change my mind again and vote for Obama. I can't wait to tell my son that someone finally convinced me."

Funny, but I wasn't really trying to convince her of anything. We were women talking over the fence after hanging our laundry or putting our kids to bed. We connected. We had personal history in common with each other and with candidate Obama. We had shared goals and dreams.

Here's the thing. You can't make this stuff up and you can't pursue this type of communication for the purpose of changing someone's mind. But if someone implicitly asks for your assistance in making an important decision, and if your goal is to help her make her decision instead of the decision you want her to make, you will, at a minimum, create common ground. And once you've done that, you can accomplish something constructive together, whether that accomplishment is what you had in mind in the first instance or not.

This is what living serenity means. You commit to your goal with all of your heart and passion but in doing so you give up achieving what you want in favor of helping others make the decision that is right for them.

This is what we mean when we pray: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

I don't know if Sheila voted for my candidate or not, and frankly I do not really care. I believe that each authentic human connection possesses the potential for the

transformation of all human experience and that transformation is beyond my ability to imagine.

This is what I learned and re-learned on the campaign trail. I'm hoping - and will work toward - an American future with even greater compassion, authenticity, hope and action than I have already been privileged to live.

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