

Humanizing "The Other"



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It was a Friday night in December 1983, on a dark street in the Madrid neighborhood where I lived while studying abroad for six months. My college roommate, Bob, and I were walking down the hill to meet our always-late friend, Chico, at his apartment building two blocks away. On the way, we passed a dozen teenagers hanging out on the sidewalk. Because it was the '80s, most of them sported punk-studded black leather jackets, Dr. Martens boots, and spiked, shaved, and neon hair.

At the time, the United States wasn't popular in Western Europe. That October, President Ronald Reagan had ordered a military invasion of the sleepy Caribbean island of Grenada. In November, NATO had openly simulated a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and installed nuclear cruise missiles in the United Kingdom. The Cold War was escalating, and Western Europe was ground zero. Every young Canadian, Australian, and Kiwi traveling in Europe sewed a large flag of their nation on their backpacks so nobody mistook them for Americans.

As Bob and I walked past the group, two of them muttered "Yanquis!", "F@#* you!", and other anti-American barbs. We stared straight ahead and kept walking.

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When we reached the locked entry to Chico's building, I pushed the intercom button. Just as Chico answered, I heard stampeding military boots and caught a blur of black leather racing toward us. I calmly told Chico of the invasion and asked him to buzz us into the vestibule. He laughed, not believing a word of what I said. I insisted. The buzzer unlocked the security door and I yanked a gawking Bob inside by his collar. Our new friends kicked open the door and flooded the small room. There was no escape. They shouted "Yanquis!" as I diplomatically tried calming the angry mob. The smallest guy grabbed Bob by the neck; the leader pulled a knife on me. I dropped to the floor, shielding my head with crossed arms, expecting to be stabbed. Kicks, punches, and mayhem erupted. A minute later, the room went dark when the timer controlling the entryway lighting expired. Our visitors panicked in the blackness and ran out.

Bob and I survived with a few bruises and a humble awakening to the fact that people you have never met can hate you simply because they see you as "the other." It is one of the most valuable lessons I ever learned.

That memorable lesson comes to mind as I think about the serious divide facing our nation today. Whether it's race, politics, religion, sexual orientation, or even which side of the Great Lakes State we live on, it seems people fixate only on how we are different from "the other" rather than how we are alike. Yes, these unique features give us character. But they are worth celebrating, and not worth cleaving one another from humanity. Before we are anything else, we are Americans sharing common values.

As attorneys, we are skilled in navigating the peaceful systems that our society brilliantly devised for dealing with when-push-comes-to-shove breakdowns in recognizing our common humanity. Doing our jobs as best as we can entails reversing "othering" myopia in interactions with clients, other

parties and their attorneys, judges, and juries. It means seeing the whole person and helping others see that as well.

We are fortunate that our legal work drives us beyond a closed, self-absorbed world. I really enjoy plaintiff work in Michigan because it requires regular contact and sharing ideas with very different people. I have to truly understand and help families from all walks of life, and they invite me into their private lives. I see how they live and how they brave hardship, and I hear their worries, joys, and dreams. And in the courtroom, I must communicate their stories to others so they connect.

The practice of law requires us to meet all kinds of people, go places we haven't gone before, and imagine walking in the shoes of others. To be effective, we have to carefully listen, learn, and feel other people's feelings. Doing so is good business, necessary for attracting and keeping clients and persuading opponents, juries, and judges. And I believe these are the fundamental skills our society needs right now to overcome the extreme divisions that plague us. Fortunately, the State Bar of Michigan always finds ways to help its members and offers excellent, free webinars for strengthening these vital skills—including the Critical Conversations series and the Race and Justice Forum.

My Spanish street tutors and I never got a chance for a real conversation. If we had, perhaps we might have bonded over the lyrics of a song by another raspy-voiced Michigander:

Until you've been beside a man
 You don't know what he wants
 You don't know if he cries at night
 You don't know if he don't
 Where nothing comes easy,
 old nightmares are real
 Until you've been beside a man
 You don't know how he feels

—Bob Seger, *Shame on the Moon*, 1982 ■