

Across the Kitchen Table

written by Marthe Reed | November 16, 2016



With gratitude to Laura Mullen, Metta Sáma, and Laura Vena for their conversations and encouragement

Country Girl: A Facebook Post

Shaken and shocked by the election of Donald Trump, I have swung through sorrow and anger, and back again. I know too well the folks who voted for Trump: I grew up among them in California's Central Valley and in rural eastern Oregon, child of a nurse and a farmer.

When my mother was a child, her family looked after a relative's rural property in lieu of rent, while her father worked for the WPA grading roads to support the family, ashamed of taking "charity." My grandfather would not let his girls play with the Japanese American or Mexican American girls their age. My mother and my aunts played with one another and one other white child, as my grandfather felt befit the children of a Mason and Daughter of the Eastern Star. Later, when my grandfather superintended a farm in the San Joaquin Delta, he and his Basque neighbor came to a swift agreement: there would be no courting between the Episcopalian daughters and Catholic sons, whatsoever.

My father grew up on an Arizona homestead, land depopulated of its original inhabitants, the Havasupai, Hopi, and Navajo peoples. Because his family depended on him to help work their farmstead, Dad only completed the 8th grade. Eventually his family fled to California in the wake of the Dust Bowl and worked their way to owning a small dairy where my father worked into his thirties next to my grandmother milking cows. My brother calls us "Okies," and perhaps we are. It's true that's where my paternal grandmother's kin lived, including her flamboyant bootlegger older brother, Uncle Al.

Whether I am an “Okie” or not, I grew up in rural central California among neighbors who were farmers also. Dairy farmers and rice farmers. Peach, apricot, walnut, and almond growers, who irrigated the parched valley land with subsidized, ludicrously cheap water, flooding the ground, letting the excess evaporate into the thirsty air. The rice growers and dairy farmers further benefitted from government price subsidies, keeping them in business as well as in swimming pools and color tvs. The rice fields were routinely airplane-sprayed, the planes belatedly cutting off the spray, letting toxic chemicals drift across their neighbors’ land. My dad pitched a fit at the air hanger after my mother suffered two miscarriages, and the overspray stopped. My “aunt” Nell railed and railed about immigrants ruining the country, as if she was not the descendant of German immigrants, nor her husband the son of Sicilians looking to start over after the war. Like the dairy farmers whose families had come from Holland and Portugal. Like my mother’s family who came from England and Ireland. These are my people.

The angry “monkey wrench into the works” vote is crushing, the racial, gender, ablest, and economic violence unconscionable and horrifying. Like so many, I want to make a change in the dire predicament we find ourselves in. But how? We are a profoundly narrow-minded, self-centered culture. We are less than 5% of the population. We use 25% of the resources. Getting woke means getting everyone woke, even the angry monkey wrench-hurlers who have been starved on lies – and want “theirs” “now”, no matter anyone else’s pain. We are all going to have to get there together, or we will all be left out to dry, hung on each other’s anger.

College is not for everyone but technical training can be. President Reagan broke the working class by destroying unions. We need unions. We need a minimum wage indexed to the cost of living. We need a new Civilian Conservation Corps—the national parks are falling apart and so are communities. We need Medicare expanded to cover everyone, mental health counseling included. We need *everyone’s* right to expression and self-determination protected, not least of all women’s right of make all their own healthcare decisions. We need a guaranteed living for those who cannot work. We need protection of *everyone’s* civil rights, including those who have been incarcerated. We need enforcement of the treaties the nation made with tribal communities. We need to pay reparations to those we have enslaved, dispossessed, and interned. We need to radically scale down our consumption in order to pull back from the abyss of climate change. We are MANY and when we are able to see our shared suffering, we can gather together for one another.

We must re-imagine our future: justice, compassion, inclusion, and a radical reduction in what “I” need along with a radical expansion of what “we” means. We will have to learn to listen to each other with empathy to forge a shared path out of this hellscape. Let’s talk, okay? I am ready to listen and I am ready to be heard.

Thinking It Through

I begin by thinking about the work done by political scientist Katherine J. Kramer for her book *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in*

Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker. In an interview in the Washington Post with Jeff Guo, Kramer asserts that “politics for people is not...about facts and policies. It’s so much about identities, people forming ideas about the kind of person they are and the kind of people others are. *Who am I for, and who am I against?*”^[1] Identities give us our tribe, the people who “get” us, know life as we have known it, share our values. Identities can also turn everyone else into suspicious characters. *Those people.* Us versus them. Othering inevitably gets tangled up with racial, ethnic, and religious stereotypes. *Those people don’t know how to work hard. Those people are getting more than their fair share. I am being cheated out of my fair share.*

Kramer’s research was conducted as fieldwork. She engaged in conversations with people in their communities, in their kitchens, in their cafes. In her interview with Guo, she describes her experiences.

So what happened to me is that, within three minutes, people knew I was a professor at UW-Madison, and they gave me an earful about the many ways in which that riled them up – and then we kept talking.

And then I would go back for a second visit, a third visit, a fourth, fifth and sixth. And we liked each other. Even at the end of my first visit, they would say, “You know, you’re the first professor from Madison I’ve ever met, and you’re actually kind of normal.” And we’d laugh. We got to know each other as human beings.

That’s partly about listening, and that’s partly about spending time with people from a different walk of life, from a different perspective. There’s nothing like it. You can’t achieve it through online communication. You can’t achieve it through having good intentions. It’s the act of being with other people that establishes the sense we actually are all in this together. ([Guo, Kramer](#))

Reaching Across the Divide

The presidential vote was divided nearly in half in raw numbers, those who chose to vote pretty equally divided. The power of conversation, of meeting the *other* and seeking to hear one another out seems a potent means of undoing the power of identity, at least in such tribal terms, and forging a shared identity in progressive politics. The people left behind by union busting, displacement of industry, and the evolving information and tech economy feel they have been left out in the cold in terms of power, money and respect: they feel the rules are made to benefit others; insufficient resources are targeted at their communities; they are considered ignorant and racist (Guo, Kramer).

That the rules are made to benefit the powerful, that ordinary people have little power in Washington to sway policy, and that our experience is discredited are circumstances all too familiar to a great many of us in the progressive movement, experiences with which we can widely and readily identify. These experiences also make us natural allies with many of the people who angrily voted for Trump. That is, *if* we can find a way to overcome our ingrained antipathy toward one another.

What might evolve if we, those of us who feel able (speaking here to those least affected by the aftermath of this election, i.e. white people), reach out “across the aisle” for “kitchen table” conversations with a Trump supporter, dialogue in the mode of Kramer. A family member, a colleague or co-worker, a neighbor, a church (or other house of worship) member, a farmer brandishing a Trump sign at the farmers’ market, a regular at your coffee spot, the owner of a business you frequent. To listen. To be heard. To go into that encounter with the words of Dorothea Lang in mind: “The best way to go into an unknown territory is to go in ignorant, as ignorant as possible, with your mind wide open, as wide open as possible not having to meet anyone else’s requirements but your own.” ([Cited in Deborah Luster’s “In Remembrance of Those Who Have Gone”](#)) We might find enough shared values to embrace one another in collective resistance to the power of corporations, banks, and the richest among us whose interests have primacy among our elected officials.

What would I share? Country Girl, Part II

Growing up on a small farm, we all pitched in. My mom and dad bought 80 acres of land just as my mom became pregnant with me. Dad built the house and the dairy. While he milked cows and planted almond trees, my mom, a public health nurse, supported the family. My older brothers helped milk the cows before and after school. My sister and I fed the calves, mixing calf manna with water into nipple-buckets in the barn, then carried the buckets out to the calf paddock and hung them up on the stanchions for the calves to feed. I loved the feel of the powdered milk as I stirred it into the water with my hands, silky and warm on my skin. Everyone learned to buck hay, peel off flakes, feed the animals.

Once the almond trees started producing, my dad sold the cows, more than ready to stop waking at 3am for milking. In late summer, when the nuts were ripe, crews of migrant workers from Mexico knocked the young trees by hand with rubber-headed mallets. I recall seeing the ledger of their names on my mother’s desk, where she kept the farm and family books, wrote the checks. I carried the mystery of a man named Jesus with me for years, wondering at that small miracle. I was still quite young: questioning the nature of the world had not yet come to me. I wonder, now, how much those men earned. Where they slept and how well they were sheltered. How much of their salaries went to the man who hired them out to my father, to their living expenses. How often or if they saw their families. How ill they were made by the chemicals sprayed in the orchards and fields in which they worked.

There was not much in the way of extravagance in our family. My mom made all our clothes. She was also the 4-H sewing leader, and I learned to sew from her among neighbor kids. I made a yellow skirt and matching reversible vest

when I was 8 years old, not yet old enough to be in 4-H, stitching on my grandmother's treadle machine. I was very proud of that outfit. In fact, I wore it so often that the seams showed wear by the time the annual 4-H show came around; I earned a ribbon for it nevertheless.

When the almond trees were older, their roots deeply bedded in the earth, my father hired a mechanical knocker to bring down the ripe fruit. Then he swept the nuts into windrows for the pickup machine. After a day driving the sweep, he would come in thickly covered in dust and ring the ship's bell on the back porch. Broom in hand, it was my job to sweep him down, head, back, chest, arms, then his legs, so he could come inside and clean up. Once most of the nuts were pulled into windrows, my sisters, mother, and I, along with my father and grandmother, raked out the nuts that fell too close to the trunks, tidied up the ends of the windrows where the nuts were buried in the powdery loam. Hot, dusty work in late August and September in the San Joaquin Valley, but there was no slacking off, for any of us. There would be hell to pay in welts and tears if we did. Even when we were very young, dad had no patience for kids goofing off when there was work to be done.

Dad worked long, hard days all through the harvest, and after, into the fall pruning the trees and burning the brush. In springtime and into summer, he brought in bees to pollinate the trees, mowed and sprayed the orchard, irrigated and then drained the low-lying land, watching over the flood in rubber boots and shovel in hand. Only winter was quiet for him, though repairing the machinery kept him busy then, too.

My mom, even after she stopped working as a public health nurse and later as a teacher, was deeply committed to our community. She offered free parenting and nutrition classes in the schools, volunteered at the foodbank and at the polls during elections, worried all the time about those in need, who might need help. She had five children, yet after the birth of each she gave away all the layette once outgrown to someone in need; each new child, a new layette gathered and given on. Her commitment to helping others never ceased, and from her we learned that looking after others was fundamental to who we are.

When I was in junior high, my best friend Marcia Robinson was the only black child in our school. One day my sixth grade teacher took my mother aside and told her what a kind, good girl I was to play with Marcia. Another day, out of the blue, my dad asked, "How's your 'chocolate chip' friend?" I did not know how to reply to either, how to make sense of their cutting words, the idea that somehow love was undue kindness. Marcia was my best friend – we did everything together. We memorized the words to Carly Simon's "You're So Vain", singing along to the radio. When her German Shepherd whelped we played with the wriggling, fluffy pups and tried to talk our parents into letting us each keep one. We talked about boys, boyfriends, and wondered about love. We read books and wondered what was to come. I was stunned into silence by my teacher and my father. What did they mean? She was my best friend in all the world and I was grateful to her, to be so loved. My dad never spoke those words again, my shocked expression and hurt enough to make him ashamed, I think. I never talked about my friend to my teacher.

By the time I was in high school, the little nearby town, Riverbank, had come to have a large Hispanic population. Driving in that direction one day, I spotted, off to the side, a handmade sign with the word "Mexico" and an arrow pointing toward the town. By this time, I had come into a fuller understanding of my community, the privileges some enjoyed, bigotry never quite under the surface. Living in a small, rural community, in many ways isolated from the changes happening in our country in the 1960's and 1970's, understanding the problem of racial bias and its consequences entered our home via the television, carrying news of the Civil Rights Movement, along with the Vietnam War, the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, of the women's movement, and Watergate. That the powerful and privileged did not mind to cause suffering to others was familiar enough. I was not shocked by the racist sign beside the road. I was used to betrayal. I was fed up.

When I left Escalon to go to college in San Diego, I knew something of how lives were constrained and harmed by the ideas and actions of others, though I had felt experience of the violence a daily assault on one's sense of self, nor how cruel the lives of people who are not white like me could be. Though my awareness was growing. Not because I was a young activist, mind you, but because I myself began to experience something similar. Men increasingly felt free to comment on my appearance, shout sexual come-ons at me, or touch me furtively in public, in passing. As if I would not notice or care, or rather, as if it could not possibly matter if I did care. I was not the same as them. They were more. I was less. When I interviewed for a job as an undergraduate, the prospective employer, a friend of a friend, insisted I come to his house. In his living room, he lounged on a large bed-like sofa commenting on my clothing, encouraging me to sit beside him. A visiting writer thought I was ripe for the picking, an evening's entertainment, post-reading. Is that not what coeds are for? A library donor insisted on "friendly" "welcoming" hugs when I had to meet him at his home to consult on the materials I was archiving. The list might go on and on. Later on, in graduate school, my brother-in-law warned me that I shouldn't marry my "Jew" boyfriend.

I learned in other ways, too, often through conversations with friends kind enough to share their lives with me. The world far larger, more complex, more troubling—and more marvelous—than I had ever guessed growing up in my hometown.

What do I know? I am still learning. From conversations with my students when we talk about Garnette Cadogan's "Walking While Black" or Simon Ortiz's "That Indian Sure Came in Handy", from conversations with writers, friends and colleagues, from reading widely, and from the often ugly character of public discourse. Donald Trump's vilification of Muslims, Mexicans, veterans, immigrants, and women viscerally hurt and angered so many of us, recalled old injuries with fresh sorrow and urgency. Making our neighbors and fellow citizens fear one another goes against everything I learned from my mother about community and compassion, about our obligations to love and shelter one another, about the virtue of humility. It goes against our nation's commitment to justice, equality, and freedom for all. What does it mean about us to say "we" will only shelter "our"selves?

All that might be more than enough for several conversations, I'd guess. Perhaps another time we might chat about our kids or grandkids. How funny and smart they are, how much we love them. About my marvelous son, turning 26 with three pre-existing conditions and about to age out of our insurance cover. About my lovely daughter, just finding her feet as she navigates independence as a young trans woman. How much we all just want our kids to be safe and loved and healthy. How much they mean to us.

How To Talk With One Another

Such interactions cannot help but be delicate matters, a thicket of feelings on either side of the kitchen table. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a [helpful series of steps for conflict resolution](#), which I think offer useful insights for how to proceed. Choose a safe space to meet where both of you can feel comfortable. Listen first to what your conversant is feeling. Respond reflectively. Use I-messages to communicate your own understandings and experiences. Be aware of your own perceptual filters, biases, and triggers. Share without judgment or anger what you have felt and known in this election season. Let Dorothea Lang guide you: "go in...with your mind wide open, as wide open as possible not having to meet anyone else's requirements but your own."

Keeping Faith

Howard Zinn, in his 2004 essay "The Optimism of Uncertainty," offers a model affirming how small changes enacted many times by a great many can change the world.

Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society. We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world. Even when we don't "win," there is fun and fulfillment in the fact that we have been involved, with other good people, in something worthwhile. We need hope.

An optimist isn't necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite

succession of presents, and to live now as we think humans should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is a marvelous victory. [\(source\)](#)

I believe shared values and common experiences can be found, that real change and a renewal of community and mutual esteem can unfold through the power of empathy and exchange. Let's get to know one another, as human beings, face to face. I will let you know how it goes. Let me know, too?