

PUBLICATION

Facing Political Unrest, While Keeping Inner Peace

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I almost never discuss politics, except with my children, because it is my job to help them navigate difficult issues and decide on their belief systems. I do share my thoughts with people who ask because they are interested in my opinion.

A friend reached out to me this week and asked, "How do we stay informed, passionate and proactive without feeling depressed?" She asked for my help, so I decided to address her question. During this unrest, I have felt appalled but impassioned, marginalized but empowered, small but impactful, and questioning but peaceful.

Each of our perspectives is grounded in our life experiences. I was raised by Republicans in the Deep South; there has never been a Democrat in my family. I married a Democrat; there has never been a Republican in his family. I've spent my career practicing law at Baker Donelson, one of the largest and best law firms in the Southeast.

Our founders are [Senator Howard Baker](#), a lifelong Republican, and Lewie Donelson, who comes from a long line of famous Democrats, but switched political parties. In this fairly conservative environment, I am chair of the Women's Initiative. We have the best Women's Initiative in the country because of the nearly 300 women attorneys and public policy advisors who make up Baker Donelson and the hundreds of men who support them. We understand that advancing all lawyers is good for the whole and good for our clients. So, it is my job to lead our Firm in advancing women both in our Firm and in our communities, and I love that job.

My first year of practice, I listened to Senator Baker deliver an impassioned speech defending his representation of tobacco companies and their right to a legal defense. And I believed, not in the benefits of tobacco companies to society, but in their rights under our legal system. He didn't tell me how to think; he told me how he made his decisions, and I learned.

A few years later I attended a talk given by Mr. Donelson where he described that, although he is a direct descendant of President Andrew Jackson, he became the father of the Republican Party in Tennessee. Well into adulthood, he listened, he learned, he was pliable and he realized that although he is socially liberal, he is fiscally conservative. So, he often voted against party lines. I am proud to work for the Firm that these two men founded.

My hope is that nothing in this article suggests whether I followed the political and social leanings of my family like Senator Baker, or whether I decided to forge a different path, like Mr. Donelson. Among many traits they share is that those with different politics and different belief systems respect them, because they spent their lives respectfully listening to those who believe differently. Sometimes they allowed themselves to be persuaded to think about things differently. And, other times, the listening and questioning solidified their existing set of values and beliefs. They saved the speaking firmly and directly until after the hard work of listening was done.

As I write this, our country is experiencing the greatest level of political unrest I have seen in my lifetime. Much of it is centered on issues disparately affecting women, something I spend a lot of time thinking about. And

there is much about this that can bring us inner unrest and can divide us from those we love, and those we don't even know. Inner peace and outward passion are not mutually exclusive. Following are a few things I have done to face political unrest, while keeping inner peace.

Respect Another's Passion, Even If You Don't Agree With Her

I've not marched or made a sign. But I've watched with admiration as others have, from both sides of the aisle. And I have listened to what they have to say. I've agreed with some and disagreed with others. Sometimes I've been moved to reconsider my thoughts on an issue.

But mostly, I have been moved by the passion. Apathy is our enemy, not the exchange of ideas. But that doesn't mean just my ideas. Imagine if we each committed to respect and be moved by each other's passion in voicing ideas that are very different from our own. Yes, I understand that on occasion we believe that the other's ideas are hurtful or ignorant and we must stand up for what we believe is right and wrong.

But therein lies the heart of the matter: most people are not passionate about things they don't believe in. It's all based on our life experiences. We can respect the passion, even if we don't agree with the idea.

Value Dialogue and Listen More Than You Speak

Great leaders learn new things and are open to improving throughout their entire lives. We don't learn new things while we are talking, especially not when we are shouting.

We learn new things when we are listening. There is a time for speaking and even a time for shouting. But consider that countless hours of listening and learning are required before that speaking and shouting really means something important. Protests only make a difference if someone is willing to listen. Let the listening begin with me.

Be Pliable

My value systems continue to evolve. I find it much easier to declare my conclusions on a subject and shout about them than to consider that my conclusions may need to be questioned. Asking questions about our fundamental beliefs is scary. Admitting we could learn something from someone we don't particularly like is hard.

And answers to difficult questions are seldom black and white. The older I get, the crisper my vision becomes at seeing shades of gray. Finding that sweet spot where self-preservation meets love and compassion isn't easy. Don't get me wrong, there are issues I still see as black and white, right and wrong. But I want my beliefs to be so well thought-out and reasoned that I'm not afraid to question them based on impassioned pleas by others.

Look Away When You Need to Look Away

When I drive by an accident on the side of the road, staring at the bloody body being lifted into the ambulance does not help that person heal. Certainly if you arrive before the professionals, help if you can help. I've twice been the first person to arrive at the scene of a fatal accident and stayed with the person while they were dying. But absent the need for my help at that moment, looking straight ahead at the road and saying a prayer helps the victim and the other drivers around me.

It is important to understand the plight of others when understanding it will allow us to lend a helping hand. So, read the paper and talk with those you respect to understand the issues facing our world. But watching the ranting on social media of those who "speak" from behind a screen far more than they listen is like staring at a victim on the side of the road when there is no help you can give.

Important issues are worth discussing in person. I appreciate the large platform that social media can provide. However, if I am not logging onto the virtual discussion to understand someone else's point of view in a more meaningful way and to be respectful and unifying in expressing my own, perhaps I shouldn't log on to the discussion at all. I've felt inspired by well-articulated information shared in a respectful way on social media. But I've never changed my opinion on an important social issue after reading a 140-character Tweet or a Facebook post. So, I most often look away.

Figure Out What Grounds You and Go There

I was raised with a big faith that God is ever present. I have spent years cultivating that faith. Layers of strength are usually added in hard times, not easy ones. We nurture that faith in good times so that when times are tough, the foundation is there to lean on. That faith threads its way throughout my beliefs on lots of subjects.

One of those beliefs is that we are small, time passes quickly, and that God and eternity are infinite. In other words, God has got this and if I spend enough time being quiet and listening, I will know how to make a difference for those who need love in this world. I am not in control of this – what a relief. Just wait quietly and when it comes to you how to make a difference, do it. Unrest for me can come from either the not listening or the not doing.

To make a difference, both are required. I am also grounded by the principles that our country was founded upon and that have seen us through other hard times. Our country has faced the unthinkable together many times and we always get through to the other side, even when getting there hurts. I respect that for others it may be something different that grounds you; turn to that.

Determine How You Can Make an Impact, and Then Give Everything You Have to Those in Your Sphere of Influence

Part of determining how you can make a measurable impact is letting go of some things you cannot change right now. The parts of the current dialogue that marginalize women have been where I feel I can have the most immediate impact for good. My role as chair of the Women's Initiative gives me a jump-start.

In that role, I have the pleasure of helping women who need a hand up in their careers. It's amazing how satisfying that can be, helping one woman at a time who is navigating issues of advancing in a profession marked by low percentages of women at the highest levels of partnership and leadership.

Conversely, I also want to help girls who are just forming their belief systems and their own sense of self-worth. So, I coach an all girls' high school mock trial team. The girls I coach are teenagers. We spend some time working on evidentiary objections, opening statements and understanding the law. We spend more time learning to listen to each other, what it means to be a team and to look out for each other, to square our shoulders and look the person we are speaking to directly in the eye, to project our voices so we can be heard, and to stand and speak respectfully any time we address the court or opposing counsel, because respect for our adversary and our judiciary is critical. Right now helping girls I coach and women I work with brings me inner peace.

I'm going to continue to try to find ways that I can make a positive difference in these difficult times. That brings inner peace, not to be mistaken for apathy.

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