

THE THIN GREEN LINE

One of the enjoyable parts of my duties as a USU agricultural Extension agent is attendance at and participation in a multitude of committee meetings. To some that declaration may sound strange, but it's true. One can get a valuable education by carefully listening to dialog in such settings. Often the exchange is a bit heated as there are usually differences of opinion. I have deep respect for those who can diplomatically state their opinions and disagree without being disagreeable. It's a skill I'm still attempting to master.

As a society, we seem to be having increasing difficulty getting people to be actively involved with civic and professional duties. It seems most of us are about as busy as we want to be, and in many cases we're convinced we can't make a difference anyway. If we are not careful, apathy and indifference can easily override enthusiasm and optimism. It is easy to stand on the sidelines and cast stones at those who are attempting to make a difference.

I watched with interest last fall as some municipalities struggled to get sufficient candidates for political offices. In some cases there were not enough candidates to warrant a primary election and it was not uncommon to have only one candidate on the final ballot. I can understand why people resist involvement in civic and professional duties. We are rather hard on our elected officials.

I remember years ago driving home late one evening from a planning and zoning meeting with an older man of unusual wisdom. The topics at the meeting had been significant, but attendance was rather modest. As we drove this mentor reminded me that a small percentage of our population make the decisions for the majority. He suggested that all one has to do to make a difference is to attend meetings and simply listen. If one will merely do that it will not be long before decision makers will be asking your opinion. Then, in almost no time at all, you will be sitting in one of the big chairs making the decisions yourself. Democracy favors those who actively participate.

In my files I have a copy of an article written by John Phipps, who farms near Chrisman, Illinois. Phipps observed that as he attended different farm organization meetings he repeatedly saw the same familiar faces again and again. By doing some unscientific research he estimated that only about three percent of all farmers were actively involved in agricultural organizations. First, he concluded that farmers don't join farm groups readily and when they do many are content to simply be a card-carrying member. Fortunately, there are always a few who get involved and provide valuable leadership for the rest of us. By simply attending they represent all of us. Accordingly, disproportionate power is available to this "Thin Green Line" of participants. Phipps concluded his column by writing; "Such representation-by-dereliction, regardless of the results, is a wholesale abandonment of professional accountability and self-responsibility." What is his point? Decisions are made by those who show up.

I was intrigued by a recent editorial in the Deseret News. The editorial identified four key trends that would shape 2016. One of those developments was an ominous trend toward narrow-minded-extremism. "In a world overflowing with easy access to information, there is a natural

human tendency to consume information that confirms one's personal biases. This tendency has the potential to produce an increasingly narrow-minded and extreme citizenry...The antidote for this troubling trend requires that people be willing to consider ideas that conflict with their preconceived personal biases. This requires both the skills and the confidence of critical thinking--a skill that unfortunately seems to be in decline."

Perhaps this column is inspired by my duties as a member of nominating committees for various agricultural organizations. As our respective committees consider potential candidates I am reminded again that busy people always seem to stay busy. It is easy for many to say they just don't have the time or the interest, but the price of non-involvement is costly. Enlightened thinking comes from listening to good thinkers. Philosophies are created, priorities are established, and important decisions are made through the unique, time consuming, often frustrating process of committee meetings. Decisions are always made by those who show up.

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1/5/2016