

August 2022

Greetings Beloved Tacoma Pierce County Community,

Life lessons come in many forms and may be interpreted in various ways. We live in a world where everything is available every day to those with resources in our globally connected consumer society. In this letter, I recount two unique life lessons, one involving driving subtitled, the consequences of regenerative braking, and a friend's opinion on proper ways to fold towels as a way of highlighting the conundrum our communities face.

Some lessons are only meaningful when we have appropriate previous life experience and awareness necessary to support healthy curiosity. This statement assumes that some wisdom is gained in a linear fashion, much in the way we develop where crawling precedes walking and walking precedes running. Such linear thinking skills allow us to do everything from planting crops in the spring, perform the myriad of tasks necessary in the summer, before harvesting in the fall. One of the downsides of linear thinking is that not all participants are sufficiently informed or prepared at any given point in time to benefit from the wisdom of a particular lesson. We can all be distracted and miss a preceding detail rendering the next logical point confusing or otherwise misinterpret the lesson all together. For convenience, I will say that we only know what we know at any given point in time, and we invariably interpret our world through our partially informed uniquely crafted lens. My lesson snippets follow.

As was customary when I attended high school, I participated in the school sponsored driver's education program. Because of that well-rehearsed finely tuned incremental instruction, I learned to maintain a spatial cushion between my car and the others on the road. I internalized the need to inform other drivers of my intentions by religious use of my turn signals. My safety informed point of view made it hard for me to understand drivers that follow too closely or fail to use turn signals. With decades of safe driving experience I remain confident of my well-honed driving skills. That is, until one Sunday in 2021 early in the Covid-19 pandemic. A young man motioned for me to lower my passenger window. When I did he shouted, "don't you know how to drive?". At that moment, I thought, had my many years of safe driving been an well-rehearsed illusion? From his perspective, I was doing something that made him uncomfortable sharing the road with me.

In another life lesson experience, I was helping a college friend fold towels as we were engaged in conversation when she snapped, "That's not how you fold towels!" Her statement startled me. Had I missed the class on towel folding? Apparently, in her parent's household, there was only one specific way to fold towels.

It occurred to me that these particular life lessons serve as a metaphor for how we react when we encounter unexpected behaviors of others. Such interactions reveal conflicting values and practices that we tend to judge harshly. We often react with binary reasoning rather than taking into account the fact that each of us has been uniquely raised, educated, and socialized to think and act in unique ways. We rely on our well-rehearsed world view to resolve

contradictions. In so doing, we often find ourselves repeating what we have been told. Thus, the way we see the world is by definition, right, and all other ways of seeing and doing things are wrong. This pattern of thinking infrequently makes allowances for variations of behavior reflecting unique socialization and experience. So we rely on what we know and understand, which is partially informed at best, to define our point of view. Since we only know what we know, we are completely unaware of how we are judging each other with unspoken expectations, of which others are completely unaware.

Both lessons reinforce how we are all uniquely socialized to expect things to be done a particular way. Since we all come from different household experiences with unique interpretations of family, culture, social and faith values, it is apparent, misunderstanding, disagreement and often conflict will occur. This is also true for people from the same household, social, ethnic, or religious group. Individual perceptions and experience vary causing differences in world view.

In essence, we each have unique sets of experiences and learned expectations that determine how we rate each other's actions. We end up performing blind evaluations. I'm going to rate you on my secret scale that you have no idea exists. e.g. (No stars out of 5 for you, but this one gets a 5 out of 5.) Given our multicultural, multiethnic and variety of belief systems, the complexity of engaging with others, especially after an extended period of isolation, is challenging to say the least. The environment I have described raises particular questions related to my life lesson examples above: Is there only one safe way to drive? And is there only one specific way to fold towels? If not, and I presume that you agree with me, how do we develop an incremental way of reengaging with the rest of our delightfully different neighbors? I believe that people of good will can discover and apply the necessary incremental steps that represent; crawling, walking and eventually go beyond running. Such efforts will more completely comprise what I have been speaking of these past few months as we intentionally move toward a more beloved community. Make no mistake, what I have outlined is challenging. It is my opinion that this is the challenge of our generation. However, nothing that last is easy and we as a people thrive on challenges.

Speaking of challenges, an update on my EV the driving experience. Each time I drove that same street I would reflect on what happened that day to cause such a visceral response from a fellow driver. In a moment of insight, I remembered that my Tesla, has regenerative braking. Which means any time one removes their foot from the accelerator the car slows while generating electricity and automatically activating the brake lights. I suspect from the perspective of someone following me when I remove my foot from the accelerator to observe the speed limit would appear to have an unhealthy relationship to the brake pedal. So if that young man is reading this, your point was well taken and I am a better EV driver for your feedback.

I propose we spend some time decoding the inevitable misunderstandings rather than assigning blame as a self-appointed judge of driving, towel folding or whatever we discover something that does not meet our expectations, perhaps changing our mindset to one of gratitude for a community filled with awesome diversity of thought, ideas, and opinion. Therefore, when we discover that there is an unfilled need in our community, we are given the opportunity to use our nearly limitless creative ability to intentionally and incrementally take steps to build or repair the interpersonal connections which form the foundations of our beloved community.

On July 30, 2022, I participated with the Tacoma Ministerial Alliance on the steps of the Capitol in Olympia as we celebrated the conclusion of the first annual Love Thy Neighbor Month. My modest contribution to that important milestone was a brief discussion of patience and kindness, two of the characteristics of love expressed in the New International version of the Bible 1 Corinthians 13. I told the audience about my discovery while studying “the Love chapter”. My conclusion, each of the love actions has four perspectives or dimensions; self, loved ones, strangers, and your God. The question I posed was, is it possible to be patient if we only practice patience in some but not all four dimensions? If I say I am patient but only with loved ones, am I truly patient? I offer a thought exercise, imagine a community where patience is practiced in all four dimensions for a month. What would be different if, say, 20% of community members engaged with each other with intentional patience? In the next incremental step, the next month, add intentionally practicing kindness in all four dimensions. I don't know, but I suspect, such actions could have positive health effects. Is it possible such incremental steps could start the restoration of what supports a beloved community? The challenge, if we choose to accept it, is ours.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Johnson
Tacoma Branch NAACP
President