

Closing the cultural divide

I lived most of my adult life, and raised my family, in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Sometimes this Jewish Pacific islander feels like an exotic bird that fell out of the sky and landed in Howard Lake. I don't meet too many people like me out here. To say that that is a great cultural divide for me personally, is an understatement.

Don't get me wrong, folks. I love the people who live here, particularly those I have met who run local businesses.

I believe in patronizing local businesses, so I'm pleased to know, hairdresser Stephanie (I miss her pink hair), John the pharmacist, Jennifer & Craig from Phenomenal Rehabilitation, Steve the physician, Jenell who owns Posey Patch Flowers (my favorite flower/novelty shop), Merle from Cattail Corner, Joe's Sports Shop and his kids running the hardware store behind the gas station.

By the way, for a tiny hardware store, there has never been a time I needed something that he didn't have it which is kind of incredible.

Anyway, nearly all have been negatively impacted by the loss of the grocery store whose livelihood depended on "foot traffic." But who amongst the 'powers that be' understands or worries about that?

Getting back to the cultural divide, I've discovered that God has a wonderful sense of humor because right next door to our home in our Green Estates cul-de-sac lives an entire nuclear Afghani family who arrived in Howard Lake about 8 years ago.

Many people in Howard Lake, I'm sure, have seen the two grandmothers taking their mid-evening walk around the lake wearing long sheaths of colored muted shades of cotton called the chadri, with head covering.

Samad, the paterfamilias, whose

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father died in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, was in college studying to be a teacher. In the midst of the chaos, however, it became dangerous for college students like Samad to remain in Afghanistan because the intelligentsia had either "disappeared" or they left town.

A culture of "informers" was fomented to include the children of families, which either got those informed on arrested, tortured or shot.

One day he went to his classes with his best friend; the next day his friend was never seen or heard of again.

Samad knew he was next, so he and his family escaped through Pakistan and legally immigrated to the United States. Now he and his wife's entire family live with him on a car mechanic's income right here in Howard Lake.

"Why a mechanic?" I asked him. "What happened to your dream of becoming a teacher?" Samad replied that at his age learning to speak English and resume his passion to teach and attend college without a penny to his name was nearly impossible.

However, getting into a trade school as an immigrant in Minnesota presented less challenges and quicker returns economically.

He subsequently achieved both: becoming a mechanic and learning to speak English, fluently I might add.

With an invitation for dinner at his home, my husband and I learned a lot about cultural divides.

Feasting on several Afghani entrees, splayed on exquisitely ornate dishes fit for a sultan, we learned about

an Afghanistan that had a highly developed culture of artists, poets, engineers, teachers, doctors, vibrant colleges and universities, and streets with shops and boutiques that rivaled the streets of Europe. "Remember Beirut, the Paris of Lebanon?" he said, "That was Kabul."

After the Taliban and continuing to this day, Kabul and towns like it are strewn with garbage, broken sewage, and the debris of unending war.

Since 1975, Afghanistan has been turned into a country of ragged clothed beggars, orphans and widows. Nothing green grows. No trees, no gardens, nothing is left that gives a hint or glimmer of what was once a cultural paradise.

After our meal with Samad's family, we resolved to be brothers and sisters from now on.

We watch their house, they watch ours. Any emergency or crisis that arises, we will be there for each other.

What cultural divide is there between our Jewish family and their Muslim family? Not all that much. Yet here we are, making a wider circle of family in Howard Lake. What small graces God gives us.

I highly recommend reading "The Kite Runner," by Khaled Hosseini. It's out in paperback and it was on my "to read" list when it came out last year with several highly praised critical reviews about this first-run-out novel.

It's about Afghanistan and what happened to that country through the eyes of a young budding writer. If you read it, keep a box of tissues on standby. You won't make it through without it.

Now added to my wish list for Howard Lake is a bookshop/coffee house. That should shorten the cultural divide a bit don't you think, along with a grocery store?