

York Community Dialogue (April 2017): What Divides Us? What Unites Us?

Introduction

On Saturday April 8, 2017, the York Community Dialogue joined forces with the York Diversity Forum to host a public discussion of two questions: 1) What Divides Us? And 2) What Unites Us? Approximately sixty people attended the forum which was organized in the same manner as previous dialogues that have been held in York since 2010. The purpose of the YCD was noted: it is an organization that creates a neutral space for civil discourse about topics important to the people of York. The rules for conducting the dialogues were noted as well.

Attendees were assigned to one of seven round tables where facilitators and a note-takers were appointed. Assigning people to tables generally meant that they were not sitting with the same people they had come with. We were looking for heterogeneous mixes of people in hopes that differences of opinion would be more likely to surface. While there were differences of opinion, there was less variety than we had hoped for in demographic or political terms.

The program's organizers had made outreach to various groups in town in hopes of attracting a diverse crowd. A variety of people were in attendance, though the assembly was less diverse than we would have liked. There were women and men; residents of all parts of York (the harbor, the village, the beach and Cape Neddick); retirees and people in the workforce (albeit too few); people in their 30's, 40's and 50's with a majority over 65; various Christian and Jewish congregations were represented (but no Muslims or residents belonging to other religious traditions); the crowd appeared to be homogeneous in terms of race.

To begin the dialogue in groups, each participant was given an index card and asked to list 1, 2 or 3 things that answered each of the two questions posed at the outset. These short statements provided a take-off point for the discussions while at the same time giving us a lengthy list of ideas.

What Divides Us?

Organizers did not define the meaning of any of the words in the question so individuals at each table were free to define them for themselves. The index cards filled out for the first round of the dialogue reveal several themes: attitudes and values, demographic, environmental, experiential, political, social and socio-economic factors. A complete list of the responses is contained in Appendix 1.

As noted above, the charge was not defined, so when the moderator asked "What divides US?" the meaning of the word "US" was left to each table to determine. Some people approached this with an eye on the local community but most people attributed the divisions many experience today to derive from the national scene. The principal source of division was identified in different ways but the divisiveness of national politics was seen by many people as a crucial factor. Some spoke of political parties; some spoke of liberalism and conservatism; still others used the phrase preconceived ideas and the word ideology to identify issues that divide us.

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People lamented that differences in world views and disagreement about politics often led to labeling and to making enemies of those with whom we disagree or those who have different opinions from our own. The reliance on different news sources by people with different political persuasions was seen as a factor that aggravated and deepened differences.

Beyond the political dimension, people understood that social and demographic factors divide us. Race and racism was mentioned as a source of division in the nation. Here people began to remark about the role of fear in keeping people divided. Intolerance and the assumptions we make about people whom we consider “the other” were seen to build walls between people who we might find we share a great deal in common if we were able to meet and know them better. Immigration was noted by a few people in this context.

What Unites Us?

Following completion of the first round and a period of debriefing on the question of what divides us, the tables turned to the second question: what unites us? As with the first exercise, people in each group were asked to identify three ideas. A complete list of the responses is contained in Appendix 2. In contrast with the first round — people’s attention was focused largely on the local community rather than on the country or the wider world.

It should not be surprising that people love York. They love its natural environment, its history and its heritage. Geographical and historical aspects of the town unite us all. People love the small town feel of York and prize its beaches, coastline, rivers and mountain. The universal appreciation of the natural environment led some people to talk about climate change — belief in which, it should be noted, is a source of division.

It was also noted that our common humanity should unite us — across the community, across the state and the nation and across the globe. Several people commented on the world we are leaving to our children and grandchildren and how their quality of life depends on what we do today to the environment. A habitable earth and a safer and more livable world could be unifying goals for everyone.

At least one person noted that meetings such as the dialogue in which people were participating are sources of unification. This served to emphasize the importance of the community for all people. One person noted that there is a hunger for contact with people and that opportunities for creating community should be fostered. Grouped together in Appendix 2 as “institutional factors” (e.g., the library, schools and hospital) are a series of local institutions identified by participants in which a sense of community is created and preserved.

Possible Next Steps

After the second round of dialogue, the group was asked to reflect on where we go from here. A number of creative suggestions were brought forward.

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- **Build on existing regional and national efforts.** It was noted that a variety of organizations have developed mechanisms for creating dialogue: everyday-democracy.org and portsmouthlistens.org. One participant told the group about a project called indivisible.org which is archiving conversations between people who hold divergent views. This is modeled on the StoryCorps.org project in which people get to tell their story to an interviewer. It was suggested that this model could be adopted locally to help bridge the divide.
- **Providing support for refugee families** Clearly, many people felt the need to better understand the worlds in which others live. How do we achieve the required level of insight? A couple of people speculated about what would happen if York were to become the destination for Syrian immigrants. The idea struck some as worth pursuing. Could the churches cooperate in sponsoring refugee families? Or might a new organization spring up to create a welcome program for refugees?
- **The Arts.** The potential of the arts to stimulate interaction was suggested. One participant reported on a project she had heard about in which people cooperated to make art and through the medium develop one-on-one personal interactions.
- **Cross-community Partnerships.** Partnerships with minority communities also were suggested — either where members of the majority community can meet minority members of our own community or where people from York can reach out to Portland neighborhoods (going there or inviting minority group members to come here). The idea of traveling to meet “the other” struck some people as naive. It was noted that there is more diversity here in York than most people realize. Some people thought we should come to understand ourselves better before we look outside of our own community. The idea of having a community Bar-B-Que appealed to several people.
- **The YDF Seasonal Worker Program.** The success of the York Diversity Forum’s Seasonal Worker Program was cited as a successful program that brings together international seasonal workers and local community members. A sign-up sheet was circulated so that individuals interested in this kind of international outreach could get involved. It was noted that there are local businesses operated by people who have emigrated — sometimes as students — and these folks might be encouraged to get involved.
- **School-based projects.** One participant reported on an interview in which she was matched with someone who holds different views. The interview was conducted by a 7th grade student who asked the same question of both subjects. The idea of involving York Middle School students struck some people as doable and worthwhile.
- **Simulation.** Another participant recommended that we conduct a simulation exercise based on contemporary immigration policies. Someone else spoke about how a class at one of the elementary schools engaged in a role-play exercise involving the immigration experience. It was noted that there are well established diversity exercises that could be adapted for the community.

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Conclusion

Follow-through is a key to any dialogue having an impact. One participant noted that the YCD files written reports with various Town agencies and individuals but this should not be the end of it.

In fact, of course, a variety of initiatives have become policy in York because of ideas surfaced at the dialogues. The entire sustainability section of the Town's Comprehensive Plan was written in response to a discussion at the first dialogue (2010). This expansion of the Comp Plan resulted in the establishment of the Town's Energy Steering Committee which has many accomplishments including most recently the installation of LED streetlights soon to be installed in the village, saving the Town an estimated \$60,000 per year.

Also in 2010 ideas for improving bike and pedestrian safety as well as revitalizing York Village were discussed at the June dialogue. Each of these themes was picked up by the Board of Selectmen, leading to formal committees that continue to make notable progress on these issues today.

Other ideas from various dialogues have resulted in other new sections of the Town's Comprehensive Plan (e.g., addressing disability access). The idea for a multi-generational community center was suggested at the 2014 dialogue. Subsequently, the BOS created a Community Center Needs Assessment Committee which is expected to finalize its report by the end of the year.¹

The ideas at this April 2017 dialogue were more philosophical than has frequently been the case but the possibility for action taking place is no less desirable. The York Diversity Forum has shown great initiative in bring issues of diversity to the community. It would be welcome if some of the ideas addressed in the preceding section ("Possible Next Steps") could result in actual programs to address the "fear of the other" that so often affects the community and the nation.

Report Submitted by The Steering Committee of the York Community Dialogue:
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List of Those Receiving This Report

Members of the York Community Dialogue
Board of Selectmen
Office of the Town Manager
York Community Service Association
Pastors of York's Churches

¹ *The Community Center Needs Assessment Committee will be hosting a public listening session on June 7 @ 7:00 p.m. in the York Middle School Cafeteria. All members of the public are invited to participate.*

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Appendix 1: Responses to What Divides Us?

Attitudes and Values

- Anger
- Arrogance
- Assumptions about “the other”
- Bias and racism (white privilege)
- Different world views
- Either/Or thinking (binary thinking)
- Fear
- Guns and gun control (2nd Amendment)
- Health care: right or commodity?
- Ideas about Freedom and the First Amendment
- Immigration
- Impatience
- Intolerance
- Labeling people: conservative or liberal
- Respect
- Role of government
- Powerlessness
- Priorities
- Stereotyping

Demographic Factors

- Age
- Educational attainment
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Race
- Religion (also church and unchurch)
- Sexual orientation

Environmental Factors

- Borders, fences, walls
- Commuting patterns
- East and West of I-95
- Global warming / Climate change
- Nature
- Neighborhoods: the Village, the Harbor, the Beach and Cape Neddick

Experiential Factors

- Belief systems
- From Here or From Away
- Incarceration
- Interests
- Lack of understanding about different cultures and religions
- Locals and tourists
- Mobility

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Our history of slavery

Political Factors

Conservatism vs. Liberalism

Different news sources

Ideology: conservative and liberal labels

Making enemies of those who disagree

National politics (polarization)

Opinions

Political parties (and the emotional investment people make in them)

Preconceived ideas

Values

Social Factors

Anonymous messaging

Alternative facts

Associations

Community

Decline of newspapers

Judgments about right and wrong

Lack of common, global vision

Leadership and governance

School budgets (and who supports them)

Socio-Economic Factors

Entitlement programs

Food security/insecurity

Health insurance (those with and those without)

Inequality

Resources/income

Socio-economic status (social class)

Taxation (who pays for what)

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Appendix 2: Responses to What Unites Us?

Attitudes and Values

Acceptance of others / Judging people for who they are
Accepting our interdependence and connection
Change (governance)
Communication
Community (longing for, love of and pride in)
Compassion (empathy)
Curiosity about the world
Desire to be happy and safe
Equality, justice and a better life for all
Fear and anxiety
Greater tolerance
Laughter
Listening
Love of country, national pride (Americanism)
Love of freedom
Loving kindness
Mastering our emotions
Open-mindedness / Belief in our ability to change
Optimism and wonder
Transparency
Vulnerabilities
Wanting the best for the town and the country
Wanting to do right

Demographic Factors

Aging
Diversities (acceptance)
Ethnicity
Family
Homogeneity
Physical similarities
Race
Religion / Common belief system

Environmental Factors

A habitable earth
A safer and more livable world
Appreciation of rivers, mountain, ocean, coastline
Earth
Improving what we have
Living in the same place
Local focus
Love of Place (New England)
Small town atmosphere

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Weather

Experiential Factors

Activism (common purpose)
Common culture
Common goals and objectives
Common life experiences
Crises
Education/learning
Friendships
Meetings like these (civil discourse)
Shared passions (interests, sports, hobbies, etc.)
Volunteering (being engaged)

Political Factors

Ideas and beliefs held in common
Liberal Politics
Party politics
Rule of law
Town politics
Trying to correct injustices

Social and Cultural Factors

Arts
Caring for “our own”
Causes
Common humanity
Common value system
Food and beverages
Heritage
Interaction
Music
Nation of immigrants
Survival
Tribalism / Belonging
U. S. as a world leader
Wanting our children to be happy and successful
Wanting the Town to prosper
York history

Socio-Economic Factors

Common need for food, safety, shelter, sanitation and employment
Education that broadens perspectives
Health care
Homogeneity

Institutional Factors

Hospital
Internet
Library (facilities, opportunities, programs, services)
Schools