

OPINION

Martin, we hardly knew ye

I tried to write about the Super Bowl: this annual tribute to belligerence and gluttony. But, no.

I tried to write about the value of eating meat, or eggs, amidst the boom in veganism. But, no.

It's been nearly a week since the holiday, but I have Martin on my mind. Martin Luther King Jr.

A recent survey said, for most, he is only known for that speech at the Lincoln Memorial. I grimace. Now, 90% of Americans celebrate you, but you are often seen as tame, when you were a revolutionary clothed in peace and eloquence.

What would you think, Dr. King? Were you slain for a speech?

At your death, a poll said 75% disapproved of you.

You upset people. Our history classes are often inadequate, skewed. In passing, I asked students what the Civil War was about. I marveled when students said, "Well, it had nothing to do with slavery." So, it is no surprise that people know little beyond your speech.

Your leadership led a bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., sparked by Rosa Parks. Eventually integration prevailed. You marched on Selma, with news cameras showing the brutality of police, with high pressure fire hoses pasting blacks to buildings or clinging to poles; German Shepherds bared their fangs at people who simply wanted to vote.

Didn't you meet with presidents to urge them to do what is right, with pressure on Kennedy and Johnson?

Didn't you fight for equality so that today, I don't have to be concerned about whether Spiffire Grill or Sickle's will let me eat? That I can travel, as I did years ago, to Vermont from Detroit and, tiring, check into a Best Western? You, Johnson and others produced these rights.

And you wrote five books, plus the essay "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," one of the best in American history, digging into the philosophical and religious underpinnings of the Civil Rights Movement, while you sat in jail for "parading without a permit." You wrote of being deeply troubled by white Christian moderates who, in most cases, refused to support you then and, in many cases, even now. Even up north, in Detroit, white churches dismissed racial concerns.

You were flawed. Your unfaithfulness cannot be rationalized, any more than your namesake Martin Luther's anti-Semitism in the 1500s. Tainted. But I am thankful for the good.

The struggle is not over, when we have incidents of whites harassing black and brown people barbecuing in a park, or entering their own homes. But your public dignity inspires; your "weapons" of peace and eloquence are models for addressing inequality, a growing wage disparity, and for supporting peace.

Watching a video of your speech did stir me. So, even though I was so hot and dehydrated last September, I strode up to the Lincoln Memorial to see the statue of one Civil War/Rights leader and to catch a whiff of another, you; not a tame, passive man, but, like Aslan of Narnia, a brave leader who was not "safe."

Interested in a broad range of issues, including social and faith issues, Brickner serves as a regular contributor to the Forum's opinion page. She is an English instructor.



JOAN BRICKNER

OUR VIEW

Why is it so hard for some officials to conduct public business in open meetings?

We're baffled over the repeated violations of open meetings law by local governments. This really isn't difficult. Here's the general rule: "North Dakota's laws state that all government records and meetings must be open to the public unless otherwise authorized by a specific law."

That guidance comes from the North Dakota Office of the Attorney General. Minnesota has similar laws.

We repeat: Public meetings and records are open unless specifically exempted by law.

We're offering this tutorial after the latest violation of open meetings laws by the board of the Fargo Park District, which has become a repeat offender in recent years.

The park board just finished a round of interviews involving five finalists for its executive director. The first four interviews were conducted behind closed doors, in flagrant violation of North Dakota open records laws.

The fifth interview, of Dave Leker, now serving as interim director, also would have been closed if The Forum hadn't objected before the meeting. The park

board consulted with the attorney general's office and learned the meeting had to be open to the public.

Readers might recall that the Fargo Park Board ran afoul of open meetings law last August, when it issued an artfully vague notice of a public meeting, with the topic opaquely described as "HR/Staff review."

That bland description failed to disclose that the review involved its executive director at the time, Joel Vettel, who ended up offering his resignation following a scathing staff survey of his performance.

Maddingly, the park board violated open records law three years earlier during the selection process that resulted in Vettel getting the job. It failed that time to give public notice of a selection committee meeting.

Once again, the presumption should be that a meeting must be open to the public. For some reason, the Fargo Park Board just can't grasp that simple guidance. Jerry Rostad, the park board chairman, blamed the latest violations on bad advice from their lawyer.

That might be — as noted, the park board has been a serial offender

in recent years — but we remind the board members that, as elected officials, they are responsible to conduct their business in public.

The park board is hardly the only public meetings offender. Over the past five years, the North Dakota attorney general has found seven open meetings violations from local governments in the metro area — three by the Fargo City Commission, two by the Fargo Park Board, one by the West Fargo School Board and one by the Cass County Commission.

Many of these violations involved hiring or evaluating the performance of top administrators. Although it might be more comfortable to hold those conversations in private, they should be conducted in the open. Sunshine, it's wisely said, is the best disinfectant.

When local officials close the door while conducting public business, they are locking out taxpayers and constituents who have every right to know what the people they elect to serve them are doing in their name.

Why is this so hard? Editorials represent the views of Forum management and the Editorial Board.

Can ND Dems turn it around in 2020?

MINOT, N.D. — Is this the year North Dakota Democrats finally turn a corner and begin a long march back into political relevance? It could be.

It sure seems like it should be.

Since the tides of public opinion tend to ebb and flow, politics are a cyclical thing. For our state's Democrats, the tide can't go out much farther.

They currently hold just 10 of 47 seats in the state Senate, and only 15 of 94 seats in the state House.

They hold not a single state-level executive-branch office and haven't since 2012 (the Superintendent of Public Schools is technically a non-partisan position, but in practice, Democrats and Republicans endorse candidates for the office).

Thanks to former Sen. Heidi Heitkamp's loss in 2018, the North Dakota Democrats have no incumbents in any of the state and federal offices elected on the statewide ballot for the first time since 1958.

Or perhaps 1916, depending on how you count the Nonpartisan League, which was founded by a socialist but began running its slate of candidates as Republicans before eventually merging with the state Democratic party.

However you do the math, this has to be rock bottom, right? Since they can't do much worse, where else do Democrats have to go but up?

It's been a tough couple of years for agriculture in North Dakota, and historically the Democrats have been pretty good at turning that sort of anxiety into votes.

In 2018, North Dakota voters approved a ballot measure amending the state constitution to create new ethics rules and an ethics commission. Republicans spoke out against the initiative, but it passed anyway, signaling that while most voters in the state may not be ready to vote against Republicans, there is a growing feeling that those in power have grown a bit too comfortable with it.

And then there's President Donald Trump. He won North Dakota handily in 2016, with over 63% of the vote, but his first term has been chaotic, and as I write this, the Senate is debating whether or not to remove him from office.

Will that help or hurt Trump and down-ballot Republicans in North Dakota when they go to vote later this year?

Either way, it seems Democrats have a real opportunity in front of them. Can they capitalize?

I expect Democrats will likely pick up some legislative seats.

Because, again, it's not like they can do much worse, and the NDGP picked up some seats in some fairly blue districts during the 2016 Trump wave, which may be tough for them to hold.

Beyond that, I don't expect Democrats to accomplish much in 2020. They have nobody elected to federal office, which is an essential conduit for national political money. Democrats traditionally don't raise nearly as much money from North Dakotans as the NDGOP does. Without an elected member of their party bringing in national dollars, the party may not have much of a budget this cycle.

This may be why the rumor mill about who might run for Democrats on the statewide ballot is pretty much standing still. Outside of persistent rumors about Fargo-area state Representative Ruth Buffalo possibly challenging first-term incumbent Congressman Kelly Armstrong, I have heard nothing about potential statewide Democratic candidates in 2020.

If the Democrats felt like Republicans were vulnerable this cycle, you'd expect to see candidates lining up, and that's just not happening.

Rob Port, founder of SayAnythingBlog.com, a North Dakota political blog, is a Forum Communications commentator. Listen to his Plain Talk Podcast and follow him on Twitter at @RobPort.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Families come in different forms, and all forms have value

By Emily Dhanani
Fargo

I'm writing in response to Anna Enright's letter to the editor, "Where have all the children gone?" published Jan. 23.

The choice to have, or not have, children is a personal decision with a vast amount of reasons behind those choices, all of which are individual to each family. It is no one's position to inquire about the reproductive choices of those around them, as it is a deeply personal matter for many.

The value and compassion of a person is not determined by their member status of

a traditional nuclear family. Families come in all shapes and sizes — large families with many children, single parent households, loving homes full of foster children, families consisting of individuals who choose to never marry, families who are unable to have children, and families that remain child free by choice. All of those families have value, and all lean on and support each other in times of crisis.

I am fortunate to be surrounded by a community of people of varying ages and walks of life, with different definitions of "family," all of which are kind, patient and generous. They donate their time and resources to support the growth of our local community and economy.

They take the time to volunteer within various organizations throughout the Fargo-Moorhead area to build up our growing community and the incredible diversity that growth has gifted us. They work with homeless and at-risk citizens, providing them with safety, shelter and the resources to improve their current circumstances and remain safe.

They are compassionate. They are generous. They are patient, and loving, and selfless. Not a single one of them are any of those things because they chose to have — or not have — children. They are those things because, as Anne Frank once said, "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

LETTERS POLICY

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