

Do we come together as a community, or stand apart in our beliefs?

Richmond Shreve

Special to Bucks County Courier Times

USA TODAY NETWORK

In the Thanksgiving weekend that opened the holiday season for most of us, families and friends went out of their way to be together socially, share a meal, reconnect and renew the bonds of relationship.

We gathered in the shadow of the pandemic and despite our diverse social beliefs. For some it's all great, and for others it's a trial requiring that they put on a happy face. Sharing and being part of a community is essential to human thriving.

We all participate in numerous intersecting communities. The best ones nurture and support our personal and spiritual growth.

In my 20s, I was a carpenter's helper, which meant that I did most of the lifting and fetching. I had to anticipate what was needed before being asked. I was expected to keep busy, which meant cleaning up and putting things in order when I wasn't otherwise needed.

My coworkers took pride in efficiency and craftsmanship. An old timer mocked the puny 12-ounce "little lady" claw hammer I'd brought from home and handed me his 22-ounce framing hammer after demonstrating how he rapidly drove nails with two decisive

blows. That community of craftsmen I worked with did me a service by shaping my attitudes and skills.

It wasn't until much later in my life that I became aware of the central importance of community attitudes. Although as parents we make sure our kids don't hang out with the wrong crowd, we are less careful about who influences our own opinions. We are, after all, grownups and have supposedly developed mature judgment.

Lately, I'm not so sure of our adult wisdom. Greta Thunberg asks how our leaders can fail to grasp our urgent environmental crisis. I'm astonished that anyone could think the pandemic is a hoax. Yet these opinions persist among certain like-minded people who reinforce each other's beliefs.

Healthy groups learn and adapt. Yet the agreement among some groups is so rigid that contrary facts don't have much influence.

Looking inward, I'm aware that I, too, hold opinions that I don't question. Most are implicit — they rubbed off through social contact — and I did not pause to question them. Many of my early religious beliefs were of this sort. In my spiritual journey, I've benefited from traveling in wider circles and exploring other perspectives.

So it is with all of our guiding social beliefs. In the 1960s and '70s, Ameri-

cans actively re-examined their implicit beliefs about the accepted roles of men and women. More recently, we've made progress in examining our beliefs about human sexuality. We are still not of one mind in these matters and we have clustered with those of like-mind, with subgroups that don't care to rethink implicit values. Yet we're all freer as we grow less rigid and judgmental.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media have transformed how we form opinions. Formerly, professional journalists dominated public opinion. Now most people derive their view of the world from informal social networks. The mainstream media has become fragmented along political, social and ethnic lines. We tune in to voices that affirm our unexamined beliefs.

Print media, like this column, don't have their former reach. In fact, 52% of American adults read with less than a sixth-grade proficiency, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Little wonder that TV and social media are so influential. For many Americans, reading is neither easy nor fun.

Our smartphones magically connect us with highly visual, endlessly entertaining media, all imperceptibly filtered to our preferences, steering us clear of inconvenient dissonance.

We rely on such comfortable self-

confirmation at our peril. Avoidable deaths among Americans who hesitated to get vaccinated averaged 450 a day through September. Reality is not a compassionate teacher. Doubts, ignorance, and poorly grounded beliefs can be lethal. Some victims proclaimed their right to be wrong with their dying breath.

Intellectually, I know that humanity is one community, singular, with just this one small planet as our only home. Yet, I don't always act like I believe it deep down. I wonder what implicit beliefs I hold, in solidarity with my community of friends, that insulate me from discordant realities?

Possibly my personal blindness is the implicit bias that my prosperous WASP tribe somehow merits its favored status, justifiably leaving those less fortunate to catch up as best they can.

As we approach the holidays intending "good will toward all," seeking to bond fondly with family and friends, we might also pray for the generosity of spirit to ask how we can become less tribal: be inclusive, loving, and kind toward others — leave nobody on the outside.

Richmond Shreve is a member of the Newtown Friends Meeting and lives in Newtown. From a Faith Perspective is a weekly column written by members of local faith communities.