Uncomfortable conversations

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By Nate Smelle

Recently I wound up in a text war with a good friend of mine regarding the upcoming U.S. election, and the racism of President Donald Trump. On most occasions such a personal disagreement would not make it into this column. However, as the conversation evolved I was reminded of something the members of Anti-Racism North Hastings had said about the importance of taking the time to work through uncomfortable discussions.

Admittedly not a huge fan of the status quo candidate Joe Biden, and definitely not a card-carrying member of Trump's gang of followers, I hadn't been following the campaign as closely as usual. Though in a similar frame of mind regarding the candidates four years ago when covering the battle between Trump and former Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, the spectacle of having such an outrageously offensive and tremendously dangerous president in the White House drew me in like a moth to a bug-zapper.

This time around, the combination of Trump's disgustingly racist and anti-earth track record, along with Biden's lack of allure, plus my disappointment that Senator Bernie Sanders is not in the race for the presidency, my interest in the mess has been at a minimum. That was at least until I watched the first train-wreck of a debate.

Watching as Trump's interruptions, personal attacks, and lies piled up during the debate, I was impressed to see Biden stand his ground. Politicians are often described as childish during debates, but the President's bullying was straight from the schoolyard. At times I expected him to start demanding that Biden hand over his lunch money.

Anyways, the moment in the debate that reeled me in and provoked me to follow the rest of the campaign more closely was when moderator Chris Wallace tossed Trump an easy win by asking if he would denounce his white supremacist supporters. Instead of knocking it out of the park by simply denouncing his racist allies, he told them to "stand back and stand by."Why is it that he is rallying his white supremacist supporters by asking them to "Stand by" instead of denouncing them? Stand by for what? Even if he didn't mean it, it would have earned him the respect and possibly the votes of any undecided voters still on the fence.

Contemplating this question, it occurred to me that considering Trump's divisive nature this crowd is likely smaller than ever in 2020. In light of Trump's personal history of frequently and blatantly making racist comments - for example, stating that there are ?some very fine people? among the white supremacists and neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017 ? it is fair to say that anyone still supporting Trump is knowingly willing to elect a racist.

The disagreement between my friend and I began when I pointed out that anyone supporting a president that regularly makes racist policies and comments which oppress Black, Indigenous, Mexican, and Muslim people, is in turn behaving in a racist way.Even if these supporters do not consider themselves racist, by supporting a president who aligns himself with white supremacist groups like the KKK and the Proud Boys, they are consciously choosing to uphold institutions that rely on systemic racism for their power.

After declaring that he took racism very seriously, he suggested that "as long as no one is being harmed, racist idiots are and should be afforded the same freedoms," as others.

So, I ask anyone using the idea of freedom of speech as a justification for racism to question their personal definition of harm. Racism, whether the public killing of an unarmed Black man by police, or a remark made to make someone feel like less of a human, is at its essence harmful. Tragically, far too often this manifestation of hatred is also fatal.