

SNG-Bud Thompson-6-20-16

Face to face with Bud Thompson

By Jim Nowlan

I am giving readers a break from my rants about the destructive state budget impasse.

In that regard, I am hearing from savvy observers that the next real full-year budget may not come until after the 2018(!) gubernatorial and legislative elections.

Those contests will equate to a political Armageddon (a final battle between Good and Evil, depending upon your point of view). Such a delay in budgeting, the fundamental responsibility of those we elect, would be unforgivable.

Instead, I want to focus on the importance of face-to-face conversation in a world “AF” (After Facebook). In only a short decade or so, this social platform has become central to the lives of many of my friends and hundreds of millions worldwide.

The topic comes to mind following a recent visit to the postcard pretty town of Prophetstown (pop. 2,000), nestled along the Rock River between the Quad Cities and Sterling, where I wowed (he writes, modestly) the local Lions Club with a talk about Illinois.

I was invited by old friend Bud Thompson (probably nobody in the town knows his first name is Howard), who is the consummate community leader.

From hard-scrabble roots, Bud became a successful hog broker during his working career.

Over his 80-plus years, Bud has been mayor and member, most often chair, of the school board, chamber, Lions, county GOP, state school board association, and state board of education. At present he is on the Whiteside County Board.

Bud invited me to come early, so he could take me around to local businesses, see the many outdoor murals painted by local high schoolers under amateur artist Bud's supervision, and generally brag up the town he cherishes.

[We visited local banker Bob Johnston, pharmacy manager Missie Taylor (the store exists only because of community efforts), hardware owners Dan and Dave Drummet (Democrats but dear friends of Bud).]

We wrapped up the tour at Eclipse Park, where Larry Van Dyke has almost single-handedly transformed (with the help of Bud and the community foundation) an abandoned manufacturing site near Main Street into a lovely, well-utilized park.

As he did that afternoon on our visits, Bud operates face to face. Looks you straight in the eye and tells you what he thinks, and is equally open to your opinions as well. A natural leader.

Later, I asked banker Johnston what Bud meant to Prophetstown: "He doesn't mean any one thing to us; he means *everything* to us!"

Bud says, simply: "We aren't here for ourselves."

Because today we have our heads continually hunched over our digital devices, I worry that we are losing something precious in diminished face-to-face conversations.

Make no mistake, the digital revolution has brought great benefits.

Oldsters can keep in daily contact with their grandkids' goings on far away via Facebook. Business communications take place in the wink of an eye, and all the world's knowledge can seemingly be brought up on Google Search and Wikipedia.

Yet the opportunity costs from becoming quasi-slaves to our smartphones are also significant.

When I taught in China last year, I saw more than one young couple out on dates at restaurants who literally never spoke to one another, instead both heads hovering over digital devices. I am afraid we may not be far behind.

With our digital devices, we are always in control; nobody talks back to us. And because of the emotional distance created by digital communication, those who blog and comment anonymously can give vent, often harmfully, to “the beast within us,” as Hobbes might have said.

In face-to-face conversation, we are not always in control. We have to shape new thoughts as we react to the perspectives of others. We also tend to tamp down the beast within us, which contributes to civility.

In her book “Reclaiming Conversation,” MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle argues that by putting down our devices and re-engaging in person, we learn together and can practice democracy.

Writing recently in the Wall Street Journal, Susan Pinker reports that face-to-face communication is indeed good for us, even lessens depression, especially among older folks like me.

I can’t see Bud Thompson sitting at home, hunched over a device. He is out in the world, wrestling with community problems face to face.

We need to discipline our families to set aside regular time each day to put away the devices, so we can be involved in our communities.