

An American Election Day

This past election (November 2008), I served as an exit poller at the Expo building down at the county fairgrounds in Kalispell. What I experienced was a beautiful slice of America that I'd like to share. The voting, although busy at times, went smoothly and peaceably throughout the day.

When I arrived at 6:30 a.m., many people were lined-up in the entryway out the doors in the cold morning darkness. Later I learned that one person had arrived at 5:00 a.m. Excusing myself, I slipped through the crowd and found an unlocked exit door into the building.

Once inside, the first person I met was a deputy sheriff named Bob, who was responsible for directing people as they entered the building to vote. Bob was an older man: commanding, yet friendly. During the course of the day, he often kidded with folks coming in, but what impressed me the most was his kindly servant's heart—such a stark contrast, as I remembered the stern soldiers with automatic rifles guarding the entrances to the Bombay airport this past summer when I traveled to India.

Next, I was introduced to Matt, the person in charge. Young, yet thoughtfully decisive, Matt quickly outlined the area and rules for executing my exit polling duties. Throughout the next fourteen hours, Matt was constantly moving, covering needs all over the building complex. Late in the afternoon, one dignified-looking couple commented me how orderly, safe, and efficient this polling place seemed. I could not help but share this compliment with Matt later that evening as he passed through my assigned area; looked so beat tired, I felt compelled to encourage him on the great job he was doing.

Iris, the person in charge of precinct 50 (which was my primary data collection responsibility), was so very helpful and friendly. Each time I went over there for number tallies, her crew seemed to really be having fun! One of her ladies collecting ballots had a red, white, and blue sweater with matching scarf, but what really caught my eye was her glittering star-shaped ring.

Most all the voters seemed to sense the importance of this election. Many were in a hurry to get back to work and apologized for not having time to fill out my exit poll survey. I'd call after them, "No problem! Thanks for making it out to vote."

So many parents brought their children with them, priming the pump so to speak for the generation to come. One mother sat her four-year-daughter down next to her at a table, and they filled out my survey "together." Several families and couples made the polling survey form a group project. Oh, how I enjoyed meeting those first-time voters: young, energetic, positive, and ready to get on with it!

However, the most heroic folks were the elderly, and some not so elderly, coming in wheelchairs, behind walkers, or on crutches. To be frank, they gave me the energy to keep moving and up-beat during the entire fourteen-hour shift. I specifically remember one elderly couple as they negotiated the double set of doors going out of the Expo building. The man (using crutches) led the way, bent over his crutches with his wife following painfully using a walker. I was able to get to the first exit door to open it for him, but not the second as I waited and held the door open for his wife. By the time she was through the first door, he had the second door across the entry way held open for his wife—the rubber end of one crutch jammed into the bottom edge of the door! *What a move. What a technique*, I thought to myself. I told him as I walked next to his wife, “I’m going to have to remember this one for when ‘I get up there.’” Although he never looked me in the eye, I got a smile out of him.

During the course of the day, Fred, the man assigned to work together with me and a former casual acquaintance, shared that his knee was really starting to hurt him: shrapnel left in his leg from Vietnam. So, we figured out a system where he could sit down and do the paper: counting, recording, and tabulating. I moved about, talking with folks exiting, handing out the survey forms while Fred kept me on track. Near the end of our shift, I turned to Fred and remarked, “You know Fred, you can share my foxhole anytime!”

My greatest delight came in seeing old friends and associates I had not seen, or even thought of, for years. My high school psychology teacher and environment club sponsor Mr. Holland, whom I hadn’t seen for over twenty-five years, was still as sharp as a tack. Also, meeting his wife for the first time and “telling on” old Mr. Holland was sheer pleasure! Hugging Les Miller again, the finest man I have ever associated with in the workplace, cannot be adequately expressed in words. Meeting some of Fred’s favorite people was such an honor on Election Day, too. I especially remember one young man and his new bride. Although I can’t remember their names, I certainly won’t forget his solid, confident handshake.

That Tuesday I also met a new friend, one I look forward to getting to know and spend time with in ’09. His name is Don. He was in charge of the wheelchairs donated for the day to help folks who needed one to go through the precinct lines. Don kept moving all day, keeping track of “his people” and the chairs even from the far ends of the building complex. I talked with Don off and on all day, as his chairs were parked just adjacent to my area. I found out he had retired once but got bored so he’s put in seventeen years now with the county Weeds and Parks Department, where he volunteered to do his “turn” for the election. He said that he missed dinner with his wife last night, as “somebody needed to bring a voting machine down from Whitefish.”

Toward the end of our day, I noted Don: stationary, leaning against one of the building’s metal posts on the back wall. He was bushed, but still standing and watching out across the crowd for people needing or using one of his chairs.

When I finally got home myself, I made it to the recliner for the news and election results. It was so cool to think the election result being reported partially came from the tabulations and samples I phoned in to Network Analysis back on the East Coast periodically through the day: the last call made a mere hour and a half earlier!

On the news I remember the gracious words of a defeated McCain and seeing the cheering throngs in Chicago. I was especially impressed by the remarks of a scholarly, dignified black man interviewed by a couple of the main network anchors. In reality, not many of the candidates whom I had voted for won, and neither did most of the issues I voted on go the way I wanted. Nor were all of those citizens who passed through my polling area that day, I expect, especially noble, honest, or true.

As I reflected, I thought, *When all is said and done, what happens around the kitchen tables of America is more significant than what happens in the Oval Office, and what transpires in our living rooms, more than in Congress or any State Legislature. But what happened at the county fairgrounds that Tuesday, or even last summer for that matter, far outweighs the impact of all the rulers and governing bodies on this old earth.*

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