

First Class. World Class.

Like most everyone, I'm built to seek comfort. But I also know that discomfort can be a powerful catalyst for growth and learning. It can be the bridge across all kinds of divides, including the political ones threatening our shared understanding of a common good worth seeking together.



I recently found myself in a first-class seat for a short flight from Albuquerque to Dallas. It was a free upgrade, which added to the anticipated pleasure of this first-time experience.

Ironically, my first-class experience was more uncomfortable than comfortable. The discomfort started with the seat. I am 5 feet tall. My feet couldn't reach the floor. The discomfort intensified when my seatmate began to talk, breaking through the barrier I manage to create between myself and others on flights by being an avid reader of very big books. (My theory is that people either take pity on me and keep silent so I can read the tome that is clearly causing me back pain OR they believe I have nothing interesting to say because I am a troglodyte who hasn't entered the electronic age.)

My seat mate was awfully nice. Chatty in a way that reminded me of the people I love, the people I grew up with. Niceness aside, I knew right away what I was dealing with when he began talking about the southern border of the United States. I constantly tell my students at United World College-USA that if education is to be a force for peace, it has to take us out of our comfort zones. The bubbles we create with like-minded friends and colleagues need to be burst.

Easier said than done.

As my seatmate and I engaged in conversation about the border, about the constitution, about where we should draw the line on tax dollars going to destroying lives (unborn and on the battlefield), about malignant narcissism and other threats to our great experiment in democracy, I found myself half hoping for a little emergency landing, a bout of semi-serious turbulence, a rambling announcement from the pilot - anything to provide a break and a chance to re-establish a wall between Michael and me. (And why had I lamely asked for "just water" when we started out?!) Would the next topic break down the civility with which we were conversing? Would the give and take of our conversation, and the effort to find common ground, give way to name-calling--or worse, that acidly polite suggestion to "just agree to disagree?"

The moment came. Michael pointed out that while we are a country of immigrants, he worried that communities were being transformed by immigrants, rather than the other way around. I chuckled and said indigenous peoples in the U.S. had certainly felt his pain for a very long time. He colored, and I made a joke about myself being a living manifestation of conqueror and conquered. He clarified that he was talking about basic things, like acquiring the local language. I quickly mumbled "Same point...", probably a little too quickly. I colored too.

We ended our trip together with a handshake and a wry chuckle. He revealed he lived in Austin. I said I thought it was a great city. He said it was "the blueberry in the tomato soup that is Texas." I said I'd always liked blueberries in my tomato soup. He said for him, "Not so much." A wry chuckle turned into a belly laugh. Fully felt, fully shared.

Flying first-class forced me out of my comfort zone, physically and politically. I'm grateful for it. I had to stretch to anchor my toes to the floor. And I had to stretch even more to meet my seatmate in the middle, to create a space for what we had in common and for what left us on different sides of some real and important divides. We never agreed to disagree. We held each other to account rather than holding each other at bay. We saw each other, and we saw ourselves through one another's eyes.

I'm not yet sure what all I learned--except that I can still stretch. Maybe that's enough.