

Opinion



Other Viewpoints

Closed meetings erode public's trust

What happens when elected officials meet behind closed doors without anyone having any knowledge about what they are discussing?

Do these people who are elected to represent residents and taxpayers fully understand the implications of meeting behind closed doors?

First, everyone is left to wonder what they are discussing. Think about it: They come out from their private meeting after anywhere from 5 minutes to an hour or more, possibly make a motion and change the lives of people who elected them.

What happened in that room while they were meeting in private, without any watchers from the press or the public? Is there a chance they discussed something other than what they claimed to be talking about when they decided to close the meeting to the media and taxpayers? Are they making back-room deals to curry favors with business owners, friends or family members? People wonder.

A lot of elected officials believe they can call private meetings based on any number of allowed circumstances and then come to a "consensus" behind closed doors. Whether they want to admit it or not, when they poll each other for a consensus during an "executive session," they are violating the Kansas Open Meetings Act.

Some times, some groups reach a decision after discussion without tax-paying residents having any knowledge about what they said or thought on the subject. Many times, when the board finally returns to an open session with members of the press or residents, no one comments and none of them state any reasons for their support or disapproval for the ensuing motion. It is either passed or rejected by the governing body, usually unanimously.

A perfect example occurred earlier this month when the Leavenworth City Commission decided to meet behind closed doors for 45 minutes to discuss several items with the city's lawyer.

On the agenda, the commissioners were scheduled to consider some legal issues related to a property that was scheduled for demolition. In the past, the commissioners always discussed the property in an open session, and everyone knew what was going on.

This time, once the city's lawyer informed commissioners that there were legal implication, they decided to discuss everything behind closed doors.

How many other circumstances have arisen where elected officials determine the outcome in private and put on a public show only after they have already come to a conclusion when it comes to their decision? How many times have they circumvented the Democratic process when it comes to their loose definition of a "consensus" among elected officials? How much longer must residents, taxpayers and voters be kept in the dark when it comes to "important" things that are decided behind closed doors without anyone knowing what was discussed?

Elected officials sometimes believe they can circumvent Sunshine Laws by meeting behind closed doors. All they are doing is causing voters ... to no longer trust them, because they are afraid to participate in an open process of governing those who put them in office.

— The Leavenworth Times, via Kansas Press Association



Writer says goodbye — again

For the second time in a year, I sit here at my desk writing to tell you I'm leaving a career in journalism.

Wow, I never thought I'd leave once, but the second time prompted the topic of today's column.

Over the past 15 years, I've reported on everything from the circus coming to town to the murder of a small town's sheriff. What a career. It's a career that gets in your blood, so much so that I'll probably need dialysis to make it through, leaving it at age 53.

Age has nothing to do with me leaving journalism, but thinking back to August, I wrote a column on forgiveness and the issue that prompted writing the column lingers. While I have forgiven the two principal parties in what was a difficult period of my life, the after effects of that time continues to make me ask myself what type of legacy is my life creating. That's where the topic of age comes in.

As each day passes, I ask myself, "What footsteps do I want my children and grandchildren to walk in?"

Over the past year, I've found myself repeatedly asking why life is so difficult. But then, as I turn to the greatest source of my strength, Jesus Christ, life tones down and it isn't as difficult as I seem to make it.

For instance, the sermon at my church Sunday was about forgiveness. In Matthew 18, Peter asked Jesus how often we are to forgive our brother who has sinned against us.

Jesus told Peter we are to forgive "seventy times seven." My pastor explained that in the Greek translation of this verse, Jesus said 77, but that the number is irrelevant. Pastor said more important is that our lives should be an "attitude of forgiveness."

Jesus wasn't worried about how many times



Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I Stand

we have to forgive each other, he was then, and is now, more interested in us understanding that life is about love and mercy.

Pastor explained that at the time Matthew was written, people were more interested in vengeance and punishment than in the love and mercy that Jesus was trying to teach.

What does this all have to do with me leaving journalism? Well, it goes back to that legacy thing. I was recently pleased to have my 33-year-old son tell me that the older he gets, the smarter I get. Words that rang sweetly in my ear and put a smile on my face.

As I grow older, that legacy thing nags at me more and more. What type of legacy am I leaving? I know the one I want to leave, one that lets people see Jesus through my daily actions. One that lets my children, and some day God willing grandchildren, tell people they learned about Jesus from their mother/grandmother. Just as I have learned about Jesus from my mom.

Martin Luther taught that while forgiveness is associated with Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection, it's also associated with life. He taught that when we have forgiveness in our lives, we can be forgiving people. We can put God's way ahead of our own way. We are not called to forgive just a little, or when we feel like it, we are called to forgive totally. Just as Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose

again, so we do not have to suffer the pangs of Hell, we are, as his followers, to share his story about our forgiveness.

That's my goal. To leave a legacy that every person I come in contact with wants to know who that person inside of me really is. The person of Jesus Christ.

This past Sunday, there, in the last two verses of the hymn "Thy Strong Word," from the Lutheran Service Book, my goal was written out for me to sing:

"Give us lips to sing Thy glory, tongues Thy mercy to proclaim, throats that shout the hope that fills us, mouths to speak Thy holy name. Alleluia, alleluia!

"May the light which Thou dost send fill our songs with alleluias, Alleluias without end! God the Father, light creator, to Thee laud and honor be. To Thee, Light of Light begotten, praise be sung eternally.

"Holy Spirit, light revealer, Glory, glory be to Thee. Mortals, angels, now and ever, Praise the holy Trinity!"

So, as I leave a career in journalism, I thank each and every one of you who has played a part of it. I send out a huge "Thank you" to Pastor John Schmidt for volumes of column material. Thanks also to you loyal readers, those I have interviewed, those who have taught me much more than I have shared, and my co-workers near and far.

A special thanks to Patty Decker, the world's more wonderful direct supervisor and an editor who over the past few years has taught me as much about life as she has the newspaper industry. Best wishes Patty. And thanks to Steve and Cynthia Haynes, owners of Haynes Publishing Co., particularly the Colby Free Press, for not one, but two times of employment.

Now let's put this to bed!

Friend and mentor gets his due

We attended the 50th wedding anniversary of some dear friends on Saturday.

Bob and Gerri Sweeney tied the knot on Sept. 7, 1958, and went on to own and operate a slew of newspapers while raising four children.

We met them in 1981 while attending our first Colorado Press convention in Denver. The Sweeneys were old hands at both press conventions and child rearing by then, as most of their kids were teenagers while ours were between 8 months and 6 years old.

Steve asked how to get involved in the group and Bob, big and bluff and sensing a kindred spirit, just slapped him on the back and started introducing him around.

Bob's been doing that for the last 27 years. He nudged Steve into working on this and that in the Colorado Press Association, and before long Steve was being sworn in as president, a job Bob had held several years before.

Back in 1981, we were living in the tiny town of Creede, way up in the mountains, and the Sweeneys were running a weekly, then a daily paper in Craig. We didn't get to see each other except once or twice a year at meetings. Then it was like a family reunion, as we compared notes on how big the kids had gotten and who was causing the most trouble for the competition.

The Sweeneys sold their paper and moved to Denver, where they started another news-



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

paper, *The Villager*, which still serves Greenwood Village, an upscale suburb.

We sold our operation, which by then included six weeklies and a daily, and moved to Kansas to start over.

With the move, our visits became less frequent for a while. We still saw each other once a year at the February meeting in Denver, since we stayed on as associate members of Colorado Press. Still, our paths seemed to be diverging as we became more involved in the Kansas Press Association, a group Steve led in 1998, just 10 years after his term as president in Colorado.

Then one winter as we were talking and mingling at the Brown Palace on our annual trek to Denver, Bob put his arm around Steve's shoulder and said, "You need to get involved in the National Newspaper Association."

Bob was on the board of the national group and he wanted us to stop just sending in our dues and get with the program.

That year we attended the national conven-

tion in Reno, Nev. I've always suspected we went to the convention because we could take the train. Nevertheless, Steve was hooked.

He ran for the national board a couple of years later and lost the election.

That February, Bob put his arm around Steve's shoulder and said, "If you want to join the board, don't give up. They always need good people."

Two months later the man who'd won the election resigned, and Steve was selected to fill his seat.

Bob served as president of the national group a few years ago, and this year it was Steve's turn to follow in his footsteps again.

They've been really big footsteps — Bob is a big guy — but as he danced with his bride of 50 years on Saturday, I knew why we've followed his advice.

It's always been as good as his dancing.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansas.com

We encourage comments on opinions expressed on this page. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701, or e-mail s.haynes@nwkansas.com or pdecker@nwkansas.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Free Press.

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Steve Haynes - Publisher
s.haynes@nwkansas.com

NEWS

Patty Decker - Editor
pdecker@nwkansas.com

Jan Ackerman - Reporter
jackerman@gmail.com

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter
aheintz@nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

Jasmine Stewart - Advertising Manager
jstewart@nwkansas.com

Heather Woffter - Advertising Sales
hwoffter@nwkansas.com

Steifon Matthews - Graphic Design
smatthews@nwkansas.com

Jessica Estes - Classified Ad Desk
jestes@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Jim Bowker - General Manager

Richard Westfahl, Lana Westfahl, Becky Foster, Jim Jackson, Kris McCool, Betty Morris, James Ornelas, Cheryl Holub, Amanda Campbell

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Mallard Fillmore

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