

Chalkboard

By

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I told a friend and co-worker several years ago that I believed there were four simple principles or truths that shaped a person's daily work life. The first was "Perception is reality". I believe that subject has been exhausted in recent weeks.

The second truism was "Everything is relative." This is a rather simple truth. It should immediately remind you of the story of the man who felt sorry for himself for having no shoes until he met the man who had no feet. A simple application of the concept leads one down the path of recognition that qualifying the events of life would place the range of experiences on a circle rather than a straight line.

For instance, I had a reporter interview me on the telephone last week. He explained that he was developing an article about some of the problems we had had in our school this year with fights between students at the secondary level. He said he was interested because these type problems did not seem to fit in with his perception of "small town" Arkansas. As a Chicago native, I am not sure what his perception was nor how it was formed. He seemed like a nice guy on the telephone.

Sometime during our conversation I took the position, one I have expressed many times in the last 14 years, that "if you can't live and work and be happy in Gentry, Arkansas then probably you won't be happy anywhere." As a good reporter does, he took me to task pretty quickly on that statement. He asked how, with four fights where the police were called to the school, I could feel that way. He inquired if maybe "I had my head buried in the sand".

Poor guy. As a requirement of his job, he had to listen my rambling explanation of my first two truths. I did not feel too sorry for him; he placed the call.

Actually to him, I made some fairly generic statements about how difficult some earlier work experiences were in some areas of education than they have been, for me, working here in Gentry. I will share with you a few details that I did not share with him.

So far in Gentry no one has spray-painted obscenities on my personal vehicle or house. No one has slashed my tires. No one has strangled a cat and tossed it in my back yard swimming pool. No one has made threatening phone calls to my wife or children. No one has spread a couple of pounds of roofing

nails under my child's tire swing. No one has threatened to kill me. And so on.....

In other places, these things were occasional parts of my work life. In Gentry, they have not been. So it's been relatively simple for me to believe that Gentry is a nice place to live. But that relativity just applies to me, right?

Maybe not. I have lived in Gentry for almost fourteen years and I do not know of a single reported homicide within the city limits since we unloaded the U-Haul. I believe that holds true also for armed robberies, forcible rapes, and other violent crimes. There is not a single city street in Gentry that I would not feel safe walking on at night. I could not make that statement everywhere my family has lived, but perhaps then that was only a matter of perception. I am not privy to the police community's knowledge of things so I suspect there are things that happen in our community that would make me cringe; but unless I see it in the headlines and have personal knowledge of it, my perception is not affected.

Everything is relative? Maybe there are school districts in the state of Arkansas that has not had four fights at their high school this year, someone with more free time than I can research that. How many have had more serious problems? That same person with the free time can report back on that also. It's not that I do not view those incidents as serious; they are very serious to me and to each member of the staff and to the school board. Such things have no place in an educational day and we are working diligently to lessen the possibility that such things can repeat. That is as much a part of our job as anything we do. In education jargon we call it maintaining "a safe and healthy environment".

Please do not misunderstand the point I wish to make with this article. My point was and is that my opinion of the Gentry community has been shaped by my life experiences and my life experiences are really tame compared to those of others. If Gentry looks great to a Southeast Arkansas hayseed, can you imagine how it appears to someone moving in from a large city where crime and violence is a daily factor? I can give you a hint.

One parent, of one of the students expelled from Gentry Public Schools, took exception that the police had been called to school because of the fight. His statement, roughly restated, was "Why did you call the police? Why did you not call me the parent first? At my child's last school, they only called the police when someone had been shot or stabbed. We moved here to get away from that type life."

I would and do pray that such a statement can never be used to characterize our community. Yet, we are living in a high growth area. Growth brings all types of new elements into play in a community. In my perception, and on my relativity scale, the community of Gentry seems to have had a serious drug and alcohol

problem with its teen-agers for years; we obviously do not need another major problem.

Our police department has said the beginnings of gang-related activity can be seen in our community. Now would be the right time to come together as a single community and say “No, not here”.

Nothing relative about that; maybe the exception does prove the rule.