

Virus bares need for common ground



Your Turn
Ming Wang
Guest columnist

The coronavirus outbreak has revealed how critical it is for all of us to find common ground in today's polarized world.

There has been a dramatic difference in the success of various countries in fighting this virus. In South Korea, the leaders assembled quickly, resolved their differences, implemented essential measures and effectively controlled the infection.

In contrast, discord and disunity in Italy led to inaction in the critical first few weeks of the outbreak, resulting in thousands of lives being lost.

In our society today, we are often incapable of overcoming our differences in order to find common ground. Our social climate is toxic.

The merit of an issue is often not considered as important as power alliances

— political, ideological or otherwise.

We can be friends and still disagree

The ever-present media has us glued to our TV sets, watching 30-second dramatic images that short-circuit our imagination and independent judgment, and polarize us.

Civil discourse and debates that are focused on the issues themselves — without insulting the opponent — have become rarities.

When I came to this great country many years ago as a poor student, with only \$50 and having recently survived China's Cultural Revolution, what attracted me the most about America was the freedom conveyed in the saying: "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to my death your right to say it."

Unfortunately, since then we have departed from the principles of free speech and mutual respect, and have instead replaced them with intolerance

and intimidation. We are becoming a society that is increasingly fixated on our differences, rather than appreciating what we have in common.

Now the wake-up calls have come! When a natural disaster strikes, such as the recent tornadoes in Middle Tennessee, we find ourselves in need of the most prepared and experienced disaster-response teams.

Similarly, when a crisis such as the coronavirus outbreak occurs, we realize that our ability to deal with it is critically dependent upon how prepared and experienced we already are to overcome our differences and come together as a nation.

Our collective vulnerability requires us to stop alienating each other

The ability to find common ground in a polarized world is only achieved through years of learning and practice.

We must first learn to listen, so that instead of trying to score rhetorical

points through well-rehearsed sound bites, we may learn valuable information — even from our opponents — that may propel both sides toward breaking the gridlock which is the hallmark of our current national discourse.

Solutions to difficult problems will come only through collaboration, not alienation, so that not only are we ready to deal with a crisis like this, but also to solve our society's problems in general as well.

For the first time in a very long time, we have all come together. We have found the common ground, which is this: we as human beings are all vulnerable, and the only way to survive is to find a way to work together.

It is my hope that this viral crisis, and the valuable lessons it has taught us, will inspire all of us to make fundamental changes to overcome our differences and find common ground in our lives.

Ming Wang, M.D., Ph.D., is the founder of the Wang Vision Institute. Email him at drwang@wangvisioninstitute.com.

Feeling anxious, scared? Refugees like me can help



Your Turn
Yassin Terou
Guest columnist

Before I fled Syria for the United States in 2011, I felt daily — sometimes crushing — anxiety. Many families stayed indoors to avoid violent uprisings and police brutality. Soon we stopped hearing neighborhood children laughing and playing games on the corner. Young couples no longer nuzzled each other at neighborhood cafés. Large gatherings were postponed. With growing concern, we wondered about our future. Would we lose our jobs, our homes, our lives?

I've been thinking about all of this as the coronavirus pandemic upends life in America. Refugees like me can offer a unique perspective during this time, especially given the adversity we've faced. We have learned to be thankful for what we have instead of dwelling on what we don't. We have learned the importance of resilience and perseverance. And we have learned that helping families and neighbors through a difficult time reaps tremendous mental and emotional rewards. I assure you: There is a pathway through the darkness. Together, we can defeat this virus and rejoice on the other side.

How to practice gratitude

Whenever I feel anxious, I remind myself of the many blessings in my life. In Syria, I was one of the lucky ones. I left before the war escalated and entire cities were bombed. That's why I'm grateful to be here in America, even in the midst of a pandemic. There's still much to be thankful for: We have food, electricity and running water. Where I come from, many families don't have even these basic things.

How to persevere

Every refugee I know understands the power of perseverance. The key is to



Free hand sanitizer is given out at Yassin's Falafel House in downtown Knoxville on March 17. CALVIN MATTHEIS/NEWS SENTINEL

take on challenges in small steps, day by day or hour by hour. Since arriving in the U.S., I've worked hard to build a life here. While I struggled to find steady employment at first, I knew America was brimming with opportunities. To earn extra

money, I sold sandwiches outside a local mosque, which led me to open my first restaurant, Yassin's Falafel House, in 2014.

Today, I own two falafel restaurants, serve roughly 4,000 people a week and

employ nearly 30 people. While our business has taken a hit, we're still bringing in more than 50% of our usual sales thanks to our devoted customers and hard work. So far, I haven't had to lay off any employees, who are like family to me. I'll do whatever I can to make sure that doesn't happen.

How to be selfless

We're stronger when we lift each other up. During a pandemic, it doesn't matter where we're from, what language we speak or what religion we practice. We're all in this together. That's why I plan to help my community as much as possible during this crisis. When the schools closed, my restaurant provided free meals to the students, and after we shut down our dining areas, we began offering delivery and curbside pickup to feed the community. As always with our restaurant, if you don't have enough to pay for a meal, it's on us.

My hope is that when we come out of this crisis, we recognize that we're more alike than different, and we will be more accepting of outsiders, particularly since refugees and immigrants are working on the front lines of the COVID-19 battle. In 2018, 28.7% of doctors and 22% of nursing assistants were immigrants, according to New American Economy. More than 18% of food delivery people and 16.7% of grocery and supermarket workers are immigrants. We're a vital part of the American economy and workforce.

During dark times, we need each other more than ever. I've been checking in with other small businesses in Knoxville to see how we can support one another. Connecting with my community, my customers and my employees is what keeps me going. It's the best feeling in the world to give back and to love people. And hopefully before the next crisis, we can enact policies that show appreciation for and support the workforce that kept America running, no matter where they come from.

Yassin Terou is the owner of Yassin's Falafel House in Knoxville.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rural residents need air ambulance service

Rural Tennesseans are facing a health crisis. Hospitals are continuing to close. In Decatur County, we have one medical facility left that can stabilize patients, and they are at risk of shutting down.

As the Emergency Management Agency director of Decatur County, where I have lived my whole life, I am greatly concerned over the medical shortage our region is dealing with. We need our elected officials to secure our access to health care.

The terrain of our remote county includes a lot of hills and narrow roads since we are located on the banks of the Tennessee River. When there are emergencies, like car wrecks and strokes, there is a limited window of time to get patients to a Level I or II trauma center.

And now with cases of COVID-19 spreading across our state, including our rural communities, access to air ambulance services is more important than ever. With Jackson General and

other hospitals in Nashville and Memphis being a one to two-hour ride by car, our community leans on air ambulances to get patients necessary immediate medical attention.

Our EMTs do everything to help bring aid to the community, but there is only so much we can do. Our air medical providers bring comfort to my colleagues and the families and visitors in our region. They also provide continuing education training for our paramedics at no extra cost.

Even with hospitals in the region continuing to close, emergencies will not come to a halt — we need to ensure that the community has access to medical care no matter where they are. Air medical services provide patients with rapid response and have the equipment to care for individuals on board. I strongly urge U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn and our members of Congress to show their support for the safety of our rural residents by supporting legislation that protects rural access to air medical providers.

Andrew Sparks, Decatur County

EMA Director, Decaturville 38329

Keep calm

Erroneous facts cause unnecessary fear.

The recent letter "Necessary but not sufficient" (by Paul Ragan, April 5) cited statistics that are, at best, only worst case scenarios based on models that are increasingly being revised and in some cases, debunked.

One glaring error in fact the writer cited is the number of hospital beds that are available in Tennessee. In an article printed in the Tennessean two weeks ago, it was noted that there are a number of beds far greater than the letter writer's assertion that Tennessee has about 7,800 beds, which simply isn't true. A simple click on the internet to the American Hospital Directory notes that Tennessee has 18,522 available hospital beds. There are even some hospitals currently closed that could be reopened if needed.

Are there some areas affected more than others? Of course there are. But

let's keep everything in context, stay focused on facts and not erroneous information, and realize that things are just not as apocalyptic as some would lead us to believe.

Paul Moore, Nashville 37205

Play your part

Re: "Politicizing the Crisis" by Ray Falconberry, April 8

All Americans should presently be focused on fixing the COVID-19 outbreak, rather than fixing the blame for the pandemic at this time.

The blame game can come later when the virus is gone, Americans are well and the American economy is back on its feet.

We all have a part to play in ending the pandemic whether it be staying at home, keeping our physical distance from others, wearing a mask when out, or all those items prescribed by the CDC. Let's do our part to end the pandemic.

Mike Plumley, Franklin 37069