



By Caryn Sullivan

PUSHING BACK AGAINST LABELS AND NARROW LINES

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Sometimes powerful messages resonate on multiple levels. At the 2008 Arc of Minnesota's annual awards program, a group of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities performed a skit that railed against the 'r word.' Their provocative, take-away message: We're pushing back against a demeaning and demoralizing label because we believe words matter.

I could not agree more. We have been inundated by labels during this interminable election cycle, as pundits and journalists have evaluated and predicted voters' predilections and candidates have jockeyed for critical votes. Do they use labels because it is easier to communicate with a discrete audience than a diverse one? Does the audience accept the labels because they fit, and it is comforting to know one's place in the world? Do most people neither care nor notice that they are being pigeonholed?

Many labels have been central to the election conversation. Early on, we heard the hot-button words that cause schisms – racism, sexism, and ageism – generate lively discussion and breed anger, distrust, fear and resentment. Labels based on economic status, such as middle class and wealthy, were comparatively unobjectionable until America met Joe the Plumber and a single question ignited class warfare.

With savings vanishing and debt growing, the economically based "isms" – capitalism, socialism, elitism and even fascism – have generated an unsettling firestorm within the electorate, fueled by fear of many unknowns. Interestingly, the emotionally laden labels that define us by our beliefs about life and death, guns and education, have been largely subjugated in this time of economic distress.

While I recognize their utility, I find the labels troubling. I am exasperated by two that have been used ad nauseam: "ordinary folks" and "working folks." Webster's defines "ordinary" as unexceptional or common. Politicians, pundits and journalists condescendingly refer to ordinary folks, the middle class and Joe Sixpack as if they are the same, but of lower stature than they are.

Is the highly challenged, low-wage-earning Arc member who has been trained to hold a job – an extraordinary feat, in my view – one of the ordinary folks? Does the middle-class mother of five (whose Down syndrome son is one for whom Arc advocates) ascend from or retain her ordinary folk status when she runs for vice president? Is the millionaire next door who drinks beer and watches NASCAR one of the wealthy or one of the ordinary folks?

What about working folks, those engaged in doing paid work? The rhetoric implies that people who hold jobs work (no argument there) and those who provide jobs do not work.

Yet, the employers I know work long hours to not only support their families but also to keep the economic engine going. They are doctors who went into debt and acquired pagers so they would be only a phone call away when we needed them. They are accountants like my brother, who during tax season, wakes at 4:30 a.m., works a full day at the office, then prepares tax returns at home while his wife, a pharmaceutical rep, completes paperwork after visiting doctors all day. They are lawyers, like my husband, who sleeps with his BlackBerry on the nightstand because work never ends on a lawsuit that consumes him but generates significant revenue that supports the small business of which he is part owner.

They are also guys without ties, like landscapers who hire college students to work during a short season, or computer geeks who save us when we fail to back up our systems. They are moms who run successful home-based businesses, selling supplements or skin care, often providing earning opportunities for others who work with them.

With income as the measure, some of these folks would be considered wealthy, although they may beg to differ. What do the wealthy do? Many are business owners – large and small – who create jobs. They not only pay their employees' salaries, they also pay or contribute to other mandatory and discretionary benefits: health, dental, life, disability, workers compensation, unemployment, Social Security and retirement.

They contribute to economic growth and a larger tax base by retaining other service providers, like public relations, advertising, printing, accounting and insurance firms; by purchasing office supplies and computers; and by treating employees to bagels on Tuesday mornings and beer on Friday afternoons. The wealthy support organizations like Arc by donating time, talent and money, and embracing its goal of fighting derogatory language that denigrates its members.

The "r word" demoralizes and isolates people with disabilities, and undermines efforts toward self-reliance. Labels that accentuate our economic status polarize us into haves and have-not, vitalizing some and disheartening others. The label-ridden, fever-pitched political discourse about how much we earn, how much we pay in taxes and how we fulfill our obligations as taxpayers has generated palpable anger and resentment. So, in keeping with the 2008 election mantra – time for change – I suggest we follow the example of Arc's People First performers and push back against labels that brand us without regard for our inherently complex nature. For, as they so aptly noted, words matter.

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