

Family conversations and stories shape journalism professor's worldview

Life
lessons

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calling
faith.....
conviction

My mother told me two things when I went off to college: Don't join a sorority and don't come back married to a Republican.

Political identity runs deep in my family. In the South, where I was raised, stories create character definition, and my family has more than a few stories to share.

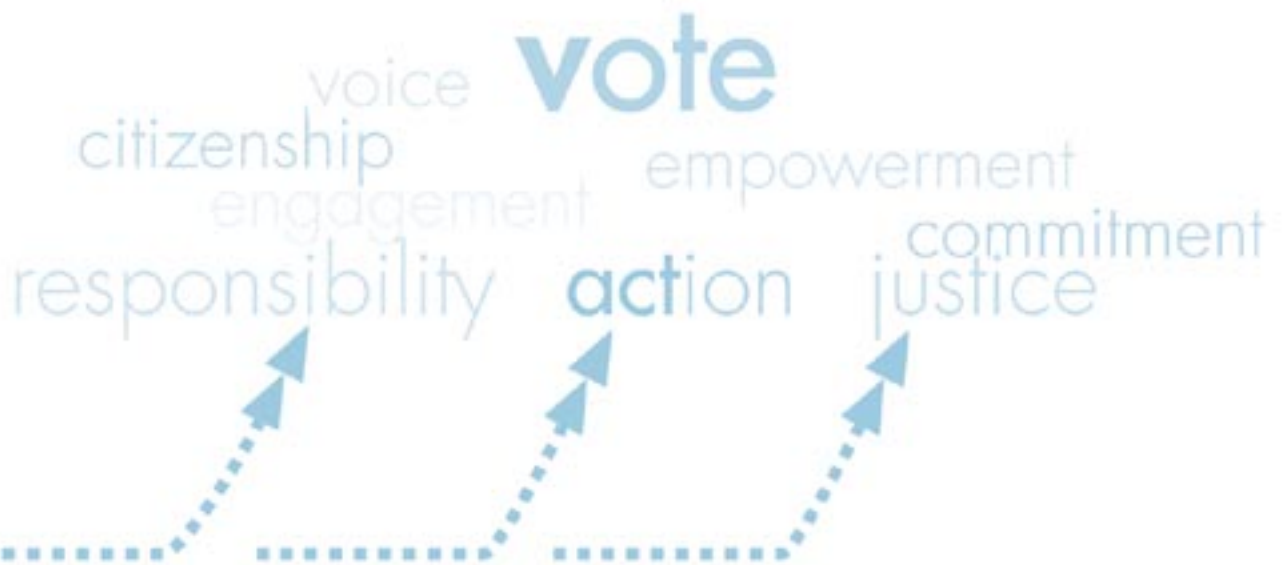
My mother's third-grade teacher took her class to watch Truman's campaign train pass through



their Kentucky town. Her family did not own a television when the 1952 Democratic convention was aired, so my mother sat on the lawn that overlooked a neighbor's living room and watched through the open window on hot summer nights. My grandparents stayed up all night after presidential elections, listening to returns on the radio.

My sister was 6 and I was nearly 10 when my father sat us down in front of the television set and said: "This is important." And together, we watched President Nixon resign. There was no partisan joy in the occasion. My father explained these early lessons in what it takes to live an integrated life: Nixon achieved great strides in building relations with China, he said, but made disastrous choices when he believed his power was threatened.

Only in my adulthood would I come to understand my parents' actions as both courageous and political. My father, while a pastor, received hate mail from other Baptist believers when he served on the board of a Catholic school for "wayward girls." After we moved to Nashville for my father's job at a Baptist publishing house, my mother recruited the first multiracial Girl Scout troop in the city. My father was not a pastor then, and many denominational employees and former ministers



belonged to the church we attended. Nonetheless, when homeless men came to our large church’s services, I knew it would be my family who would give them a ride back to their shelter and make sure that they had a meal that night.

These conversations and stories shaped my worldview.

Our political opinions were formed in dinner-table discussions with the nightly news playing in the background.

When presidential candidate Michael Dukakis was asked whether he would support the death penalty if his wife were raped and murdered, we recast the question to apply to ourselves. Our

conclusion was straightforward and, we believe, biblical: We do not support the death penalty. God’s justice and mercy do not require the life of the guilty, and the ultimate turning of the cheek may allow God’s grace to transcend the vilest of evil.

In addition, retribution for murder only breeds more anger and violence, particularly in a nation where this form of punishment is meted out most often to those with the least power.

As a military family, we are not strict pacifists, but we rarely support war. We believe that just war is rooted in conservative interpretations of Augustinian principle and aimed, again, toward protecting the powerless.

These goals of preventing violence and giving voice to the voiceless contributed to my decision to become a journalist. Real political change comes in part from information

(the hard data that helps us weigh decisions) and stories (the images that help us empathize with others). I freely disclose in any political conversation my family’s political history. But as a journalist and a journalism professor, I best serve others through providing information and sharing stories. The only political button or symbol I have ever

worn is a purple ribbon, during Domestic Violence Awareness Month each October.

The political dialogue within my family continues now via telephone and e-mail because I am more than 2,000 miles away. The commitment to public service runs deep: One brother, who volunteered in his first congressional

campaign in middle school, now works in the Tennessee governor’s office; my youngest brother is a Navy JAG; and my sister and I are both college professors. My father has died and my mother is a retired juvenile probation officer. She now teaches ESL to recent immigrants and is a poll watcher on many election days.

When I began writing this article, my mother knew what the lead paragraph would be as soon as she heard the topic. She laughed when I told her. Her statement then was really a warning to a stubborn daughter – a daughter who was listening far more than she might have thought. For my mother, faith and action, political or otherwise, cannot be separated. Faith is something you do as well as believe. Another of her favorite sayings only gathers strength when considered in a political context: Put feet on your prayers.

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