

## MEDIATE THIS!

## A TALKING CIRCLE: FEASTING ON TURKEY AND CIVIL DISCOURSE

BY STEVEN P. DINKIN

For three years now, staff at the National Conflict Resolution Center have spent the weeks before Thanksgiving fielding inquiries from people who are dreading yet another political fight at the dinner table. To rescue the lost tradition of loved ones celebrating a joyful feast, we suggest the revival of a time-honored ritual that has been adapted for modern use to heal fractured families, communities and organizations.

There was a time, not long ago, when Thanksgiving hosts sought to bring peace to family gatherings with a “no politics at dinner” rule. If all else failed, conversations that derailed could switch over to benign subjects like football and the weather.

This year, no topic is safe from partisan bickering. Protests by players have made football a touchy issue. Observations about the weather slide into debates over climate change. Avoiding conflict hasn't

worked. It might be the time to launch a new tradition: the holiday table as a “talking circle.”

The talking circle is rooted in indigenous customs dating back thousands of years. This ritual gives people a sheltered space to resolve differences. With a few rules and a small implement, a talking circle can transport participants from anger and distrust to empathy and consensus.

As our ancestors discovered in past millennia, the secret to bridging personal divides is to listen — to actively, carefully listen — even if you don't agree with the speaker. If that person is a relative or friend whom you love in spite of your disagreements, and you're going to see each other over the holidays, your stage is set.

A dinner table works perfectly as a talking circle platform because everyone can see and hear everyone else. That face-to-face connection draws people together. The only tool you need is a “talking piece,” which can be any object, like an heirloom salt shaker,



GETTY IMAGES

This week, the concept of a holiday table “talking circle” is explored.

that can be handed around.

A “circle facilitator” begins by explaining the ground rules. Talking circles are not hierarchical, so this role should not be filled by seniority or rank. The best person for the job might be a student home from college or a newcomer to the group.

Throughout the dialogue, the circle member who holds the talking piece is the only one who speaks.

Everyone else listens intently (as opposed to rehearsing in your mind what you're going to say when it's your turn). As the talking piece passes from one speaker to the next, the group's attention and consideration moves with it.

Each circle member speaks from the heart and in the first person: “I feel” or “I think.” The exchange should begin with a neutral icebreaker topic. Everyone

could share a favorite memory from a long-ago holiday season or recall a momentous event over the past year, like a birth or a wedding.

It's fine if the dialogue moves into the difficult terrain of politics as long as members focus on genuine feelings without assigning blame for problems or impugning anyone's motives. Participants are often surprised to discover that, even

as they reside at opposite ends of the partisan spectrum, they are grappling with similar emotions of equal intensity and authenticity.

This is the real lesson of a talking circle, and it has special resonance at this time of year. In focusing too much on what divides us ideologically, we have relinquished the collective strength of our shared humanity.

Instead of arguing loudly, we might listen quietly to learn something new about the people around us (and yes, even about ourselves). It's worth a try as we gather for the holidays, and it might help usher in a new sense of hope in the New Year.

Steven P. Dinkin is a professional mediator who has served as President of the San-Diego based National Conflict Resolution Center since 2003. **Do you have a conflict that needs a resolution?** Share your story with The Mediator via email at [mediatethis@ncrconline.com](mailto:mediatethis@ncrconline.com) or as an online submission by visiting [www.ncrconline.com/MediateThis](http://www.ncrconline.com/MediateThis). All submissions will be kept anonymous.

## NOTEBOOKS

From Union-Tribune reporting staff

## OUTDOORS: ERNIE COWAN

## Majestic Eagle Rock on the PCT

In the dappled shade of gnarled old live oaks, the little critter on the trail ahead looked like just another jackrabbit.

As we approached, however, caution overtook his curiosity and a furry little gray fox turned slowly and melted off into the thick brush. This was going to be a good day of hiking.

My wife and I were following a segment of the Pacific Crest Trail that meanders over the curdled landscape on the floor of Warner Valley. Our destination was Eagle Rock, a unique collection of boulders that form the shape of an eagle with wings spread as if taking off.

It was crisp but sunny with a soft breeze as we began our morning hike. Fall was all around us.

The soft, green grass of summer was now faded to hues of muted gold. The white flower clusters of wild buckwheat had turned a rusty brown, and the spreading branches and large leaves of coyote melons were drying up, leaving behind the bright yellow, baseball-sized gourds.

In the distance, cottonwood trees growing along the course of an intermittent stream were beginning to turn autumn yellow. Colorful leaves were dancing in the wind as they blew free and floated to the ground.

In the spring, this can be an equally beautiful, but entirely different hike, with fresh grass covering the ground, perhaps patches of tiny goldfield flowers offering a carpet of yellow if we have a wet winter. Spring also brings wild lupines and California poppies dotting the landscape.

The trailhead for this easy, 6.5-mile roundtrip hike is on state Route 79 at the Cal Fire station, just south of Warner Springs. This is where the Pacific Crest Trail crosses the highway and continues north.

Park across the highway from the fire station, then cross the road and look for a gate adjacent to the south driveway of the station.

You will see a gate and signs that mark the entrance to this portion of the 2,650-mile trail that extends from Mexico to Canada.

The first mile or so of the trail meanders through groves of old oak trees and along Cañada Verde creek that often has running water during wetter times of the year.

You will also encounter two additional gates within the first quarter-mile, but they are easy to open and just there to keep cattle from escaping. Once through the gates, the trail climbs gradually through the oaks,



ERNIE COWAN

The eagle of Eagle Rock, with wings spread as if taking off.

merging into chaparral covered hills and then out into the open grasslands after about a mile-and-a-half of hiking.

You will come to several trails crossing the main trail but follow the PCT markers to stay on the path to Eagle Rock.

Eventually you leave behind the oaks, following the well-worn trail over an undulating grassland dotted with boulders.

At about mile 3.2 you will come to a trail junction and notice a pile of boulders a short distance uphill to your left. That is the Eagle Rock formation. You'll need to hike around to the other side to see the eagle.

I've never been with anyone who hasn't been amazed at this giant stone raptor. The eagle is perched on a hill with a commanding view of the surrounding countryside.

As if vying for equal time, a red-tailed hawk was perched on one wing of Eagle Rock as we approached. Maybe curious or just lazy, he slowly flew off as we got closer, landing again on a nearby boulder.

After taking pictures, we dumped our daypacks, explored the area a bit, then enjoyed a trail lunch and the beautiful views. So far, we were less than two hours into our adventure. By the way, mornings are the best time to photograph Eagle Rock.

The midday sunlight was now pleasantly warm. It was tempting to nap, but we decided to hit the trail for the return hike.

Even though we were on the same trail as we took coming to Eagle Rock, the views are different on the return trip. From the open expanses of the grasslands we could see the large white dome of Palomar Observatory on top of the mountains to the west and a curious herd of cattle grazing in the distance.

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## THE READERS' REPRESENTATIVE: ADRIAN VORE

## The case of the curling newspaper

Have you noticed your newspaper curling over? At least a few readers, including the readers' rep, have.

Last week Denny Brokaw from Carmel Valley emailed and asked why his paper was curling up when he tried to read it. “Very annoying,” he said.

I thought it must be something just Brokaw was experiencing. But then I sat at my desk, pulled out the paper I receive at home, and, by gosh, it was curling. I saw other copies of that morning's U-T and the Los Angeles Times, the U-T's sister paper. The corners on some of them were curled, too. Then Barbara Vail of Carlsbad called Wednesday. She wanted to know what was up with the curling paper. That did it. I called the Times pressroom.

As many readers know, the U-T is printed at the Times plant. The pressroom guys confirmed that some curling is happening. It's because of the low humidity, they said. Dry weather will cause newsprint to curl at the edges. I assume readers in L.A. might be noticing the same thing, because both papers use the same newsprint.

## Not 'at attention'

Reporter John Wilkens heard from a few readers last week who spotted an error in a caption for a photo that accompanied his story on a Veterans Day ceremony at Mount Soledad. The story ran in print Tuesday.

The picture showed a man in a WWI uniform standing as part of the event.

The caption read, “Paul Pintek, dressed as a World War I doughboy, stands at attention during Monday's ceremony at the Mount Soledad National Veterans Memorial.”

Incorrect, the readers pointed out. He's standing “at rest.”

The photographer provided the original wording, which a copy editor used in writing the caption that appeared in print. Although, Pintek appears rigid with his eyes and head locked, he was not standing “at attention.” If that were the case, he would have had his arms at his sides and legs and heels together with the toes angled out.

## Santa Anas is correct

A reader called last week to say that the Santa Ana winds that blew through the county should be called “Santana” winds.

U-T copy editor and weather reporter Rob Krier said he has heard this before, but “Santana” is incorrect. Indeed, the correct name is Santa Ana. The name derives from the Santa Ana Canyon in Orange County, one of the places that the winds whip through.

By the way, have readers noticed Krier's updated photo on the weather page? No more mustache.

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K.C. ALFRED U-T

The original caption for this photo caught readers' attention.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES | LOOKING BACK OVER 150 YEARS

## MONUMENT MARKS END OF TRANSCONTINENTAL HIGHWAY

The San Diego Union-Tribune will mark its 150th anniversary in 2018 by presenting a significant front page from the archives each day throughout the year.

## Sunday, November 18, 1923

In 1923, Ed Fletcher unveiled the Pacific coast milestone of a southern transcontinental highway in San Diego's downtown plaza and read a message of congratulations from President Coolidge.

The final link in the Washington, D.C., to San Diego route — a stretch of highway between El Centro and Yuma, Arizona — was completed in 1925. Part of the highway later became U.S. Route 80.

Here are the first few paragraphs of the story:

## PRESIDENT MARKS END OF HIGHWAY

Col. Fletcher Unveils Marble Monument in Plaza When Coolidge Touches Button in National Capital.

THE conclusion of 15 years of effort for a southern transcontinental highway was celebrated here yesterday afternoon when President Coolidge, with the assistance of Col. Ed Fletcher, unveiled the Pacific Coast Milestone of the Lee transcontinental highway. Shortly before 1:45 o'clock yesterday afternoon the President in his Washington office, touched an electric button that rang a gong in the plaza here. At the signal, Col. Fletcher, vice president of the Lee Highway

association, unveiled the handsome marble milestone and read the President's message.

## STONE IS S.D. MARBLE

The ceremonies were brief, but impressive. Besides his reading of the President's message to San Diego, Col. Fletcher made a few remarks of his own, and he was followed by Mayor Bacon and Admiral A.H. Robertson, each of whom spoke a few words appropriate to the occasion.



The milestone which marks the Pacific terminus of the Lee highway is a solid piece of San Diego county marble, donated by the Verruga Marble company. It is located in the plaza to the east of the fountain and bears on its east face the shield of the Lee highway and the designation as the Pacific end of the highway, which starts at Washington, D.C. On the western face is a bronze tablet bearing testimony to the high regard of San Diego citizens for Col. Fletcher, whose activity has played an important part in the establishment of the highway. The stone was draped with a flag, which at the tap of the

gong, was hoisted to a staff erected on the speaker's platform. The massed bands of the Scouts, which had assembled at the milestone for the ceremony, played the national anthem, and as the last strains died away, Col. Fletcher read the following message from the President:

## RECALLS HARDING

“It is a pleasure to comply with the request of your Lee Highway association and the city of San Diego to send a message for the dedication of the Pacific milestone. President Harding was to have dedicated the Pacific milestone, and had planned to make an address at San Diego on this subject of highways. Perhaps, then, I may appropriately recall something of what he said in dedicating the zero milestone in Washington on June 4, last. Referring to the highway system, which at all times have served to unify society and promote civilization, he spoke of our national highway system of 200,000 miles of modern improved roads, together with more than 2,000,000 miles of rural highways, which yet remain to be improved as rapidly as economic conditions shall justify.

“President Harding emphasized the necessity to utilize every form of transportation to the utmost practicable extent, and commended the various associations which have fostered the good roads movement. Particularly, he thanked the Lee Highway association for erecting the zero milestone, the Pacific milestone, and others which have been made official bench marks of the United States coast and geodetic survey.”

ONLINE: View this and other anniversary front pages online at [sandiegouniontribune.com/150-years](http://sandiegouniontribune.com/150-years).