

## One nature, indivisible by differences



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COLUMNIST

In early January my wife and I were cozied down in a cabin in the Nantahala forest for three nights. After two days snowed-in at our place in Asheville, the rain on the cabin roof was a warming welcome.

I'd like to say we read books when we came back from explorations near the lake or rivers — and we did read — but the lamps weren't very good for light, so we watched some shows on the flatscreen. We happened to be there to watch President Obama's final address in Chicago, feeling some sadness to see him leave.

For balance, the next morning we watched then President-elect Trump's first news conference. We had a very different response to that, but this column is not about partisan politics. Well, it is, but I'll come back to that.

Hiking up a leg of the Appalachian Trail, we found ourselves in the burned area of Tellico Gap. The smell of the autumn fires was strong, yet the trail was still in good condition. We were thankful for firefighters.

I was reflecting on the impressive way men and women from all over the country came to Western

North Carolina to fight those fires. On those steep and slippery slopes it isn't hard to imagine the dangerous work those crews struggled with in the battle against exploding trees and hot flames whipped up by unpredictable winds.

Charred stumps and scarred remnants of rhododendrons, mountain laurel and larger trees surrounded our ascent. When we reached the ridge and the fire tower we intended to climb, the fog was so thick we couldn't see anything. As a light rain began to fall, we turned back and enjoyed a slow saunter in the mist.

The morning we left the cabin we drove over another gap. Due to the fires and recent snow, another trail was closed, so we continued down the twisting road toward Franklin. Rounding a corner, we saw a white car angled into a ditch. A lady frantically waved us down so we pulled over to help. We put on our coats and crossed the road to see how she had wedged her car into the slope, one front tire spinning. We did our best — but it was no use.

About this time a bearded guy in a large truck came down the

mountain. We waved him over and without hesitation he pulled over to see what he could do. We all got branches and rocks for traction, but it still wasn't enough. Then two young forest rangers stopped to help. Finally, another man with a truck and trailer joined us.

Everyone looked over the situation. The Latina driver was nervously joking with us, concerned that we might damage her rental car. The first guy got a tow rope and climbed under to attach it, making a comment to us, "If anything goes wrong, my name is Barack Obama — he's on his way out — so you can blame me." We chuckled.

The car was carefully pulled down one side of the ditch, enough so the woman ranger could drive it out with ease. The lady was so happy, thanking each of us with a handshake and smile.

Six strangers helping one stranded woman in need. No question; no hesitation. Were we Republicans or Democrats? Were we liberals or conservatives? Were we rich or poor — employed or unemployed? Were we Christians or Muslims or atheists? Were we North Carolinians or from another state?

In the moment, no one cared about that. Someone needed help, and we helped. Like the firefighters from across the

nation. What does it matter what their politics or religion or bank account may tell us about them? Strangers don't seem so strange when we realize that we are strangers to them too — and it doesn't have to make any difference.

Something we call "America." We live here together. It's our country, our nation, our land — not "those people" and "our people." But it's too easy to get stuck in a ditch and forget, too easy to think we are the true Americans and this is our nation not "theirs."

I reflect back to that burned-over trail in Nantahala. We stumbled over blackened roots for miles and got soot on our boots. Even in the midst of so much destruction, the forest was already regenerating itself, and us. Tripping over those intertwined roots was a step-by-step reminder that the land — nature itself — marks us by rain and fire, mind and muscle. We are indivisible.

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