



The Politics of Being Apolitical

Why not caring about political hijinks shouldn't be confused with not caring at all.

DURING LAST YEAR'S POLITICAL CAMPAIGN, more than one friend hit me with the "how-can-you-not-care-about-these-issues" question. It was, as much as I may not like to admit it, a reasonable charge. I've made it perfectly clear to those who know me well, and to some who may not know me that well, that politics turns me off. I'm turned off by the finger-pointing sensationalism. I'm turned off by petty partisan arguments and an inability to compromise. I'm turned off by the blinding and disingenuous influence of money (some estimates put the 2012 election tab at an eye-popping \$6 billion—the costliest in history).

But too often, it seems to me, a lack of interest in the political process—and in the

cottage industries that have arisen around the process, like the professional pundit class and largely fact-free political talk shows—is confused with apathy. Here's the thing: I *do* care about the struggling economy, our subpar education funding, and whether all U.S. residents have access to affordable health care. I worry about the people whom these issues affect, including me. I did my part and voted. And I'd like to think I've done more to help improve things in our neighborhoods, states, and beyond than the talking heads that, in my mind, add almost nothing constructive to the conversation.

I'm a big believer in putting an everyday face on our country's problems. How can we understand the ramifications of such-and-such congressman's agenda if we don't know the person whose life will change when those initiatives are enacted? When politics is reduced to a game of winners and losers, those in power often miss the opportunity to shine a light on the real issues. Instead—and the mass media is complicit in this—the story becomes about the process itself: whose polling numbers are better, which campaign is in disarray, who's having an affair with whom.

Instead of shouting out my personal opinion on cable TV or social media, I'd rather tell the story of the small-town individual who embodies a social issue—human rights, women's rights, our welfare system, food security, environmental threats—that triggers discussion about humanity, ethics, and morality. Over the years, I've written human interest stories about such things: a young foreigner seeking political asylum in Colorado, a local woman addicted to abortion, families surviving on food stamps or sleeping in homeless shelters. Outside of my job, I've been fortunate to be a mentor to local elementary school students. I've tried to instill in these children the ambition to follow a career they love, or to simply accomplish a challenging goal. Those interactions are real and hands-on; they help me feel like I'm making a difference on the ground, underneath the hype-cloud of the media.

Sometimes, though, I feel isolated. I just married one of the most informed people I know, whose stint as a congressional legislative director in Washington, D.C., armed him with enough Capitol Hill savvy to flatten most people in a political debate. I work in a business in which knowing the latest in political maneuvering—and having a sharp opinion on those maneuvers—is considered a basic job requirement. I respect my husband's and my colleagues' love of the game—or rather, their ability to channel that noise into something meaningful. But the next time someone asks me why I don't care about these issues, I am going to explain to them the ways I do participate in the things that are important to me. And I'm going to be proud of that. —**JULIE DUGDALE**