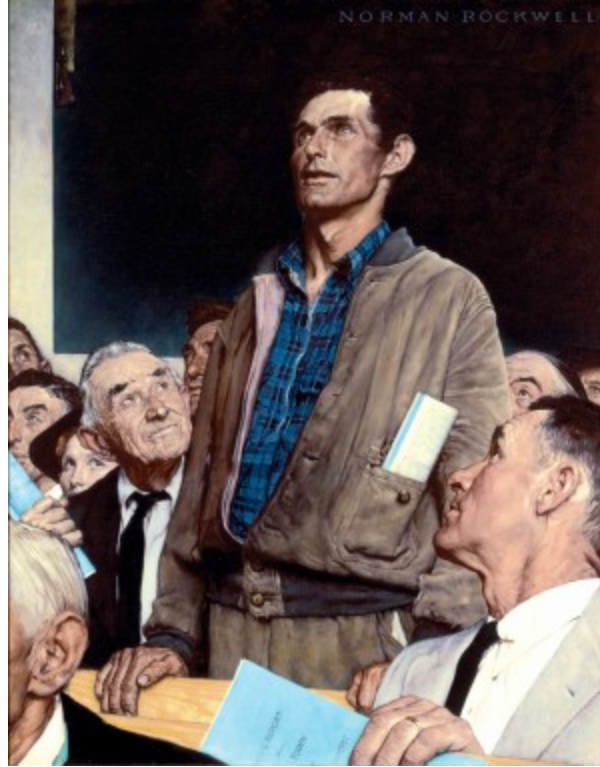


A Civic Engagement Lesson from Norman Rockwell
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Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), "Freedom of Speech," 1943,
Story illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," February 20, 1943.
Norman Rockwell Museum Collections. ©1943 SEPS: Curtis Licensing, Indianapolis, IN.

*"The human spirit finds many ways
to be heard. People speak out. We write.
We sing. We create works of art.
In every language and form of expression,
we offer opinions, tell stories, share dreams
and lift our voices in protest.*

*Freedom honors this gift. It gives
each one of us the opportunity
to tell who we are,
to say what we stand for,
to express our love for others,
and to show our gratitude."*

I do not know the speaker of the above quote, but I first saw it accompanying the above picture of Norman Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* painting, which was the first in a series of four paintings

depicting the four basic freedoms identified in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's State of the Union address delivered in January 1941.

So, what does this painting have to do with civic engagement? In today's political environment where our public discourse has devolved from one of respectfully listening and engaging in a dialogue regarding opposing views into one of name calling and shouting down those who have an opposite viewpoint, this painting illustrates how citizens can positively and respectfully engage their government and their elected officials.

The *Freedom of Speech* painting and above quote were presented to the Frederick County Board of Supervisors by a citizen who attended a board meeting at which numerous people of differing viewpoints spoke passionately, yet respectfully, during the public comment portion of the meeting. This citizen was so impressed not only with the manner in which the citizens engaged the Board, but also the attentiveness and respect the board members gave to each speaker, regardless of where they stood on this particular issue. This individual felt the painting embodied what they had witnessed that evening and provided the painting and quote in a frame so it could be displayed in the board room at all times, as a reminder of how our public discourse should be.

I am sure that most, if not all, of you are neck deep in your budget process. And, as you know, a part of that process is the public hearing on the budget. This year as you listen to the public comments during your respective hearings take some time and observe the manner and tone in which the citizens address your board or council. Are they passionate? Are they respectful? The important thing to take note of is that they are engaged. Many are like the man depicted in the painting. They might not wear a suit or fancy dress. They might not be the most eloquent speakers. However, they are all interested enough in the budget that they felt it necessary to come to the meeting and share their comments.

"The human spirit finds many ways to be heard." That my friends is what civic engagement is all about.