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The diversity dynamic

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The world in which we live and work today is increasingly diverse. We all want to be treated with respect, valued and welcomed in our environment and community, be it the neighborhood in which we live or the office in which we work. America's growing diversity has reached nearly every state in the union.

Most of us say that we value difference and diversity, but do we? Do we really know what diversity means? It is one of the most misunderstood words in today's language. The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes diversity as, "the condition of being diverse; variety; the inclusion of diverse people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organizations."

I recently attended a spirited conversation about the dynamics of difference at The Shenandoah Club in Roanoke, facilitated by Susannah C. Rinehart, director of education for diversity and inclusion in the Office of Equity and Inclusion at Virginia Tech. The initiative, of which I am a part, is STAR, the Spirit of Tolerance and Art in the Region, a subgroup of Creative Connectors.

STAR is one of four initiatives from the Creative Community Leadership Project in cooperation with the city of Roanoke and the Creative Class Group. This was the first of a series of three open-door discussions about diversity and inclusion.

Several business and educational leaders in the Roanoke and New River valleys comprise the STAR team. We are part of 30 people engaged in a 12-month campaign to strengthen and diversify the local economy.

The leadership project's methods and goals were developed around the creative-class theory pioneered by Richard Florida, one of the world's leading public intellectuals on economic competitiveness and author of the best-selling books "The Rise of the Creative Class" and "Who's Your City."

Florida's international model of 4T's -- talent, tolerance, technology and territorial assets -- is the framework for building regional prosperity. Florida describes the

"creative class" as 40 million workers in two main groups of creative people. The first is the super-creative core whose occupations include science, engineering, education, computer programming and research, with arts, design and media workers making a small subset of this group.

The other group is the creative professionals who are knowledge-based workers in health care, business and finance, the legal sector and education. The Bohemians, describing people who have nontraditional lifestyles, are also included in the creative class.

The conversation allowed the more than 50 participants to discuss what they value in a community and the notion that we can be a community without all being the same nor all believing the same thing.

Most think it is easier to be different in a large community, such as Washington, D.C., versus Roanoke. One participant said, "The good thing about Roanoke is it's a small city. The bad thing about Roanoke is it's a small city."

An African-American woman said, "I would drive four miles to get an egg before asking my next door neighbor for one," adding that she has lived in her house for 17 years but one of her next-door neighbors has never met her. She said her family has hosted block parties, yet the one neighbor has never responded to an invitation.

Does Roanoke hold diversity as a value to be actively sought? Why is difference so threatening? When Rinehart asked this question of the attendees, responses included racial segregation, economics, education, politics, religion, sports and "townies versus transplants," but the one word that came up the most was ignorance.

Think about what diversity means to you. Are you willing to reflect on how you think, feel and interact across difference? Imagine life if we were all the same -- if we looked the same, talked the same, dressed the same and had the same skin color.

In my view, diversity is what makes the world go around. And the creative class is transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life in the Roanoke and New River valleys.