A few weeks back, you referred to yourself as a Free-Range Catholic [A free-range welcome for the Pope, Ken Trainor, Viewpoints, April 16]. Interesting term … I had never heard it used before. At times I have referred to myself as a Cafeteria Catholic, though I have always been a tad uncomfortable with the term.

To me, it somewhat implies a degree of theological and intellectual laziness that certainly does not describe many good friends who share concerns similar to mine. And yet, I must admit that the term has sticking power. So, what the hell, I guess I’m a Cafeteria Catholic.

Certainly my upbringing could not have been more traditionally Catholic. I was raised on the West Side of Chicago in a secure Catholic ghetto. I loved my childhood. My family was large and broadly extended. My parents were loving, intelligent, supportive—and devoted to their Catholic religion. And I am the beneficiary of 16 years of Catholic education, the final eight with the Jesuits. Yeah, I was raised a Catholic.

And yet, I was also taught to think. My parents demanded that I listen carefully and that I think more carefully about our actions and their impact on others. Former village director of community services, Rogene Hill, illustrates the point when she says, “Integration means something positive for whites. For many it is a cause they feel good about, a feeling of having been generous, courageous and noble. For African Americans, it means getting what is due and often with struggle. African Americans do not often integrate for the noble experience but for the economic benefit, period.”

Ruby believes most people in the village do not understand the complexity of what we do to encourage diversity in the housing market. I agree. There are many programs and some are hard to understand. There are linkages that take time to appreciate—for example, the links between the quality of our schools and neighborhoods or the links between village and Housing Center programs.

The housing market is really a group of submarkets. The weakest submarket are the apartments. Rental units are not evenly distributed across the village. Most are in east Oak Park, so our apartment programs commit more resources there than elsewhere.

When Ruby interviewed the two former directors of the Housing Center (Bobbie Raymond and Agnes Stemann), both said maintaining white demand was a concern right from the start. Ideally, our mostly studio and one-bedroom units attract demand from all races. Black demand is strong; White demand is not as strong. Relying on the market alone can lead to segregation. Recognizing this, Bobbie Raymond created the Oak Park Regional Housing Center in 1972. To its credit, the Housing Center works in Oak Park and the region.

Unfortunately, racism still exists, so 40 years after the village

A Cafeteria Catholic and his individual conscience

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...
Oak Park, keep fighting the good fight

I wish to express my thanks to Wednesday Journal and Ken Trainor for publishing the fine reviews of my “Oak Park Stories” work in Viewpoints. I am especially grateful to Bob Trezevant, who wrote the introduction, located the other writers and shepherded the essays to publication. I found the reviews by Betsy Ritzman, George Bailey, Paul Hamer, Frank Lipo and Rick Kuner interesting, well conceived and, at times, a bit embarrassing in their praise. Thanks.

The pioneers of Oak Park’s social experiment in diversity are now retiring, some have died. The memories of the “bad old days” are beginning to fade and some, I fear, are under the misapprehension that the “battle is over.” To maintain an ethnically diverse community that is welcoming to all is a perpetual battle. Racism and homophobia are everywhere. Because Oak Park is an island, it is easy to be lulled into a false sense of success.

I am proud of my hometown and hope it will continue to fight the good fight.

Jay Ruby
Emeritus professor of anthropology
and a DOOPer

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What we’ve learned
from page 23

passed its Fair Housing Ordinance, we still need village housing programs, the Housing Center, the Oak Park Residence Corporation, and progressive apartment owners. Demographics, housing preferences, and economic trends are just some of the forces we must take into account by periodically revising what we do.

Lessons learned

How do we live in a diverse community?

The people Ruby interviewed have some tips:

Yolanda Taylor—“Accept me for who I am and I will accept you for who you are.”

Helena Gervais McCullough—Be tolerant and accepting of all kinds of people.

Rebecca Levin and Bob Trezevant—Work to make Oak Park better. Start with common concerns.

Craig and Yolanda Taylor—Do the best you can for the children. They need to move across race, class, and cultural divides.

Jay Ruby—“To live in Oak Park means you must constantly consider how one can live with people who are unlike you.”

Val Camilletti—“We say we want to be a diverse community, so we have to try to make it work.”

Learn from our differences.

Be persistent.

What are the lessons we can take from Ruby’s work? I suggest the following:

Diversity is fragile and hard to achieve. Oak Park’s story is unusual and rare. Most communities that have tried to maintain diversity have failed. Learn from their (and our) mistakes and correct them.

Work together. Disagree respectfully. Resolve our differences. Move forward. Collectively, we can make a difference.

Understand that progress will come in small increments among many people with occasional large spurts. It will take time. We will see progress more easily in our children than in ourselves.

Support leaders who understand what will make us a better community and who know how to get things done.

Be willing to take on tough problems. Make timely decisions even with limited information, monitor results, and take corrective actions as needed.

Pass our knowledge on to the next generations.

Beware of the “free riders” who claim we have achieved diversity so we can stop spending time and money on diversity programs. They are wrong.

Take advantage of the wealth of talent in this village. Many people will help if asked. Get rid of the Not Invented Here Syndrome. There are many sources for good ideas.

Take the advice of former village president John Philbin who said provide good village services first—otherwise government will not have the credibility to operate social programs.

Ruby concludes that Oak Park is successful in its attempts to be diverse. But he warns: “Those who feel that the only way this social experiment can survive is constant vigilance are experiencing a kind of battle fatigue.”

I think we are losing our diversity, especially in the apartment submarket. We are overdue for some revisions.

When you see Jay, shake his hand and thank him for sharing the stories with us. Thank the people who shared their stories with Jay. His work provides a valuable snapshot of our community. It will help those who come after us. We cannot pay back our debt to Ruby and the people he portrays. This debt we pay forward.

Our predecessors did a great job. Now it is our turn. As poet Robert Frost said, “We have miles to go before we sleep.”

The Oak Park stories told in Ruby’s ethnographic study:

Rebekah and Sophie — A Lesbian Family
The Taylors — A middle-class African-American family portrait
Oak Park Regional Housing Center
Dear Old Oak Parkers – The Helena Gervais McCullough family
Val Camilletti — A cultural institution