

Calendar

Chatterbox Café

Politics and Religion Discussion Group

Affirmative Action: Served Its Purpose or Barely Served?"
 "Lawsuits Today: Protecting the Victims or Legalized Extortion?"
 "Iraq: Long, Short, or No Occupation Policy?"
 "World Trade Organization
 *Protest: What's It All About?"
 "The Mideast and U.S. Policy: Doomed to Disaster?"

Looking at a list of daunting topics planned for the weekly discussion group at a Hillcrest coffeehouse, one can't help but think of another question to pose to participants. It

LOCAL EVENTS

pertains to the group's founder and moderator, Gary Grine of Chula Vista: "Gary Grine: Glutton for Punishment or on to Something?"

Grine says P&R stands for "politics and religion." He didn't want to name the group that outright, however. "It's because my first fear was we'd get a lot of religious diatribe going on. We had one topic, 'Fundamentalist Religions: Predictor or Cause of the Apocalypse?' I was anticipating people getting violent, actually. But it was a very good discussion. We decided you can't really blame fundamentalist religions. It's politicians using them that's the trouble."

The group is seven months old. In the beginning, Grine picked the topics himself. Now he asks people to submit suggestions. The list of future topics is chosen and publicized in advance.

Grine has learned what tends to go over best. "Questions about war and culture, society and history, I don't get a big turnout for. The biggest turnouts are for specific philosophical discussions." The weeks that featured existentialism and Friedrich Nietzsche, he says, brought out 20 or 25 people.

For the one titled "Lord of the Rings: Messages for a Modern World?" he got exactly two takers. Even the regulars — a core of seven — weren't set on fire by that one.

Grine is 50. The average age of the group is "about 40," he guesses. Are they mostly men? "We have several ladies," Grine replies, adding, "We get a lot of first-generation people. A Russian lady shows up and is very interested. Another lady, who said she couldn't afford college, says she is sitting there just to learn. We have an older gentleman who comes in, and he's one of the most well-read people I've ever



Living Room discussion group

known. We also have our Socialist hard core that show up and sneak in that class struggle any time they can squeeze it into anything."

Like many organizers of meetings and groups today, Grine says he wishes he could attract more young people. "When I was in college, we discussed these things on an everyday basis."

Grine seems genuinely to want to know what young people think. "What is the philosophy of today?" he asks. For a discussion about Islam in December, Grine says, "We had a young man heading out for Iraq who had studied the Koran. We learned a lot from him about what his fellow sailors on the ship think. Christianity going down, Islam going up. People are looking for something to base their lives upon."

Grine sees his group as part of an old tradition. "In Europe and in the Middle East, you have these café societies. People get together face-to-face, not on computers, and discuss these topics. That's how they shape their ideas." Hosting such groups has classically been the job of a coffeehouse, says Grine, a business broker by

profession, who sold this coffeehouse to its present owner.

The discussions are "at a fairly high level," says Grine. Like the older gentleman, "most people who come to the group are readers." Often, participants have certain basic texts in common as reference points, even though they weren't "assigned" beforehand.

The Socratic method is employed. Grine gives its definition: "When someone comes up with an argument that they can't really substantiate, we question them until we find the basis of the argument. It's a dialectic thing. It makes everybody think."

Like lurkers in chat rooms, some group members merely listen. "And that's okay."

If, by contrast, anyone tries to monopolize, Grine doesn't shut them up. "I just let them speak their piece and then politely jump in there and put the question to other people."

People do sometimes come with an agenda, says Grine. And that's okay, too. "We don't tell people they're wrong. We want people to believe

whatever they want to believe. We don't close anyone out."

The agenda types are invariably one-timers. "If anybody says something they don't agree with, they don't show up again."

What else is going on at the coffeehouse while these discussions take place? Grine is asked. "It's very crowded at night. A knitting group meets there. Once we met while another group was in there talking about investments. Last week, there was a Common Cause group. It's a great atmosphere. Everyone's talking. If you wanted to, you could just drift from group to group."

— Jeanne Schinto

P&R (Politics and Religion) Discussion Group:
"Affirmative Action: Served Its Purpose or Barely Served?"
Wednesday, January 7
(new topic every Wednesday)
7:00 p.m.
The Living Room Coffeehouse,
1417 University Avenue, Hillcrest
Free
619-295-7911

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