Suggested headline:

***Cut, cautiously, without demonizing people***

Sometimes, when the wandering spirit possesses me, I hit the road just to experience the grace and grandeur of our United States of America.

More often than not, as the years catch up, it’s on four wheels rather than two. But the effect is mostly the same. Energizing. Soothing. Appreciative.

There are only two of us who grew up on the family farm in Metcalf, Illinois, my sister Kathi and myself. So a semi-regular stop in these wanderings is at her house, in the north suburbs of Oklahoma City.

This year we renewed a joke shared between us the past few years. How can it be, for two kids off the farm, that we grew up to be among the most despised and distrusted villains in modern America? A mainstream journalist (me). A public school teacher (her).

We’ve both been relatively conservative with our politics over the years, as farm folks tend to be. Nevertheless, hardly a day goes by that we're not exposed to angry rants about the evils of media and public education.

I may have one up on Kathi, though. I don’t believe she’s been called “an enemy of the people” yet.

We have both experienced surprising face-to-face interactions, though, with people we have known nearly all our lives. It goes like this. “Public education is nothing but an indoctrination center run by people who hate America.” Or, “The media is nothing but a pack of liars out to destroy America.”

And we wonder: Do these people, who we thought were friends (or maybe relatives), know who we are and how we put food on the table for our kids?

When Kathi and I get together we’re both able to laugh about it. But it’s a stinging laugh.

I know this about my sister. She’s as solid and moral as they come. She taught in some pretty tough schools. Even in retirement, she did remedial work with inner-city little kids, who had been dealt a bad hand by life. She put her heart and soul into trying to make a positive difference. The crap she hears from others says more about their lack of understanding and compassion than it says about her.

As for myself, I’m not interested in mounting a defense. Like most of my brothers and sisters in journalism I’ve tried to find and tell the truth, best I can. I sleep just fine at night.

Here’s what is bothering me today, though. There’s a new worst American ever, and it’s apparently the men and women who work in government roles. They are under attack like never before.

I have to admit chuckling at the old joke that the scariest words are, “Hello, I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”

I feel a little ashamed about that today. Maybe our collective disrespect led to this moment in which government workers are being treated as superfluous do-nothings at best, and America-hating agents of national doom at worst.

They have even been called, by people in power, “evil” and “criminals.”

Look, I believe government at many levels is bloated and resistant to change. We spend too much for too little. The national debt leaps by trillions at a time.

By the way, elected politicians approved every dollar spent.

The brilliant conservative columnist George F. Will often observed that the budgetary disconnect exists because Americans want more from their government than they are willing to pay taxes to support. In your garage, you can’t have a Ferrari on a Chevrolet budget. The same principle should apply in government.

What bothers me today has nothing to do with looking for ways to control government spending and improve efficiency. Any organization can reduce costs. I know. Been there, done that, as the newspaper industry contracted the past two decades.

There’s a right way and a wrong way to go about it. Making smart decisions means putting in the time to study organizational responsibilities and measure individual situations. It means having a plan to protect and preserve key services on which people depend. It means recognizing that political differences are separate from job performance.

It doesn’t mean taking a meat cleaver willy-nilly to entire parts of the government – often, parts that have been identified as partisan political targets – just because you can. Remember, too, public employees work for all of us, not some of us, and we Americans tend to disagree with each other.

Holding down the cost of government is unavoidable if America ever is to tame runaway deficits.

But staff people are not evil. They deserve respect. They deserve due process. The agencies they represent deserve the same, because it’s a lot easier to tear down expertise than it is to rebuild it, once lost.

My public school teacher sister and I can relate. It’s no fun being demonized.

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