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# Menius: Stories we tell ourselves

BY ART MENIUS

*My View*

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“Read any good books lately,” I asked the colorful lady in her spring hat. Louise just sat there, staring blankly toward Weaver Street.

Undaunted, I offered that I had just read David Korten’s “Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth.”

“You remember Korten?” I asked. “He wrote ‘The Great Turning and When Corporations Rule the World.’”

Louise kept staring, stone faced.

“He extends his work from ‘The Great Turning’ on how narrative shapes society,” I continued. “He asserts that communities of all sizes and types are held together by ‘shared cultural stories.’ From there he posits that when we get those stories wrong, we get our future wrong.”

Louise sat quietly, as oblivious to my words as she was to the unusually cool weather for the last Sunday in April. Statuary art, even in Carrboro, is prone to be that way. Louise has been pleasant but silent for 18 years since Art on Weaver.

I finally gave up talking to Louise and headed on about my way. I didn’t stop thinking about Korten and shared cultural stories, however. They might not affect Louise, but they do affect flesh and blood people and the communities we inhabit.

How do our shared stories in southern Orange County shape how we think about Carrboro and Chapel Hill? How do they affect the policy positions for which we advocate locally. What are the cultural stories we share around here?

One could be that Chapel Hill is a village. If Chapel Hill is a village, it is a mighty big one at 60,000 people. To me a village is Efland, Bynum, or Hurdle Mills. I can remember back to 1959 when Eastgate opened and the university owned the utilities. It didn’t seem like a village even back then.

The village myth, however, seems to continue to influence our policy making.

The paucity of affordable and mid-price housing is one such effect since Chapel Hill slowed growth in the “village.” Although 140 West and the redevelopment of University Square are bringing apartment and condo living for adults downtown, for many years the village story resisted this trend. That produced a downtown with a restaurant-dominated retail mix abandoned to the students and an area with housing issues.

Downtown Carrboro similarly suffers from a shortage of affordable and especially mid-range housing. The story remains true that Carrboro is an arts and creative economy town. Without building upward to provide the needed housing and workspace, however, it may not be true much longer. For 2012, the median house or condo value in Carrboro was \$346,386, in Chapel Hill \$374,033, but for North Carolina as a whole just \$150,100. For Carrboro that marked a jump of almost \$180,000 since 2000.

Another story we tell ourselves is that Carrboro and Chapel Hill are diverse. While we are two of the most open, accepting communities anywhere, ethnically we are very white and economically becoming increasingly polarized. Carrboro is 70.9 percent white, Chapel Hill 72.8 percent, both just above the state’s 70 percent. Both places hover around 10 percent African-American, less than half North Carolina’s 21 percent. While Carrboro (\$45,159) nearly matched the state’s median household income and Chapel Hill (\$51,690) exceeded it, both places exhibited poverty rates above those for North Carolina. That shows a pull toward top and bottom.

I found Louise right where I had left her. She is a good listener since she never interrupts.

“What if we changed our stories,” I asked. “Would we not make some change and more progress if we believed these stories: Chapel Hill is a small city; Carrboro is a large town. Both have face a loss of middle-class residents. Residents leave our towns to go work elsewhere. People drive into southern Orange from other places to work here in jobs that don’t pay them enough to live here. Both Chapel Hill and Carrboro are dominated by white people. While we have a real affordable housing problem, we also have a true shortage of mid-range housing.”

Louise just sat there, silently staring.

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