For many years now I have been a part of a group of women who head off into the wilderness together on canoe trips to the Boundary Waters, kayak trips on Lake Superior, and cross country ski trips up the North Shore. We range in ages, levels of experience, and skill. That range adds an immeasurable richness to these trips. I recall in the early days of our trips, we’d be up at dawn, have a quick, healthy breakfast, and head out for a long day’s paddle or ski. As we all get older and wider, we seem to get up later, eat more gourmet (and less healthy!) food, and have shorter, and probably slower adventures. But what has remained and has grown deeper and more meaningful with each trip has been the connection among us and the support that we provide for each other. This support is not only in making it successfully to a safe end of each day’s journey, but also in helping each other navigate the challenges that we face in our daily lives.

From our very first trip together we have always had an unspoken rule that guides us out on the water or along the trail: we always try to go at the speed of the slowest person. It’s never about how far or how fast we can go, or about who is the fastest or best paddler or skier. I honestly don’t even know who is the fastest or the best. We seem to take it in turns to be the one who has a day when we find ourselves flying out in front and having to check ourselves to slow down, stop, and wait for the others. Or to be the one who feels like there is lead in our paddle or ski poles and no matter how hard you try to keep going, it’s just a struggle. But somehow it’s never really a struggle, because you know that you are surrounded by the others, dropping back to paddle along beside you with an encouraging smile and a comforting word. It’s also not about the destination. Instead it is about the journey together, taking the time to soak up the incredible beauty that surrounds us on each trip, and sharing space, time, heartfelt conversations, lots of laughter, and sometimes tears.

Speaking of tears: Last summer I took an 8 day kayak trip in Pukaskwa Provincial Park (along the NE shore of Lake Superior) with two of our hardier women's group members (who my brother describes as “women of dubious sanity and great compassion”!). Our first day started out with glorious, glassy-calm waters, blue skies, no wind. But within half an hour that changed, and we were soon heading into very strong headwinds. It was my day to be the one who was indisputably the slowest. I had made the mistake of having my paddle unfeathered, which means that every time you lift the paddle out of the water, it faces flat side forwards. This is fine on a calm day, but like paddling through molasses when heading into the wind. It wasn’t really safe to stop to try to fix the paddle (and unfeather it), so I just kept on plodding along. I was also wearing the same wetsuit that I have been wearing for at least the last 10 years. But those of you who knew me ten years ago know that I truly am older and wider than I was back then. So about half an hour into the trip I began to feel like my arms were being severed from my body by
the too-tight wetsuit cutting off the circulation under my arms. And then there was the 300 pound paddle that had turned into a massive sail that was driving me backwards instead of forwards. But somehow I kept going, because each time I wanted to give up, my friends were there beside me, encouraging me, letting me know that I was not alone.

And finally, when, after about a decade of paddling, we rounded a point and headed into a calm bay, the two of them paddled ahead to set up camp. I broke down sobbing and headed further up the beach to be alone in my misery. I made it out and crawled onto a piece of driftwood, utterly exhausted. I wondered why on earth I had ever agreed to take this trip. Then I looked up through a fog of tears to see Trish standing in front of me, a look of great tenderness on her face, holding out an ice cold can of beer. It is moments like that that are so precious, that put life into perspective, and that help one appreciate the beauty, meaning and importance of unconditional friendship. And cold beer.

One of my favorite birthday cards is a Peanuts card. On the front is a picture of Snoopy looking very bedraggled but with a cheery look on his face, saying, “Smile. It could be worse!” Then you open the card and it says, “So I did, and it was.” And so it was on that kayak trip... The next day the wind was even stronger, but for some reason that I cannot fathom, we seemed to think that we could continue paddling. I had taken my handy dandy leatherwoman knife, slit the armpits of my wetsuit so that it didn’t cut into me, feathered my paddle, and we were ready to go. But within a very short time we realized that this was not going to work.

This time the waves were at our back, growing bigger and bigger with every minute. We were headed along a rocky cliff area where the waves were crashing, offering no place to land safely. We knew we had to turn around into the oncoming waves to be able to head back to safety, but that’s not easy in high winds, waves towering over you, and knowing that if you capsize in that deadly cold water, even with a wet suit, you probably won’t be able to get back into the kayak again.

The only time in my life I have ever been as afraid as that was the last time I had been kayaking in the Pukaskwa (about 10 years before this trip). This time, as I battled to turn, I thought it was a case of every woman for herself, and that the others (who had been behind me) would have already turned and be headed to safety. But no. When I finally managed to turn around and begin to head back into the oncoming waves, there, a short way away, fighting hard to stay in place, was Paula, waiting for me, an encouraging smile on her face, ready to come to my rescue if I needed her. And so together we headed back to find Trish and see if she needed help (as she was still upright and okay, but had been swept out and found safety behind a little island).

Here at UMD, for a lot of people, it has felt like that kayak trip. Times have been hard, and for many it has been like paddling with an unfeathered paddle into gale force winds with our circulation slowly -- or not so slowly -- being cut off. Sometimes we can feather our paddles and free ourselves from the constrictions of too-tight wet suits, but it doesn’t change the fact that we
are still in very rough waters, paddling into relentless winds that feel like their attack on us is personal. What makes it even harder is that some people have paddles that are fixed and can’t be feathered, some don’t have the protection that even too-tight wetsuits afford, while others are tucked away in the warmth and comfort of a cabin on a thousand-footer ore boat that is so protected from the elements that its passengers aren’t even aware of the terror that is being experienced by those being tossed around in their small crafts on the waves outside.

I have been at UMD for 26 years. I love it here. I love the place. I love the people. I love Duluth. I even still love Lake Superior. What is breaking my heart, however, is seeing the profound and what may be irreparable hurt that people I care deeply about are experiencing -- directly or indirectly as a result of actions -- intentional or unintentional -- by other people who I also care deeply about. What I worry about is that over the past few years, as we have faced the multiple challenges resulting from budget cuts, prioritization, and adjustments to new leadership styles, we have begun to turn on each other like rats in an overcrowded cage.

Change IS hard. It affects us each differently -- and inequitably. I don’t know that any of us get it right all the time. In our hurt and frustration I think it is natural, easy, and understandable (but not necessarily easily forgivable) to lash out against others -- against those who are close to us, but even more so, against those who we perceive to be the “other” and who are different from us. In our pain, anger, frustration, fear and in order to try to make sense of what is happening, it is all too easy to rush to judgment about others, interpreting their actions through our own lenses and our own experiences.

What tends to happen at times like this is for us to seek comfort and support from those who are similar to us, and who share our perspectives on the world. This is comforting. It is validating. It can be exhilarating. It can also lead to remarkable, transformational change. One of my favorite quotes is from Margaret Mead when she said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” When we come together and stand up in the face of injustice, we can make a very real difference. I believe in this fervently, and have done so since I began speaking out against apartheid as a child growing up in South Africa. It is so very important not to stand by and let injustice and oppression happen -- especially for those of us who are in positions of power and privilege, or at least those of us who are not as vulnerable as others.

But it’s complicated.

What happens when we come together with like-minded others, especially in the heat of the moment and feeling under siege, is that we tend to reinforce and validate each others’ perspectives -- for better and for worse. One of the dangers in this is that we can convince ourselves that our view is the only correct one, and close ourselves off to seeing and understanding things from perspectives other than our own. We tend to be guided by what so
many of us were taught as children, namely to do unto others as we would have done unto ourselves. But the problem is that others very often are not like us and don’t want to be treated the same way as us. Even if we supposedly share a common language, culture, and life experiences we may still see and interpret the world very, very differently. The reality is we are each unique, viewing the world through the filter of our own unique cumulative life experiences. So just because I might respond in a particular way to a particular circumstance doesn’t mean that you would, or that I can ever truly, fully understand why you do what you do, no matter how hard I may try.

When things are going well -- at least for me -- I may well try to set aside my own perspective and seek to understand as best I can the perspective that you bring so that I can support you. But when the going gets rough, and especially if I feel threatened, I may take refuge in the community of people who are more like me. As we look out from behind the walls that we have raised to protect ourselves from The Others, who are behind the walls that they have raised to protect themselves from us, things can rapidly spiral out of control in a devastating and destructive battle.

I wish I could say that I have never been guilty of prejudging others, of never making huge negative assumptions about why others have acted the way they have, and then acting on my assumptions. I wish I could say that I used to do that only when I was younger and less experienced. Tragically, I cannot. Perhaps the worst blunder that I made was last semester, when, in an effort to try to help build bridges between two groups of people here on campus, I probably ended up making things much worse. Despite knowing better, I waded in and tried to fix things, forgetting that my view was filtered through my lens as a tenured, senior faculty member, with all the power and privilege that comes with this position. I neglected to really listen and seek to understand vital differences in perspectives.

I think there are some lessons that may help us here to break down the walls that we are building between groups and that may enable us to seek to create a campus climate that is kinder, gentler and more humane. Despite the dangers of making assumptions, I am going to suggest that there are two important exceptions to this rule:

- The first is to assume the sincerity of others, even if we don’t agree with them. Wars are fought by people who sincerely believe that what they stand for is right.
- The second assumption is that people are fundamentally decent. As humans, we all make mistakes. But I know that what drives me and keeps me loving life and feeling so passionate about being a teacher who can make a difference in the lives of others, is that I truly believe in the Unitarian Universalist principle of the “inherent worth and dignity of all people” -- even when I don’t understand their actions.

I think what can really help us make UMD a kinder, gentler place, is for us to heed the words of Parker Palmer when he says, “The more you know about another person’s story, the less possible it is to dislike, distrust or dismiss them.” So instead of rushing to judgment about what others do, let us start by assuming their sincerity and decency, and then lean in and really listen.
As we listen, we need to remember Nelson Mandela’s caution that, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” In other words, we need to recognize our vantage point from which we look at the world. Are we looking out from the comfort, shelter, and privilege of the ore boat, or are we being tossed about in waves caused by the raging storm of generations of systemic oppression and a lifetime of microaggressions that eat away at our soul? We may not understand the perspectives of others, but the purpose of listening doesn’t always need to be to understand. Especially for those of us with greater privilege and power, even when we mean well, for us to say to others, “I understand” is a slap in their face, exposing our hopeless naivete about the depth of their hurt that we have never experienced and can never really understand. At times like that, it may be that the person we are listening to isn’t listening to us, because they are hurt, angry, and done with remaining silent. That’s okay. It’s not a contest. It’s their time to be the one who is listened to. We need to listen with compassion and an open heart, not so that we can claim that we understand, but so that the person we are listening to really feels heard.

I think that’s one of the things that I treasure about about my many wilderness trips with my group of women friends. When we take the time to step away from our work roles, to slow down, to be playful together, and to take the time to listen -- really listen -- to each other, it helps to restore our faith in humanity. Instead of trying to prove who is best, or who is right, we notice who is struggling that day, and slow down, falling in step beside them so they know they are not alone.

We need to do this more often, not just with our friends, but equally importantly, with those who are not. Next time we want to raise our voices in anger, hurt, and frustration, when we want get into the face of the target of our wrath and yell, “Why do you do that?” (deluding ourselves that this is actually even a question!), we could instead, sit down beside that person -- or invite them to go for a walk, or a cup of coffee. With an open heart, an open mind, operating under the assumption that they are a sincere, decent person, we can ask them with genuine curiosity and kindness, “Tell me, why do you do that?” And listen. Really listen. No judgment. No rescuing. Just listening.