

Raise a toast to democracy



BARB GUY

I was hunkered down at the world's largest outdoor rodeo, feeling like the lima bean at the church supper after it fell into the frog eye salad, if you know what I mean, when I heard about Drinking Liberally.

In that moment of utter alienation, a fellow lima bean, my sister-in-law Mindy, looked away from the rodeo patron in the "Osama says vote Democrat" T-shirt who was talking with a guy in a "Hey Democrats - strap on a pair" T-shirt, and mentioned this group I had never heard of.

It's no mistake that news of Drinking Liberally came to me at a time of estrangement - that's the whole reason they began. Drinking Liberally ("promoting democracy one pint at a time") started as a support group in New York City in 2003, back when George Bush was golden and anyone who didn't love him

was subject to derision, even in a place like New York.

We were still in a similar George-Bush-can-do-no-wrong atmosphere in the summer of 2005 when Mindy and I were dragged to the Wyoming rodeo.

It's fun to see how times have changed.

Drinking Liberally is a nationwide inclusive social group. There are no dues, officers, membership lists or responsibilities. Mindy sent me to www.drinkingliberally.org where I entered my zip code and was truly stunned to find a chapter in Salt Lake City. I submitted my e-mail address to get news about local meetings and, after nearly a year of enticing weekly messages, my husband Chris and I finally showed up at our first weekly meeting a few months ago.

Since then we have visited maybe five times, always enjoying the company of some nice people - all of them strangers in the beginning - who have something in common politically. And there have been some meaningful discussions. Education in Utah, and the state Legislature's uniquely frustrating approach to it, was one topic.

One time just before last month's election all the political candidates were invited to attend

a meeting in a State Street bar. Lots of them did. Marshall Thompson, the earnest Utah Iraq war veteran who walked 500 miles to renounce the war, was a guest speaker after his journey. Salt Lake DLeers were falling over each other to buy him dinner. There are subgroups that see movies liberally, read liberally, laugh liberally and (insert your own idea here) liberally, but I haven't tried any of those yet. The reading folks will be discussing Barack Obama's book, *The Audacity of Hope - Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, in January. Chapters are also participating in a fantasy Congress contest (www.fantasycongress.com).

The amorphous Salt Lake group is made up of teachers, government workers, undergrad and grad students, runners, bikers, a pilot or two, a nurse, an American Idol contestant, some computer people and many others. Professions don't come up in conversation all that often.

The original drinking - I mean thinking - about forming a group like this, was that bars are democratic spaces where strangers talk to each other, everyone is different, and everyone gets along in a common space. Just as Paul Revere and John Hancock might have discussed the nation's pressing issues over a pint of ale in a neighborhood pub, these

The Salt Lake Tribune

modern cohorts are keeping the tradition alive.

In all our visits to Drinking Liberally, we've never seen anyone who was even a little tipsy. I don't think it's about drinking for most people, it's about being in a place where you can say something political and the folks nearby are likely to agree with you.

A lot of people in Utah have that luxury everywhere they go, be it church, workplace or family gathering, but for the liberal minority, Drinking Liberally may be their only hope.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.