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How to Engage a Fanatic

David Brooks OCT. 23, 2017

I've had a series of experiences over the past two weeks that leave the impression that everybody on earth is having the same conversation: How do you engage with fanatics?

First, I was at a Washington Nationals game when a Trump supporter in the row in front of me unleashed a 10-minute profanity-strewn tirade at me, my wife and son.

Then I went to the University at North Carolina at Asheville and watched some students engage in a heartfelt discussion over whether extremists should be allowed to speak on campus.

Then I went to Madrid, where a number of Spaniards told me that the leaders of the Catalan independence movement were so radical there was no way to reason with them.

Then I went to London where I was with pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit activists trying to have a civil conversation with one another.

Over the course of these experiences I've been rehearsing all the reasons to think that it's useless to try to have a civil conversation with a zealot, that you've just got to exile them, or confront them with equal and opposite force.

For example, you can't have a civil conversation with people who are intent on destroying the rules that govern conversation itself. It's fruitless to engage with

people who are impervious to facts. There are some ideas — like racism — that are so noxious they deserve no recognition in any decent community. There are some people who are so consumed by enmity that the only thing they deserve is contempt.

You're not going to change these people's minds anyway. If you give them an opening, you're just going to give them room to destroy the decent etiquette of society. Civility is not a suicide pact. As Benjamin DeMott put it in a famous 1996 essay for the Nation, "When you're in an argument with a thug, there are things much more important than civility."

And yet the more I think about it, the more I agree with the argument Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter made in his 1998 book "Civility." The only way to confront fanaticism is with love, he said. Ask the fanatics genuine questions. Paraphrase what they say so they know they've been heard. Show some ultimate care for their destiny and soul even if you detest the words that come out of their mouths.

You engage fanaticism with love, first, for your own sake. If you succumb to the natural temptation to greet this anger with your own anger, you'll just spend your days consumed by bitterness and revenge. You'll be a worse person in all ways.

If, on the other hand, you fight your natural fight instinct, your natural tendency to use the rhetoric of silencing, and instead regard this person as one who is, in his twisted way, bringing you gifts, then you'll defeat a dark passion and replace it with a better passion. You'll teach the world something about you by the way you listen. You may even learn something; a person doesn't have to be right to teach you some of the ways you are wrong.

Second, you greet a fanatic with compassionate listening as a way to offer an unearned gift to the fanatic himself. These days, most fanatics are not Nietzschean supermen. They are lonely and sad, their fanaticism emerging from wounded pride, a feeling of not being seen.

If you make these people feel heard, maybe in some small way you'll address the emotional bile that is at the root of their political posture.

A lot of the fanaticism in society is electron-thin. People in jobs like mine get a lot of nasty emails, often written late at night after libations are flowing. But if we write back to our attackers appreciatively, and offer a way to save face, 90 percent of the time the next email is totally transformed. The brutal mask drops and the human being instantly emerges.

Finally, it's best to greet fanaticism with love for the sake of the country. As Carter points out, the best abolitionists restrained their natural hatred of slaveholders because they thought the reform of manners and the abolition of slavery were part of the same cause — to restore the dignity of every human being.

We all swim in a common pool. You can shut bigots and haters out of your dining room or your fantasy football league, but when it comes to national political life, there's nowhere else to go. We have to deal with each other.

Civility, Carter writes, “is the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together.”

You don't have to like someone to love him. All you have to do is try to imitate Martin Luther King, who thrust his love into his enemies' hearts in a way that was aggressive, remorseless and destabilizing.

Now I confess I didn't respond to the Trump guy at the ballgame with all the noble sentiments I've put in this column. But I'm sure I'll have a chance to do better soon. Doing the right thing in these bitter times is hard, but the answer isn't that complicated.

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