

MAKING A PLACE FOR BIGOTRY AND HATE

Opening to a different and necessary conversation

By Dan Holden

Charlottesville, Virginia, August 2017. We are once again witness to the undercurrent of racial hatred and violence that has plagued us for countless generations. The pattern for how we handle, or mishandle, these moments has become predictable. A violent episode takes place and immediately is published globally via social media. Then the name calling, judgements and denials begin: *You're a racist...No I'm not...You hate _____ (fill in the blank)...No I don't.* This is followed by the "Whose pain is greater" argument, a tactic used primarily to end any conversation about unethical or unlawful treatment from a subordinated group. Further, arguments next arise between those who see the event as a pattern in a long string of similar events versus those who claim this is an isolated event, not connected to other events. The crazed moment then begins to wind down with the predictable cry of the righteous who are offended by the hatred and claim, *'There is no place for bigotry and hatred in America; these are inconsistent with the values that make us all Americans.'*

Apparently, though, bigotry of all varieties and hatred have a real place in America and have had a place since before we were a nation. Simply look at our history. The annihilation of indigenous peoples, the importation and enslavement of tens of millions of black Africans, Jim Crow, and the violence of the Civil Rights movement. Affirmative Action legislation was passed to at least slow down the exclusion of dark skinned Americans from educational and employment opportunities. Manifest destiny, a contested concept in the 1800s, seemed to give white American settlers a moral duty to advance westward, killing any 'different other' who resisted. Bigotry and hatred have been with us for a long time. We have always seemed to need a group to hate, to look down upon. Black people, Native Americans, women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people have all been the necessary targets of vengeance and wrath. The pattern continues today.

We are an amazing nation and we have contributed to the world extraordinary breakthroughs in science, medicine, technology and many other fields. I cannot imagine living anywhere else. And, we have a violent, hateful aspect in our culture as well. Although these matters are tough to look at and acknowledge, denying their place in American culture is foolish and prevents us from growing stronger and more whole as individuals and as a nation.

James Baldwin once wrote: "Not everything we face can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Denying groups we may oppose their right to free speech makes no more sense than ripping down statutes that offend many. Isn't this what the Taliban do? What has happened to us? For many, these symbols are difficult to look at because they remind us of a painful part in our history, dynamics still in place today. This is precisely why they must remain, because they give testimony to where we have been as a nation and how far we have yet to go. The drama, bitterness, and judgements, as well as the violence and demands that the viewpoints of some have no place in

America all result in two things. The deeper issues go underground and remain hidden until the next episode. The status quo is solidly maintained because we fail to learn the skills necessary to ameliorate these conditions which divide us. Deep democracy demands that all voices be heard, especially those on the margins of society and including those voices we despise.

What could we talk about if we weren't so busy hating one another? Assume with me that we will likely never agree on our beliefs, political affiliations, or philosophical viewpoints on these emotionally charged issues. We need a deeper, more expansive conversation. Here are three possibilities listed in order of difficulty.

1. Be willing, for a period of time, to suspend our locked in positions and consider the possibility that we have shared interests that could be stronger than our differences. Explore these shared interests. Physical and emotional safety, personal and financial freedom, family, and health, could be places to start.
2. Tell stories of our own experiences where these shared interests have been threatened. Learn how to do this without condemning entire groups of different others. Own our individual and collective experience without demanding that others, i.e., everyone other than me, change. This is, admittedly, a challenging task and one that requires patience, practice, grace and grit. For those among us who have ventured into this terrain, the result is a new kind of strength, authentic presence, compassion and power.
3. Herman Hesse, the Nobel prize winning German author, once wrote these words: *"If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself. What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us."* In this the most difficult of tasks, we are invited to look closely and compassionately at our own complicity in the very events we are concerned about. Done the wrong way, this can feel like we are blaming the victim, which causes even more anger and hurt. Done with grace and skill, we come to terms with the reality that we have all been impacted by racism, sexism, heterosexism and all of the 'isms'. We have either been victims of the violence and discrimination or have enjoyed our relative privilege (as white, heterosexual, Christian, male, middle class and up, etc.) wondering what all of this unrest is about and thankful we don't have to live and complain like others do. Much of the time, we have had both experiences, sometimes without knowing it!

The Texas-based Arbing Institute, in their classic book, *Leadership and Self Deception*, suggests in clear and provocative language that all acts of anger and violence begin with acts of self-betrayal. We violate a value of our own, fail to recognize it and allow the violation to sink in us, where it festers and grows. This eventually leaks out in destructive words and actions. It can show up as a simple betrayal: I drive through a traffic signal, my light is green but there is a person still in the crosswalk. I hurry through, the pedestrian has to stop to avoid being run over. I know I'm wrong and feel a twinge of something, guilt. Two hours later while at work I practically rip someone's head off in a disagreement over something very small. Small betrayals give way to larger emotional outbursts; large betrayals can give way to violence. When we find the inward betrayal we find our leverage for deep personal change. When we

find our capacity for personal change we discover how to have a different kind of conversation about some tough issues.

There is a fear that looking at and talking directly about these issues only make matters worse. We open Pandora's box and are then swallowed by what's inside. What actually happens is the opposite. This kind of conversation brings healing, health and vitality back to us personally and back to our communities and nation. Awareness—we need this kind of antidote for bigotry, prejudice and hatred, which remain important elements of our individual and collective experience that must be faced.

Isn't it about time? Make a place at the table today.

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