

The Antidote to Our Toxic Discourse Is Not Political 'Correctness'—It's Civility and Reason

*Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But words will never hurt me.*

We've all heard that childhood verse, but even a five-year-old puts the boot to that second line.

Our words have power. They can wound or mend; they can separate or reconcile; they can cast others into the depths of hell or lift them to celestial heights. A sentence misspoken may bring an end to a friendship; a thoughtless email may lead to dismissal from a job; a Tweet sent in haste may forever ruin a reputation.

Thirty years ago, our ability to damage people through the spoken or written word was much more limited. In our private lives, we might bully others in person or tarnish their reputations through gossip. In the public square, newspapers and television rarely gave voice to the rumors, innuendo, and name-calling so common today. Many reporters and commentators brought to the television screen a certain bias, it's true, but what we accept as news in 2018 would never have passed muster in 1990.

Technology has demolished those standards. Our power to wound an opponent by defamation and falsehoods, to sully the reputations of the innocent, to blacken the name of a business for taking an unpopular stance, and even to bully a few people into suicide, has immeasurably increased. Millions of people

have become editorialists and faux reporters, bombarding others without regard for truth or charity.

Daily we see the devastation wrought by our words. One verbal misstep by a politician or a celebrity ([remember](#) Rosanne?), one violation of the boundaries of political correctness, boundaries that seem always in flux, and out charges the cyberspace smear mob, screaming their malevolence, tossing obscenities like brickbats, and waving their electronic placards. They use pseudonyms for their masks, and without consequence they hurl what have become their standard epithets—racist, sexist, elitist, fascist, Nazi. Indecency comes cheap when no one can identify you.

If the smear mob does its work well, media or partisan organs will amplify its message, and they can condemn another person to high-tech Siberia, a place of exile where prisoners are ignored if they keep quiet, verbally jackbooted if they dare raise their voices in protest.

In *The Leaning Tower of Babel*, Richard Mitchell offers this chilling declaration from Vladimir Lenin:

Why should we bother to reply to Kautski? He would reply to us, and we would have to reply to his reply. There's no end to that. It will be quite enough for us to announce that Kautski is a traitor to the working class, and everyone will understand everything.

Nowadays, anyone with a phone or a computer can become a little Lenin. They can take down a movie director ([see](#): James Gunn) or [a young pitcher](#) in the middle of a no-hitter.

Please do not misunderstand me here. I do not condone their language. I feel no nostalgia for the days of slow mail and typewriters—I remember what cut and paste used to mean—and I treasure my electronic devices: sending my work to a magazine

with a few clicks on my laptop; visiting news sites from around the world; reading favorite columnists as soon as they publish online; communicating instantly with friends; listening to music, watching YouTube, and ordering various goods and services.

The little Lenins are the dark side to this freedom of information and celerity of communication. They are modern barbarians, no longer at the gates but here among us—neighbors, friends, perhaps even members of our family.

So what can we do? How do we counter the crudity and slanders so common in our marketplace of ideas?

Let me end as I began, with another familiar line, this one from Burke: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

We can do something. We can practice etiquette and reason in our communications. We can avoid obscenities and ad hominem attacks in our posts. We can gently reprimand those who rant and curse and lie, however forlorn our hope for change. We can ask genuine questions—“Why do you believe that to be true? What is your evidence?”—when someone announces yet again that “Donald Trump is a *##*!&* racist” or that “All liberals are **&\$\$#* crazy!” Finally, for freedom’s sake, we can endure the assaults and expletives of the smear mob rather than demanding even greater regulation of speech.

Words have power. Let us use our words to support the side of civility and decency.

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