

Bonfires of Bigotry: The Sources of Our Present Anger

A few questions for my readers:

When you are shopping at WalMart or your local mall, do you constantly assess people by the color of their skin?

When the pigmentation of the clerk behind the register at the grocery store differs from your own, does bile rise in your throat?

When you meet someone wearing a cross, a yarmulke, a hijab, or a bindi, do you fight the urge to scream “Death to the infidel?”

If you are female, do you look at all men as possessed by “toxic masculinity?” If you are male, do you assume all women despise men?

When you encounter a gay couple, do you turn on your heel and depart, certain that otherwise your antipathy might spark an explosion of fists and curses?

If you live in a trailer and your boss lives in a mansion, do you want to take a baseball bat to his capitalist head?

I’m guessing—I’m really hoping—you answered no to these questions.

But I have a reason for asking them.

For years, a chorus of voices has proclaimed America a hotbed of racism, sexism, class hatred, and religious bigotry. So convinced are these accusers that Americans are truncheon-swinging, goose-stepping Nazis that some of them gin up fake news just to keep the fires of hatred alive.

But let's be honest. Most of us don't give a hoot in a handbag about someone's race, sexuality, or bank account. We don't care whether the barista in the coffee shop is a Catholic, Muslim, or Jew, so long as the coffee is delivered piping hot. The proponents of such perceived prejudices are either delusional, or even worse, believe their own propaganda.

Instead, most of us, I like to think, take others as we find them, assessing them not by their dress or skin color, but by their character. I base this assumption on people I know—family, friends, acquaintances—who go about their frantic days trying to make ends meet and treating those who cross their path with respect and dignity.

So why is it that every time I come online someone is yakking about America's racial inequality, sexual bias, bigotry, and intolerance?

Where is all this oppression? As I say, I don't see it in my day-to-day life. So where does all this talk about oppression come from?

Here are some of the culprits: the media, some politicians, academics, and certain celebrities with an agenda.

Think about it. Look at the world around you and not the one that exists online or in the heads of a few fanatics. Are your friends and neighbors filled with rancor over race and class? Do they fear and hate gays or "birthers"? Do they lump together and condemn entire groups of people? If so, what is the source of that loathing? Does their execration derive from personal experience or from spending too many hours on certain websites?

Some journalists and commentators, anxious to prove American bigotry and blind to their own, throw gasoline onto these pyres of hatred. Politicians in both parties drag wood to this fire, dividing Americans into groups and setting them against one another. Many universities fuel these flames as well,

promoting an agenda of division by means of race, gender, and wealth, denigrating, for example, males, particularly white males.

Given our educational system, the state of our politics, and the death of real journalism, this bonfire will blaze for years to come. The culture is ablaze with rancor, and there are no fire trucks on the horizon.

But here's the good news: We don't have to participate in this festival of hatred. We don't have to listen to the race mongers, the bigots, the New Puritans who constantly snoop through the lives of their fellow citizens in hopes of rooting out some trivial evil or affront.

Instead, we can treat those around us as human beings, judging them by their vices and virtues. Moreover, we can remain on guard against the haters, whom we can either ignore or, if the opportunity presents itself, mock with gentle laughter.

In *A Knock At Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Martin Luther King Jr.*, King has this to say: "Let no man pull you so low as to hate him."

Those are words worth remembering.

For our own time, we might add: "Let no one pull you so low as to hate others."

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