Don't Normalize That!

I’m old school, meaning that on principle I believe in three things

1. I believe Tupac is the greatest rapper of all time .. though there’s zero disrespect on Biggie Smalls

1. I have no idea what an NFT is, and I have yet to have someone explain it to me in a way that’s not intensely convoluted, and
2. When my neighbor knocks on the door, and asks for a cup of sugar, I believe the virtuous thing, would be to extend it to them with a smile. The golden rule, right, treat others how we’d like to be treated, … A maxim shared across nearly every religion and every culture.

Yet, I believe it’s become the opposite…that the one thing we could universally agree on we *can’t* anymore…

I remember the protest season of 2020. It’s no understatement to call it: America’s reckoning with its troubled social and racial past. When we were all locked indoors; writers like Judith Butler and Ibram X. Kendi became cult heroes, and discovering painful yet accurate accounts of history filled us with a certain pride. Understanding that we’re not inherently racist, bigoted, or hateful, but that we must start tearing down *the systems* which are. We acknowledged our own shortcomings and pledged to do better. Not for ourselves, but for our neighbors; For Black Folks, Asian-Americans Queer and Nonbinary people.

I remember *really* uncomfortable dinner table discussions, a world in which we were separated but decided it was essential to come together for something bigger. Sure, we might’ve disagreed on the methodology. Nonetheless, though those moments…. When the world stood still, the moments of silence after we marched, seemed to mark a new era of American History. One in which we’d do the hard work to begin to love one another.

But How naive …

Because it’s 2022

And Passionate love has devolved into vitriol. After one of the hardest years in American History, an attempted coup d’etat on the capital, CRT under attack, and WOKE activism flooding social media, Folks across the political spectrum can’t seem to hold a conversation with one another; much less agree on a policy stance. And trust me, this ain’t no condemnation, I’m no exception.

Yet as a result of this phenomenon, one particularly upsetting instance comes to mind; with some of my best friends. We were sitting in a circle discussing the politics of the day, and of course, how bomb WandaVision was… I mean, who didn’t like that show.

When one of those friends remarked

“It’s not my job to educate white people”

I couldn’t help but to validate her; but disavow her thesis on the spot. Although I’m sure she was exhausted from giving the same ‘that’s racist’ speech to white people over, and over and over, she made a serious mistake by putting herself at the forefront of social justice. Telling me that her exhaustion led her to dismiss the opportunity for a potentially life-changing constructive conversation. I used to put *myself* at the forefront of social justice, often being selfish in how I blamed people, instead of blaming the system. Though, I had little idea that this me-first mentality was the precise *opposite* of what social justice should be.

I’m a senior at Pattonville High School and a massive proponent of Liberation for all marginalized people. Yet I’m here to commit a misdeed in the eyes of my contemporaries: I’m arguing to the contrary today, that *my* movement, the social justice movement, has lost its way; That American discourse has lost its way. And that the real, changemaking kind of justice is rooted; grounded, in a radical kind of empathy.

So we’ll begin with an analysis of the status quo; the exceptional difficulty of radical empathy. We’ll continue by adding some context to our historical dismissal of radical empathy, and end by redeeming the movement, and reestablishing its roots.

We have this idea in many cultures of the two warring factions. A dichotomy of distance; two tribes who shant confer with one another. For instance: Democrats vs. Republicans, Anti Legalization, and Pro Legalization and the most contentious of all… Pancakes…. Vs. Waffles. Whatever side we’re on, we often stand by religiously with little consideration to the thoughts or opinions of others. Which in part explains every fight in a waffle house. But more importantly is indicative of the breakdown of American discourse. In fact, according to CNN, **the percentage of Americans who strongly dislike the opposition party has gone up by about 400% in just the last two decades.**

 For my friend who refused to have conversations with white people about race, for myself who used to do the same… this violates the love that social justice should be promoting. And it’s *hard.* Because let’s face it, being empathetic can be intensely difficult work. It requires genuine vulnerability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and allow them to put their feet into yours. Often, when I see injustice, I don’t feel *like* talking,  *I want to fight.* A la activists before me.

`Yet, despite the myriad of fighters, there's no radical who looms larger in the hearts of Americans than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. --King was famous for employing an intense campaign of radical empathy --Progressives and Conservatives alike often quote that the great MLK once had a dream.

What America seems to overlook, however, were his perpetual attempts to revoke this dream. One such instance occurred in 1965, Chicago. King remarked that: **“So often in these past two years I have had to watch my dream transformed into a nightmare ... I have felt my dream falter as I have traveled through the rat infested slums of our big city ghettos and watched our jobless and hopeless poor sweltering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society."**

King was pro-socialism, anti-war, and the most hated man in America. According to the Smithsonian, **“the man whose half-century of martyrdom we celebrate died with a public disapproval rating of nearly 75 percent”.** And the Ghettos MLK tried to desegregate exist even *more* today.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Brentwood, Ladue, Clayton, Pattonville, predominantly-white, affluent communities, surround an urban underclass which is nearly all-black, underrepresented, and allowed poor-quality education.

Yet we normalize it. Folks are denied college, denied safety in their own neighborhoods, denied quality facilities. Don’t normalize that! Don’t normalize the trauma, the death, the addiction, the afflictions which scar these communities, our communities. Don’t normalize the fact that we get to be here today, and they can’t, don’t normalize my friends who got shot dead in the street. Don’t Normalize that!…

This is why I understand the philosophy of being sick and tired of being sick and tired. King was tired! And he died with empathy so why should I? What I look like dodging angst from both sides of the isle? Getting called a Nigger and a sellout Tryna conduct discourse with folks who don’t wanna listen? .. Who don’t want to listen.

Even still, I made the choice to listen because I’ve come to find that normalization doesn’t stem from hate, rather, from a genuine lack of awareness. And it’s not just the black community; it’s not just systemic inequity; this normalization is evident everywhere. We normalize treacherous realities to make ourselves feel better for dismissing them. Our default is to ignore problems, rather than make an attempt to *understand them.*

This process of normalization is incredibly dangerous, because by normalizing what should be non-normal; By becoming okay with things that shouldn’t be ok, we become passive bystanders ignorant to Injustice. Faithfully complacent with the status quo.

Yet, radical empathy is, and always has been our solution! Because folks, it takes a certain kind of passion, a certain kind of zeal, a willingness to stand out! And say no! Don’t normalize that!!…

Radical empathy is the bravery to put yourself in someone else’s shoes despite the fact you’ll never fully understand, or fix their qualms; it’s MLK’s post-dream fight for equity, but it’s more than that, it’s that really uncomfortable confrontation with your boss, about their undeniably racist remarks. It’s conducting political discourse at lunch with your coworkers, even though it’s dreadfully taboo. It means standing up for what’s right, and initiating hard conversations with all folks of all backgrounds… Even the mean ones… the petty ones, the people who don’t want to listen. It’s the humility, to stop ourselves from judging others, and validate them despite our inclinations otherwise. Radical empathy is our shared fate, that I will never be liberated until we are all liberated.

Folks, being this bold is gonna take effort.

After all, the fate of our nation begins and ends with us. Though we radically empathize , we shouldn’t detach ourselves from oppositional ideas! In fact it’s quite the opposite.

This year, through listening, through discourse I learned that moderate pushback in response to radical progress isn't at all a bad thing. It’s precisely this, this democratic balance which has allowed our nation to flourish for nearly three-centuries.

Here’s the thing though, some of you might be offended. You might be righteously upset, because when discussing these tough subjects I sure don’t make bullet-proof claims. I'm 18… just a kid. But I hope you’ll have some radical empathy today… That even if you disagree, you can boldly pull me aside, and I'll listen whole-heartedly with the intent to learn. Liberation doesn't start with me, it starts with us, so let's have hard conversations, let’s bring back discourse! … If so, I may even have to concede (and it really hurts to say this) that Pancakes may, indeed, be better than waffles, but *only because* that batter had to have been sweetened with a cup of sugar.

Thank you.

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