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Have a Conversation

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Some words don't mean anything anymore. Some very powerful words. Words that throughout history held unprecedented meaning. Words with profound sadness, depth, and power behind them, cemented throughout the timeline of their use. Words like racist, sexist, and fascist. Words like "White Supremacist." Words like "Nazi."

Of course, these words do still have meaning. You can look them up in a dictionary, or at the very least Google them. I'm not suggesting that they don't. What I am suggesting, rather, is that recently these words have been carelessly thrown around so much that they have lost their intended meaning, and are now more akin to casual insults.

I don't say this with pleasure, either; I wish these words hadn't become so warped in our modern dialect. These words are essential and need to be used when necessary to identify evil and injustice. They have, however, been distorted into phrases to yell at a person whose opinion you don't agree with. Identifying actual white supremacists, such as those at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, for what they are is using this powerful speech correctly in a way that is ethical and just. Equating Jordan Peterson, a conservative leaning professor/public speaker, to Hitler is not.

A graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada named Lindsay Shepherd made headlines toward



Assistant. The clip was taken from a panel discussion broadcast on Canadian television, in which Peterson discussed his disapproval of Canadian Bill C-16, which “adds ‘gender identity or expression’ to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination” in the Canadian Human Rights Act. Peterson talks about how he disagrees with the implications of the bill -- if an individual is unwilling to refer to a person by their desired pronouns it could be considered a criminal offence.

In response to showing this clip, Lindsay was chastised by faculty members and called transphobic by her peers. In a meeting she secretly recorded on her laptop, the school’s faculty told Shepherd they received at least one complaint from a student who was offended by what Peterson said and reprimanded her for showing the clip. Shepherd defended herself by saying that she did not take sides during the class, and that she was simply presenting both arguments in a neutral manner. Shepherd even goes so far as to express during the meeting how she does not even agree with what Peterson was saying in the video, making the entire situation that much more ironic. A faculty member concluded that because Shepherd did not explicitly denounce the views of Peterson during the class, it was like she was “neutrally playing a speech by Hitler.”

This issue goes beyond merely making a false equivalency. Rather, it is more about what these false equivalencies justify in the minds of those making them. For example, if someone is called racist -- or, in Lindsay’s case, transphobic -- and enough people believe the claim, anyone can feel justified in completely shutting down any and all conversation with the person in question. That person has been labelled a racist, and therefore nothing he has to say for himself should be given any credibility.

This phenomenon is further exemplified in the situation regarding Bret Weinstein at Evergreen State College. Evergreen has a tradition that every spring, staff and students participate in a “Day of Absence,” when “faculty and staff of color [spend] a work day away from campus as a grassroots collective action.” The purpose of this is to highlight the contribution of African Americans to campus life and culture and promote the idea that they are as essential to the function of the school as everyone else.

This past year, however, the dynamic of the Day of Absence changed. Instead of people of color voluntarily leaving the campus, “white students, staff and faculty [were] invited to leave the campus for the day’s activities,” as reported by a student journal at Evergreen. Professor Bret Weinstein disagreed with this direction, and voiced his concerns in an email to Rashida Love, Evergreen’s Director of First Peoples Multicultural Advising Services. Professor Weinstein claimed that “there is a huge difference between a group or coalition deciding to voluntarily absent themselves from a shared space in order to highlight their vital and under-appreciated roles... and a group or coalition encouraging another group to go away. The first is a forceful call to consciousness... The second is a show of force, and an act of oppression in and of itself.”

What happened when Weinstein publicly expressed this opinion? A mob of angry students formed outside his office and began calling him a racist, demanding he either resign or be fired. Though being verbally harassed, Professor Weinstein still showed interest in hearing and understanding the point of view of the students accusing him. Amidst the yelling, Weinstein states, “I am not interested in debate, I am only interested in dialectic. Debate means you are trying to win, dialectic means you are using disagreement to discover what is true.” He wasn’t looking to convince these students that he was right, he wanted to have a conversation. The students didn’t seem interested in this conversation, however, as one is heard replying, “We don’t care what terms you want to speak on,” before they begin yelling over one another.

I could spend the rest of this article listing off more and more examples of this misuse of speech, but I would much rather talk about how this problem can be solved. There is a way we can undo what we’ve done to these words -- to make them once more mean what they have the right to mean. It is something, though, that I fear many won’t want to hear, if only because nowadays it is far easier to simply discredit anything a person has to say by way of falsely claiming they are something they, in reality, are not.

Have a conversation. Talk to someone. Discuss. Not with people who think the same way as you, but rather with people who think differently. Take some time away from your own personal echo chamber -- whatever that may be (Twitter and Facebook come to mind) -- and spend some time engaged in real conversation. The key to winning any argument, political or otherwise, is to simply understand your opposition’s point of view. Do you think any self-proclaimed white supremacist has ever changed their ways because someone yelled at them for being a racist-Nazi-bigoted-scumbag? Certainly very few, as they are already well aware of what they are. Instead, why not attempt to explain to them exactly how and why what you believe is true. Like Professor Weinstein said, be more focused on dialectic than debate.

Don’t believe that would ever work? Just ask Daryl Davis, the African-American musician who convinced 200 (and counting) members of the KKK to give up their robes. How did he do it? In his own words:

The best thing you do is you study up on the subject as much as you can. I went in armed, not with a weapon, but with knowledge... That began to chip away at their ideology because when two enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy — it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything... you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship... That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves.

There are many more lessons to be taken from Daryl's story, and I would highly recommend reading through the [interview](#) he had with NPR, where this quote comes from.

Open conversation is the most important aspect of the survival of any democracy. Without the free exchange of ideas, society would never progress. People should be allowed to say what they believe. Yes, even white supremacists. Because of this, people should also be judged and criticized for what they have to say. However, they should be judged fairly and honestly, through evidence and conversation. It does no good to make false equivalencies, and in fact only succeeds in making the words used carry less weight.

In a poll conducted by [The Brookings Press](#) in August of 2017, students were asked which of the following two options was more important for a college to do: "create a positive learning environment for all students by prohibiting certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people" or "create an open learning environment where students are exposed to all types of speech and viewpoints, even if it means allowing speech that is offensive or biased against certain groups of people." Overall, only 47% of college students surveyed chose the second option -- that it was more important for a college to facilitate an open campus than it is for a college to facilitate a positive one.

Compare these results to those of a [Gallup](#) poll from just a year before, where almost the exact same question was asked, and we see a significant difference in opinion. In that poll, an overwhelming majority of 78% of students were in favor of an open environment that allowed potentially offensive speech. In just one year, the majority opinion of college students switched completely. In 2016, only 22% of students were in favor of a positive environment over an open one, but by 2017 that number had risen to 53%.

With that in mind I'd like to end this article with something of a challenge -- a challenge to think about ideas critically and to think about people critically. Someone who thinks differently from you is not automatically your enemy. Ask yourself why a person is being called racist or sexist and if these statements are only meant to insult a person with a different perspective. If there is no true merit behind the word being used, understand that it does nothing but broaden the scope of what that word can mean. When the scope becomes too large, eventually that word will have expanded to mean anything and, subsequently, nothing at all.

Culture

open dialogue, college, free speech



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