

FORGIVENESS, INCLUSIVITY, AND THE LIMITS OF OUR FIRST PRINCIPLE

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*Wild Geese by Mary Oliver*

*You do not have to be good.*

*You do not have to walk on your knees*

*for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.*

*You only have to let the soft animal of your body*

*love what it loves.*

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.*

*Meanwhile the world goes on.*

*Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain*

*are moving across the landscapes,*

*over the prairies and the deep trees,*

*the mountains and the rivers.*

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,*

*are heading home again.*

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,*

*the world offers itself to your imagination,*

*calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --*

*over and over announcing your place*

*in the family of things.*

It was my first year of college, near the end of my second semester, and several Residential Advisors of color were holding a seminar on racism.

About twenty people came, and after talking a little bit about the goals of the seminar, we split into two groups to share experiences. Each group had black folks and white folks and other folks of color.

My group started talking. Specifically, white folks started talking. It was uncomfortable; there was tension in the air. It seemed weird, to speak up, when the people of color weren't really talking. But I spoke anyway. It had been a rocky introduction to the realities of racism and the world outside my privileged Wyoming background, and I had a lot of emotions about what I had seen and felt and done. And weren't we supposed to talk?

We came back together, and several black folks from the other group shared how nice, how powerful, how important it was to share their stories, be heard, be *listened to*, especially by white folks.

Our group was silent.

The shame of this experience has hit me gradually. I wince, now, talking about it. Now, I imagine how much it must have hurt, to come to a meeting hopeful, and to experience something many of these folks experience day in, day out: white people talking about themselves, and knowing that you will not get a chance to be heard.

I talked over black folks and people of color. I prioritized my own pain in one of the few spaces that was supposed to be for them. It was born more of ignorance than malice, and yet, I hurt them.

[ I will return to this story, but I want to set up a few other points before I do. ]

The concept of Better Angels has had me conflicted these past few weeks.

On the one hand, I believe that communication and understanding are important. If I am not willing to listen to people I sincerely disagree with, then am I not just stuck in an echo chamber? I'm liable to create insular, myopic, and harmful systems that exclude many people.

On the other hand, I believe that much of conservative rhetoric is built upon denying the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and I am not willing to hear out any perspective that starts from that position.

When I began thinking about this, I kept coming back to a post I saw online that talked about inclusion of marginalized groups. It went something like this: "If you want to bring POC into a mostly-white group without the white people dealing with their racism, you're not diversifying, you're just bringing those POC into a place that's unsafe for them."

Other people chimed in with analysis that described how important it is to push back against harmful behaviors, and exclude the people who are doing the harmful things. For example, inviting in gay people doesn't mean anything if you also let people say, 'oh, I'm just not sure about gay people'.

I sat with this contradiction for a long time. It rang true to me. If a homophobe was allowed to speak in this church, and gave a sermon about how they hate gay people, and the congregation was silent, I would not feel safe here. No matter how many people said "oh, I'm fine with queer people," and no matter how many reassurances I got that I was welcome here, if a homophobe was safe to express their opinion that I should not exist, then I would *not* be safe.

And yet, I don't think that's what would happen at all. If a homophobe spoke in this church, and gave a sermon about how they hate gay people, I believe the discussion would be full of people

pushing back against that concept. I hope that that person would not be allowed to speak again, until and unless they made major changes.

In this hypothetical, it feels as though this homophobe might change their mind more easily because they were allowed to speak. To return to Better Angels, it feels as though maybe listening to conservative people opens up a possibility of change.

And here, again, I am conflicted.

In my interpersonal life, I've learned the importance of listening. When I listen to my friends, I try very hard to reflect what I hear, accept who they are and where they are in their personal journey. I do not try and force them to become something they are not.

I have found that sometimes accepting people without attempting to change them is not possible. One of my close relatives, for example, is sexist. It's lowkey. It's not obvious. I doubt he makes jokes about returning to the kitchen. And yet, I know that he does not respect me, does not believe my stories should be told, and does not think that my equality is worth fighting for. If someone else made a kitchen joke, he would probably laugh.

I've never tried very hard to change him. It feels like pushing a rope uphill. How can I make him listen if he does not even really see me as equal? But I do not trust him, either. This relative will not fight by my side, if it inconveniences him, will not hear the whole of my messy, female, queer experience, will not accept the entirety of who I am. And, just so, I will not accept the entirety of who he is: I cannot accept that he does not believe I am equal to him, because if I accept that, in a way I am accepting that it is true.

My relative would have to change before I could truly be in relationship with him.

In plenty of arguments, both sides have good points, and neither are acting in a way that violates the other person's humanity. For example, my coworker and I always seem to disagree about how to weed or water a garden. I want to get everything done as thoroughly as possible, but she has a more time-saving approach. In the end, both approaches have their merits and their drawbacks.

But sometimes the two sides arguing are not equal. Saying something like "Medicaid for all" is not the same as saying "Mexicans are rapists". Both phrases could perhaps hurt someone, but saying "Mexicans are rapists" directly violates our first principle: it makes the claim that all Mexicans are not people, who make choices. It claims all Mexicans are inherently bad.

And punching a homophobe is not the same as punching a queer person. The homophobe made a choice to act in a certain way, to speak certain words. They spoke and acted as though other people had no worth. The queer person simply existed.

There are always at least two perspectives one could choose to listen to. When one side is denying the other's basic humanity, one could say there is a perpetrator, and a survivor.

The stories of survivors are often dismissed, ignored, and spoken over. My conflicted feelings about Better Angels come down to this: are we just listening to perpetrators, and bonding of our mutual love of oatmeal, and once again leaving survivors in the cold? Are we letting homophobes give sermons in our spaces? Are we accepting actively harmful rhetoric and actions?

In the case of Better Angels, I don't know. I want to make that clear. I haven't gone. I've just been thinking about it a lot. But it is, I think, something we need to be wary of. Many of us are white, and affluent, and cis, and straight, and thin, and neurotypical. Many survivors are not any of these things.

Finally, I want to talk about forgiveness.

At the beginning of this talk, I shared a story about a time I talked over people of color. Telling this story at all is ironic. It's a story about a time I took up space that wasn't my own, and talked when I should have listened, and here I am, talking about it.

In telling this story, I want to make a point. I am not owed forgiveness. Ignorance or malice, I still hurt people. Microaggression or assault, I still made a mistake. If I ran into these humans in the street, maybe they would be wary of me. Unwilling to trust that I would listen. I believe it would take a long time, and sincere change on my part, to forge a relationship with these humans.

I believe that anyone who is willing to do the hard work of redemption deserves that opportunity, and that work. Being homophobic is an action. And choosing to grow, and learn, and do better – that is also an action.

And yet, redemption does not require or guarantee forgiveness. Mistakes, once they're made, are made. The pain I've caused won't ever go away. I can do good, and add to the beauty in the world, but I cannot take back the mistakes I've made. In the meantime, someone should have yelled at me. Someone should have acted to protect the people of color I hurt.

I have inherent worth and dignity, and so do you, and so does the worst person you know. Nazis, homophobes, Trump, they all have inherent worth and dignity. But I think in acknowledging this, we also must acknowledge that these people deny the worth and dignity of millions and millions of survivors.

Sometimes there is no way forward that is not a fight. If someone gives a homophobic sermon, that puts me in danger. Unless someone speaks up against that homophobic speech, I am not safe. Survivors deserve to be heard, and their safety requires that perpetrators are *not* safe to act out their prejudice.

I don't know when it's appropriate to try and change a perpetrator, and when it's appropriate to punch them to protect their survivors. I'm not very confident in my ability to do either of those things. And yet, I am certain that I must try.

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