

It's Not the Thought that Counts
Transforming the World by Changing the Rules
By
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When I was still a little fellow, before I'd even started kindergarten, I use to get up early in the morning to watch *The Jack LaLanne Show*. For those who don't know who Jack LaLanne was, he was considered the Godfather of Fitness, America's Trainer, and the first person ever to open a commercial fitness center. I don't know why I liked watching his show, which ran, in some form, between 1951 and 1985. I never did any of the jumping jacks, pushups, or other exercises he so enthusiastically led his TV audience in. I think it was mostly because of those occasions he'd invite his dog, a white German Shepherd named "Happy," to join him on the set. I loved Happy!

The other thing I remember about watching *The Jack LaLanne Show*, besides jumping jacks and Happy, were the public interest editorials that often aired during the commercials. Back then, broadcasting licenses were granted to local stations only in the public interest, which meant they were required to devote some airtime to discussing controversial public issues and to present opposing views on such matters. If a paid sponsor presented one side of an issue and nobody paid to present another opinion, it was up to the station involved to provide free time and do so on its own.

But, in 1987, during the Reagan Administration, Federal Communications Chairman, Mark Fowler led a successful repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, which had been in place since 1949, claiming it was unconstitutional and violated free speech, the same excuse used to pass Citizens United more recently. Fowler also eliminated regulations restricting the number of stations one company can own in a single market. A few years later, under President Clinton, the Telecommunications Act of 1994 allowed cross media-ownership, meaning corporations could buy up as many kinds of media outlets as they wanted, which has resulted in just 5 corporations now owning almost every radio and tv station, and every network, newspaper, and magazine in the country. If some of today's largest banks have become too big to fail, the national media has become too big to succeed, because, without the Fairness Doctrine in place, with near complete control of the flow of information, and motivated by nothing more than pure profit, they have little need to be accurate, unbiased, or civil in their reporting.

Today an entire generation has grown up with this model, having never experienced the kind of civil discourse that once existed in the mainstream media. They've grown up with Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and MSNBC, as well as countless online bloggers committed to presenting their own biased opinions as fact, all with the apparent goal of demeaning and demonizing those they disagree with. They've grown up in an era in which the entire point of communication is to silence and destroy the opposition; in which *discussion*, like its cousins, *percussion* and *concussion*, is all about blasting one's opponent in a vicious war of words; in which those responsible for telling the news often become the subjects of the news; in which free speech means the freedom to shut down speech; in which opinion is passed off

as news, propaganda is considered fair and balanced, and paranoid conspiracy theories are given serious attention, while the only serious news we get is from comedians.

Out of this milieu has emerged something we've never seen before, the culture of Political Correctness, a philosophy of some social progressives who think nobody should get away with saying things they find offensive—a philosophy akin to that of people like Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Glenn Beck, who seem to think they have a right not to have to listen to opinions they disagree with, that they have every right to publicly demonize, humiliate, and silence anyone who says something they don't like. We see this manifested a lot these days, especially on college campuses where some students drown out the voices of conservative speakers, and sometimes in our own communities when hundreds, even thousands, rally to protest the presence of conservative figures.

We saw it just a couple days ago when about a thousand people showed up to protest a planned speech by White Supremacist, Richard Spencer at the University of Florida. I personally think it's greatly encouraging when these small groups of racist outliers are overwhelmed by masses chanting things like, "Not in my town, not in my state, we don't want your Nazi hate," or, "No Trump, no KKK, no fascist USA." It's a relief knowing those emboldened by the ill-gotten election of a White Supremacist President still don't represent anywhere near the majority opinion in this country. And it's good to know so many Americans care enough to show up and counter such hate. What bothers me is not the expression of an alternative opinion, an opinion I obviously share, that racism no longer has a place in this country. I'm troubled, rather, by the images I see of antiracists slugging racists in the face, or cursing them in verbal confrontations. I'm troubled by anything insinuating we have a right to hate, disrespect, and do violence against those who don't share our ideas or values. I'm troubled by the belief that basic rights should belong only to those who share our own beliefs.

I'm troubled by the video of a teacher in Berkeley, California who began physically assaulting a participant in a white nationalist rally last July. As the man held his arms up in the air asking nearby police for help, who did nothing to stop the woman, others from her group forced him to the ground then began beating him before the officers finally stepped in. They were part of a group called, By Any Means Necessary, or BAMN, that insists they have a right to protect themselves from racism and fascism by any means necessary. When cellphone video of the assault eventually led to felony charges against her, Yvette Felarca said during her arraignment, "Standing up against fascism and the rise of Nazism and fascism in this country is not a crime. We have the right to defend ourselves."¹ It is this strike first mindset, that justifies protecting ourselves from those with ideas we consider dangerous "by any means necessary" that disturbs me. As a liberal who lives in a nation that has vilified liberals for the past 40 years, and one who was fired from my job after standing up for gay rights, I'm terrified by this widespread belief that it's okay to win the ideological war by any means necessary. Fighting fascism with fascism is not the answer. Silencing and harming others because we disagree with their dangerous ideas is no more justified now than it was during

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/yvette-felarca-neo-nazi-fascism_us_59949dece4b0d0d2cc83d266

the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the McCarthy Era, the Cold War, Vietnam, or any other time we used ideology as an excuse to do violence.

It goes without saying that fascism, racism, and white supremacy reflect twisted, reprehensible, and unjustifiable ideologies. Of course we must combat these ideas, but not by any means necessary. It's not okay to win by any means necessary, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to do violence against those we disagree with, just because we are convinced our side is right. It's not okay to deny equal rights or equal protection under the law to those who don't think like us, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to incomprehensibly gerrymander voting districts to give our side a skewed and unfair advantage, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to purge the rolls of those most likely to vote against us, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to buy up all the media in country to control the flow of information and prevent those we disagree with being heard, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to create a bogus drug war and era of mass incarceration to politically disenfranchise those we disagree with, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to enact politically motivated racist voter suppression laws, just because we're convinced our side is right. It's not okay to ignore the rules, then simply change them overnight to appoint our own Supreme Court choice, just because we're convinced our side is right.

None of this is okay. But you know what is okay? It's okay to hear things we disagree with. It's okay to listen to people with different opinions than our own. It's okay for people to say things we dislike. We're not so fragile we can't handle it, nor so righteous we don't have to stand for it. Some of you have heard me talk about this before, about what happens to us when we feel we are right—and that's what it is, a feeling. It begins with the biological instinct toward repetitive behavior. Repetition is a survival strategy. The more we repeat certain behaviors that don't get us killed, the more likely they are to keep us safe, and, thus, through evolution, come to define a species. Our biology has helped insure repetitive behaviors in us by making us instinctively neophobic, afraid of anything new or different. In our species, because we have advanced frontal lobes, this innate fear extends into the realm of new and different ideas, which we fear might lead to new and dangerous behaviors that divert us from the tried and true ways of the past. So, the feeling of being right releases dopamine into our systems, a neurotransmitter that causes pleasure, a feeling that is withdrawn when we feel uncertain, causing us to feel threatened instead.

I've witnessed this occur during one-on-one or small group conversations, when someone is confronted by an opinions contrary to their own that becomes so threatening the conversation goes from being a simple matter to a moral issue in which lines are quickly drawn, dissenting opinions get shut down, and the conversation comes to a stop. But, as I've said before, when we're so sure we are right, we can be sure we're having an emotional response. This seems to me to be what's happening in our society these days, on all sides of the issues, with people being so convinced they are right that they have a right to defeat those they disagree with by any means necessary. Instead of listening to each other and honestly evaluating our reasons and evidence, much of our discourse is controlled by fear and the flow of dopamine—by how good it feels to be right and how scary not knowing is.

An additional problem with making certain ideas taboo to talk about is that in all the battling for minds, for control of the discourse, and to establish a dominant language in which everything is framed in just the right way, is that this emphasis on words doesn't address the real threats and injustices in the world. I know words can be hurtful, and are sometimes worse than sticks and stones, and that bad ideas often cause us to ignore our most pressing problems and can even make things worse by trying to force the square peg of our minds in to the round hole of the real world. But it's far more important and effective for us to concentrate our efforts on changing these realities than changing minds. These days I hear a lot of talk about talking, coming from liberals who think the problem with the world is that we've not been willing to listen to conservatives, and that what we need to do is start talking with them, so they feel understood, and that will solve everything.

I won't attempt to analyze the soundness of this argument. I will point out that almost 63 million people voted for Trump, and almost 66 million voted for Clinton during last year's election. While talking to each other for better understanding may seem like a good idea, I keep asking what practical system is there for getting 110 million ideologically divided people together to have relational conversations? We need real, workable solutions to today's immediate problems, and can't wait for pipedreams about everyone being on the same page, which, let's face it, means our page, to come true. Yet, when we believe we are fighting an ideological battle, then it's easy to think the solution is also ideological, that it just requires somebody else listening to our reasonable argument, that it just requires a little education.

In addressing just the problem of racism, however, sociologist, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva says considering it a purely ideological problem reduces it to merely a personal issue. "Most analysts regard racism as a matter of individuals subscribing to an irrational view," he says, "thus the cure is educating them to realize that racism is wrong."² Just this week I found myself in yet another conversation where white liberals suggested the cure for racism in our country is tied to white liberals realizing they have white privilege and blind spots when it comes to racism. I asked, I know I have white privilege and blind spots when it comes to racism, now what? Most people in our country today, white people included, are no longer overtly racist in their views, but that hasn't translated into ending systemic racism. That's because, as Bonilla-Silva says, "after a society becomes racialized, racialization develops a life of its own."³ In other words, racism is no longer dependent upon racist beliefs. All of us are caught up in it and we're not going to end it by changing hearts and minds, or by simply removing racist language, symbols, and monuments. We won't end racism in this country until we tear down its systems and institutions that have continued to plug right along despite the Civil Rights Act half a century ago.

The same can be said of many issues in our world, including global warming. As an ideological battle, the solution to solving the problem is a matter of convincing a critical mass

² Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in a Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

that its really happening. It's just another matter of educating enough people with the right idea. But is the problem really just that too many people don't believe it's happening? They can't really disbelieve in something that's right in front of them, can they? They can deny it. They can ignore it. They can pretend it's not happening as an excuse to maintain the status quo, as an excuse to keep doing things the way we've always done them, but they can't disbelieve in something so obvious. The solution to global warming rather, is, again, changing the systems and structures that keep us dependent on fossil fuels. It means carbon taxes, new emissions standards, switching to renewable energies, and other real changes that make practical differences.

Dr. King once said, "It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless." Yet too many keep making the same mistake, believing we can resolve our greatest problems by convincing enough people we are right, that our ideas are best. And while the rest of us are busy fighting the ideological divisions bogus wedge issues have created between us, the powers-that-be are busy changing the rules in their favor through gerrymandering, voter suppression laws, voter purges, and mass disenfranchisement, so they can win elections with a minority of the votes, or by preventing legitimately elected Presidents from appointing Federal judges and Supreme Court Justices, or turning the free press into a corporate monopoly, or putting oil barons in charge of the EPA, or by ruling that corporations are people and money is free speech. These relatively simple actions have changed the world and the course of our society for the worse.

Last year, right after the disastrous election, record breaking numbers of people participated in protest marches, including a 10,000 strong women's march here in Spokane. I was proud that so many from our church were part of it, including me. It wasn't the march itself that encouraged me, however, but knowing that if only a fraction of those involved were to take the march one step further by doing something more to change systems of inequality and destruction, then we'll get through this. And I still believe that's true and is happening.

Right now, as a congregation, we're supporting two efforts in our state that, if successful, will change the rules. De-Escalate Washington, I-940, if passed, will require police to receive first aid, mental health, and de-escalation training, and amend the standards for justifiable force. We're also part of the Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy, working to create thousands of new jobs and a healthy environment by pricing pollution to pay for it. And, right now, as you know, we have helped place an initiative on our City ballot that will fine coal and oil companies for not more safely transporting their dirty, dangerous, and dying products through out community. I also think about the crucial role we played in legalizing gay marriage in our state, and the cascade of states, countries, and, eventually the Supreme Court, that followed suit. I think about our partnership with the Spokane Alliance and our collective efforts to change the rules by getting a Safe & Sick Leave policy passed in our community, and made it a state priority to move people with mental health and addiction issue into treatment not jail, and got a Quality Jobs Bill passed here in 2014. I think about the late Rev. Dr. Bill Houff, a beloved minister here for more than a decade, whose environmental activism first brought awareness to radiation contamination coming from the Hanford Site and led to the shut down of its nuclear reactor just three years later.

I'm also very proud to have been invited by the Louisville Bar Association to explore the possibility of starting a Restorative Justice program while I was still living there. Just two years later the committee had established RJ Louisville, which over the past few years spread from just one, to several police precincts and has diverted hundreds of young people away from prison. I'm proud of the work we did here, as a congregation, to support the Smart Justice program, which has also helped divert people away from prison in the Spokane community. We helped bring travel writer and activist, Rick Steves here to the East Side of the State to help gain support for Initiative-502, which went on to legalize marijuana in Washington and has since cut the number of stop and searches here in half.

What do all these game-changing endeavors have in common? They had nothing to do with changing minds or hearts. They were about changing the rules. They were about restraining the heartless. I'm sure you're beginning to see a pattern here. While I appreciate a good protest, but only when it remains nonviolent, respects the rights of all people, and is an opportunity, not so much to protest what others value and believe, but to demonstrate what I value and believe, I know what matters most is marching on, the steps we take after the protest is over. It's about what we do to change the rules in a way that is fair and just for everyone, including those we disagree with.

I know that marching and chanting in mass can feel good and righteous. I also know going the next step, doing something more by changing the systems, doesn't feel so good. Not only is it hard work, it can be scary. It's scary when you lose your job trying to change the rules, or are unfairly criticized in the paper, or face opposition that considers freedom of speech the freedom to lie. It's not fun. It doesn't feel good. It doesn't give me the dopamine rush my body craves. But what it does achieve is systemic changes that can make a genuine difference in the lives of thousands, even millions, almost overnight. Marching is great, but march on. For it's not the thought that counts, but the steps we take to make our dreams come true.