

Meeting the Hate of Neo-Nazis with Compassion and Courage

We live in the age of rapid-fire social media outbursts that are widening political and ideological divides like never before. A Jewish cross-cultural coach, triggered by the recent neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville and its volatile chain reactions, offers insights that can help build stronger communities, despite our diversity and differences.

By VICKI FLIER HUDSON

In 2001 I walked through a Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, Israel. I shuddered as I thought of my fellow Jews in the camps, trapped in unspeakable suffering. Waves of sadness filled me as I moved through the exhibits. Once those waves had subsided, another feeling came to me: gratitude. I had grown up in the United States in a time and place that was safe for Jews.

But that changed when I saw neo-Nazis marching in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, this August. My heart sank and a heaviness took over my soul.

And yet, what stunned me the most was not these acts of hate—Jews and other minority groups have been targets of this type of hate for centuries—it was my reaction. For the first time in my life, I didn't hate Nazis. I saw them as human. I felt compassion. Conflicting emotions roiled within me: The white supremacists in Charlottesville were carrying Nazi paraphernalia and assault rifles and shouting anti-Semitic epithets. Why wasn't I angrier?

While I did feel anger, I felt more compelled to understand what makes a person a hateful neo-Nazi. From serious pundits to late night jesters on TV, all seemed to be in unison in their simplistic and singular conclusion: "Listen people, Nazis are bad. End of story!"

But I couldn't help wonder, is that all we've got, saying these people are evil? Some of them may be, and we must look to history to understand the complexities of these incidents. But in my experience, when people lash out, the cause of that reaction is almost always fear or ignorance, or both. When we lash back immediately with anger and our own unyielding

conclusions, people often become more defensive of their beliefs.

I could not ignore the feeling that I needed to look beyond condemnation and into compassion. I found myself wanting to listen to people whose views were different from my own, even those who were prejudiced against Jews. I started to feel guilty about that desire. What would my fellow Jews think? What about other minority groups that had struggled for so long against prejudice?

How can you have a dialogue with people like the suspect in Charlottesville accused of ramming his car into a crowd? In that case we couldn't. We cannot give legitimacy to hate that has reached that stage. I thought about Jane Elliott's quote: "Prejudice is an emotional commitment to ignorance." Some of the people in Charlottesville were willing to hold onto their power and prejudice at any cost, even people's lives.

But no one begins their life with those views. Prejudice makes everyone sick, including the perpetrators. I became determined to meet hate with both courage and compassion. This may be painful and even fruitless at times, but to simply label all neo-Nazis as evil is ineffective. They will continue to simmer in their ignorance and fear, and then act on it.

But is it possible to meet hate with compassion and stand up courageously to its many forms?

During incidents like Charlottesville, we need an immediate response of courage. After the rally, Governor of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, swiftly condemned the white supremacists with clear and resolute

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statements: "Go home. ... You are not wanted in this great commonwealth. Shame on you." That was an act of courage. The ideology of the neo-Nazi is bankrupt and evil, and it must be stopped.

Compassion comes in towards the preventative side. While most of us will not confront violent hate on a daily basis, we do have opportunities for dialogue with people who are different from us. Perhaps it was too late for the white supremacists in Charlottesville, but what about people in our own circles? For example, maybe we know someone in the coal mining industry who lost his job and feels angry. Perhaps he just wants to be heard. When we engage in these dialogues, we promote empathy without necessarily changing our beliefs. Hurling insults on Facebook or avoiding opposing views may cause seeds of hate to grow. To have an effective dialogue we need to remember that being uncomfortable is not always the same thing as being unsafe. People who are different from you may make you feel uncomfortable. That does not *automatically* mean they are a threat. In Charlottesville, the white supremacists were a threat, but many of our colleagues and friends are not. If they are angry, they are likely scared, misguided, displaying prejudice or hate, or they have a valid point on which they disagree with you. In some cases they are willfully denying facts or longstanding privilege. Let's examine some possibilities for how we could respond using courage and compassion.

- A person is scared: Imagine that a friend insults a politician you support and accuses him of destroying health care. You know that friend is struggling to make ends meet and that the rising cost of health-care is a part of that struggle. Your first instinct may be to defend the politician you support. This will likely lead to your friend holding on more staunchly to her view. Instead try offering empathy. "I know the health-care situation is hard right now. I've also been stressed about it." This may give the person a chance to focus on their own experience which could help them process the stress.

- A person is misguided: Say a friend posts something on Facebook that is factually untrue about your cultural or religious group. Call him up or send him a private message. Start with a question. "Hey Steve, I saw your post on Facebook about all Indians being Hindu and worshipping the cow. I'm curious, where did that information come from?" After he responds, correct the error. "That is a common perception about people from India, but actually there are several religions in India besides Hinduism. I myself am an Indian Christian."

- A person is displaying prejudice: When we hear outward prejudice, we make clear that while the person has every right to feel afraid or angry, they do not have the right to lash out. Imagine a family member makes an anti-Semitic comment at dinner. Give an

immediate response: "Aunt Joan, we need to change the subject" or "Aunt Joan, that is not appropriate." At a later time, you may choose to privately engage Joan by being an interviewer, asking about her experiences and how she arrived at her perspective. This forces her to explain her views but in a nondefensive environment. First listen with compassion, then you may be able share facts or personal stories that shift Joan's mindset. I have used this technique successfully many times. I have also failed. Both are part of the process.

- A person is displaying hate: If we see someone being targeted with hate in a public place, we need to come to the victim and engage them in conversation about a random topic. Keep talking to them and making eye contact. Do not acknowledge the attacker's presence, and if possible guide the targeted person to safety.

As change sweeps the United States, we can expect more incidents like the Charlottesville rally. People may feel their way of life disappearing or their values threatened. They are frightened. They may also be unwilling or unable to recognize ingrained biases they hold. In fact, when people are confronted with the effects of their biases, they typically become defensive. They blame the person or group who caused their discomfort rather than looking at how those people were impacted by the bias. While this needs to change, I feel that it will not change by ignoring people's fears and experiences, lashing them, or lashing back. We must first give a bold, courageous response to prejudice, but we may be able to follow that response with conversations of empathy and reflection. Minorities and other groups historically targeted by hate may find those conversations too difficult or undesirable; they may feel understandably weary of dealing with longstanding power structures, or wish to speak against them more directly. We each must listen to our own voice in this journey and speak up where we can.

For me, I have decided to take a road of compassionate dialogue. While some may disagree, I believe that compassion for another human being is never wrong. Through empathy, people might begin to acknowledge their discomfort without seeing it as a threat, and to distinguish between fault and responsibility. Though compassion is a difficult road, it is the road most likely to lead to effective dialogue. By replacing my own hate for Nazis with compassion, I have begun to travel the road to hope.



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