



Sticks and Stones and Hate Speech

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There is an old playground saying that goes something like this: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The implication is that while rhetoric and hate speech are bruising to the ego, they do not leave the physical scars of physical violence. As Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson [highlighted last week](#), we are in the middle of a political season rife with divisive rhetoric that often devolves into conspiracy theories that have dangerous implications for the safety of our communities. Recently, this manifested as false stories of immigrants and refugees in Springfield, OH stealing and eating their neighbors’ pets – baseless claims that continue to be refuted and debunked by local authorities.

These conspiracy theories have sparked threats of violence that this week led to the closure of local schools, as local officials worked to assess and respond to 33 bomb threats. Nearby Clark State College and Wittenberg University held classes virtually on September 16th after both institutions received emailed threats that targeted the local Haitian community. Baseless claims intentionally deployed to demonize a particular group are not new historically, and they aren’t new in our contemporary context either. Yet, familiarity does not lessen the danger these statements pose. Their continued endorsement and amplification by public officials, left unchecked, normalizes behavior unfit for a playground, much less a civil society.

We know that in addition to the physical harm sparked by rhetoric that villainizes and dehumanizes targeted groups of people, the constant fear of harm’s potential leaves its own scars. The formation of lenses of distrust and perspectives of suspicion reduce our ability to see our shared future in one another. To repair this damage requires a conscious effort to engage in civil

discourse that rehumanizes those who have become the “other.” This task is difficult under normal circumstances, let alone amidst the amplified rhetoric of an election cycle.

When faced with overwhelming stimulus and complexity, we have a tendency towards the development of binary understandings. In psychology this concept is called binary bias. In our world of information saturation, we are constantly surrounded by an often chaotic and deafening cacophony of information. At times this is a symphony of the human experience. At others, it is an unproductive deluge of vitriol. Our instinct is to order this chaos into a binary understanding of the world around us and the challenges before us. Hate speech and “othering” feeds this phenomenon by reducing our community into “us” and “them.”

Prior to joining the National Ministries of the United Church of Christ (UCC), I worked as an intranational conflict mediator. As a mediator, my role was to help facilitate conversation between parties in conflict as they worked to develop a common vision for their shared future. Regardless of who emerges victorious in November, we must remember that we are members of a common community made up of a diverse array of experiences, histories, and perspectives. Our lives have been enriched and made possible by that diversity. Our future is dependent on its maintenance and thriving. This is our collective responsibility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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