

OPINION

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'How Can You Hate Me When You Don't Even Know Me?'

June 26, 2021

One of the questions I'm asked most is: How do I talk to those on the other side of America's political and cultural abyss? What can I say to my brother/aunt/friend who thinks Joe Biden is a socialist with dementia who stole the election?

I've wondered about persuasion strategies, too, because I have friends who have their pro-Trump or anti-vaccine biases validated every evening by Tucker Carlson. So I reached out to an expert at changing minds.

Daryl Davis, 63, is a Black musician with an unusual calling: He hangs out with Ku Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis and chips away at their racism. He has evidence of great success: a collection of K.K.K. robes and hoods given him by people whom he persuaded to abandon the Klan.

His odyssey arose from curiosity about racism, including about an attack he suffered. When Davis was 10 years old, he says, a group of white people hurled bottles, soda cans and rocks at him.

"I was incredulous," Davis recalled. "My 10-year-old brain could not process the idea that someone who had never seen me, who had never spoken to me, who knew nothing about me, would want to inflict pain upon me for no other reason than the color of my skin."

"How can you hate me," he remembers wondering, "when you don't even know me?"

Davis began to work on answers after he graduated from Howard University and joined a band that sometimes played in a Maryland bar that attracted white racists. Davis struck up a friendship with a K.K.K. member, each fascinated by the other, and the man eventually left the K.K.K., Davis said.

One of Davis's methods — and there's research from social psychology to confirm the effectiveness of this approach — is not to confront antagonists and denounce their bigotry but rather to start in listening mode. Once people feel they are being listened to, he says, it is easier to plant a seed of doubt.

In one case, Davis said, he listened as a K.K.K. district leader brought up crime by African Americans and told him that Black people are genetically wired to be violent. Davis responded by acknowledging that many crimes are committed by Black people but then noted that almost all well-known serial killers have been white and mused that white people must have a gene to be serial killers.

When the K.K.K. leader sputtered that this was ridiculous, Davis agreed: It's silly to say that white people are predisposed to be serial killers, just as it's ridiculous to say that Black people have crime genes.

The man went silent, Davis said, and about five months later quit the K.K.K.

Davis claims to have persuaded some 200 white supremacists to leave the Klan and other extremist groups. It's impossible to confirm that number, but his work has been well documented for decades in articles, videos, books and a TED Talk. He also has a podcast called "Changing Minds With Daryl Davis."

"Daryl saved my life," said Scott Shepherd, a former grand dragon of the K.K.K. "Daryl extended his hand and actually just extended his heart, too, and we became brothers." Shepherd ended up leaving the Klan and gave his robes to Davis.

Davis's approach seems out of step with modern sensibilities. Today the more common impulse is to decry from a distance.

The preference for safe spaces over dialogue arises in part from a reasonable concern that engaging extremists legitimizes them. In any case, society can hardly ask Black people to reach out to racists, gay people to sit down with homophobes, immigrants to win over xenophobes, women to try to reform misogynists, and so on. Victims of discrimination have endured enough without being called upon to redeem their tormentors.

Yet I do think that we Americans don't engage enough with people we fundamentally disagree with. There's something to be said for the basic Davis inclination toward dialogue even with unreasonable antagonists. If we're all stuck in the same boat, we should talk to each other.

"Daryl Davis demonstrates that talking face-to-face with your ideological opponents can motivate them to rethink their views," said Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. "He's an extraordinary example of what psychologists have repeatedly shown with evidence: In over 500 studies, interacting face-to-face with an out-group reduced prejudice 94 percent of the time.

"You won't get through to people until you've earned their trust," Grant added. "You're not likely to earn their trust until you've met them face-to-face and listened to their stories."

There's a reason we try to solve even intractable wars by getting the parties to sit in the same room: It beats war. If we believe in engagement with North Koreans and Iranians, then why not with fellow Americans?

At a time when America is so polarized and political space is so toxic, we, of course, have to stand up for what we think is right. But it may also help to sit down with those we believe are wrong.

"If I can sit down and talk to K.K.K. members and neo-Nazis and get them to give me their robes and hoods and swastika flags and all that kind of crazy stuff," Davis said, "there's no reason why somebody can't sit down at a dinner table and talk to their family member."