

I have been trying to determine how to start the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program this academic year. As luck would have it I saw this TED Talk.

I don't know how many of you are aware of the Westboro Baptist Church. They're a religious group based in Topeka, Kansas that seems to hate most minorities and travels the country spewing hate. They were in Hampton Roads a few years ago. I remember being asked to be present at my synagogue as both an anti presence and in case of violence.

I came across this TED ["I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here's why I left"](https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left). It is a 15 minutes video, the last 5 minutes provide excellent points on how to engage in positive discussions with those who have different perspectives. I provided the transcript.

Here is the link to the TED:

https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left/transcript?language=en

I was a blue-eyed, chubby-cheeked five-year-old when I joined my family on the picket line for the first time. My mom made me leave my dolls in the minivan. I'd stand on a street corner in the heavy Kansas humidity, surrounded by a few dozen relatives, with my tiny fists clutching a sign that I couldn't read yet: "Gays are worthy of death." This was the beginning.

00:25

footnote

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Our protests soon became a daily occurrence and an international phenomenon, and as a member of Westboro Baptist Church, I became a fixture on picket lines across the country. The end of my antigay picketing career and life as I knew it, came 20 years later, triggered in part by strangers on Twitter who showed me the power of engaging the other.

00:47

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In my home, life was framed as an epic spiritual battle between good and evil. The good was my church and its members, and the evil was everyone else. My church's antics were such that we were constantly at odds with the world, and that reinforced our otherness on a daily basis. "Make a difference between the unclean and the clean," the verse says, and so we did. From baseball games to military funerals, we trekked across the country with neon protest signs in hand to tell others exactly how "unclean" they were and exactly why they were headed for damnation. This was the focus of our whole lives. This was the only way for me to do good in a world that sits in Satan's lap. And like the rest of my 10 siblings, I believed what I was taught with all my heart, and I pursued Westboro's agenda with a special sort of zeal.

01:40

In 2009, that zeal brought me to Twitter. Initially, the people I encountered on the platform were just as hostile as I expected. They were the digital version of the screaming hordes I'd been seeing at protests since I was a kid. But in the midst of that digital brawl, a strange pattern developed. Someone would arrive at my profile with the usual rage and scorn, I would respond with a custom mix of Bible verses, pop culture references and smiley faces. They would be understandably confused and caught off guard, but then a conversation would ensue. And it was civil -- full of genuine curiosity on both sides. How had the other come to such outrageous conclusions about the world?

02:25

Sometimes the conversation even bled into real life. People I'd sparred with on Twitter would come out to the picket line to see me when I protested in their city. A man named David was one such person. He ran a blog called "Jewlicious," and after several months of heated but friendly arguments online, he came out

to see me at a picket in New Orleans. He brought me a Middle Eastern dessert from Jerusalem, where he lives, and I brought him kosher chocolate and held a "God hates Jews" sign.

02:54

(Laughter)

02:57

There was no confusion about our positions, but the line between friend and foe was becoming blurred. We'd started to see each other as human beings, and it changed the way we spoke to one another.

03:08

It took time, but eventually these conversations planted seeds of doubt in me. My friends on Twitter took the time to understand Westboro's doctrines, and in doing so, they were able to find inconsistencies I'd missed my entire life. Why did we advocate the death penalty for gays when Jesus said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?" How could we claim to love our neighbor while at the same time praying for God to destroy them? The truth is that the care shown to me by these strangers on the internet was itself a contradiction. It was growing evidence that people on the other side were not the demons I'd been led to believe.

03:48

These realizations were life-altering. Once I saw that we were not the ultimate arbiters of divine truth but flawed human beings, I couldn't pretend otherwise. I couldn't justify our actions -- especially our cruel practice of protesting funerals and celebrating human tragedy. These shifts in my perspective contributed to a larger erosion of trust in my church, and eventually it made it impossible for me to stay.

04:16

In spite of overwhelming grief and terror, I left Westboro in 2012. In those days just after I left, the instinct to hide was almost paralyzing. I wanted to hide from the judgement of my family, who I knew would never speak to me again -- people whose thoughts and opinions had meant everything to me. And I wanted to hide from the world I'd rejected for so long -- people who had no reason at all to give me a second chance after a lifetime of antagonism. And yet, unbelievably, they did.

04:48

The world had access to my past because it was all over the internet -- thousands of tweets and hundreds of interviews, everything from local TV news to "The Howard Stern Show" -- but so many embraced me with open arms anyway. I wrote an apology for the harm I'd caused, but I also knew that an apology could never undo any of it. All I could do was try to build a new life and find a way somehow to repair some of the damage. People had every reason to doubt my sincerity, but most of them didn't. And -- given my history, it was more than I could've hoped for -- forgiveness and the benefit of the doubt. It still amazes me.

05:28

I spent my first year away from home adrift with my younger sister, who had chosen to leave with me. We walked into an abyss, but we were shocked to find the light and a way forward in the same communities we'd targeted for so long. David, my "Jewlicious" friend from Twitter, invited us to spend time among a Jewish community in Los Angeles. We slept on couches in the home of a Hasidic rabbi and his wife and their four kids -- the same rabbi that I'd protested three years earlier with a sign that said, "Your rabbi is a whore." We spent long hours talking about theology and Judaism and life while we washed dishes in their kosher kitchen and chopped vegetables for dinner. They treated us like family. They held nothing against us, and again I was astonished.

06:20

That period was full of turmoil, but one part I've returned to often is a surprising realization I had during that time -- that it was a relief and a privilege to let go of the harsh judgments that instinctively ran through my mind about nearly every person I saw. I realized that now I needed to learn. I needed to listen.

06:43

This has been at the front of my mind lately, because I can't help but see in our public discourse so many of the same destructive impulses that ruled my former church. We celebrate tolerance and diversity more than at any other time in memory, and still we grow more and more divided. We want good things -

- justice, equality, freedom, dignity, prosperity -- but the path we've chosen looks so much like the one I walked away from four years ago. We've broken the world into us and them, only emerging from our bunkers long enough to lob rhetorical grenades at the other camp. We write off half the country as out-of-touch liberal elites or racist misogynist bullies. No nuance, no complexity, no humanity. Even when someone does call for empathy and understanding for the other side, the conversation nearly always devolves into a debate about who deserves more empathy. And just as I learned to do, we routinely refuse to acknowledge the flaws in our positions or the merits in our opponent's. Compromise is anathema. We even target people on our own side when they dare to question the party line. This path has brought us cruel, sniping, deepening polarization, and even outbreaks of violence. I remember this path. It will not take us where we want to go.

08:07

What gives me hope is that we can do something about this. The good news is that it's simple, and the bad news is that it's hard. We have to talk and listen to people we disagree with. It's hard because we often can't fathom how the other side came to their positions. It's hard because righteous indignation, that sense of certainty that ours is the right side, is so seductive. It's hard because it means extending empathy and compassion to people who show us hostility and contempt. The impulse to respond in kind is so tempting, but that isn't who we want to be. We can resist. And I will always be inspired to do so by those people I encountered on Twitter, apparent enemies who became my beloved friends. And in the case of one particularly understanding and generous guy, my husband. There was nothing special about the way I responded to him. What was special was their approach. I thought about it a lot over the past few years and I found four things they did differently that made real conversation possible. These four steps were small but powerful, and I do everything I can to employ them in difficult conversations today.

09:24

The first is don't assume bad intent. My friends on Twitter realized that even when my words were aggressive and offensive, I sincerely believed I was doing the right thing. Assuming ill motives almost instantly cuts us off from truly understanding why someone does and believes as they do. We forget that they're a human being with a lifetime of experience that shaped their mind, and we get stuck on that first wave of anger, and the conversation has a very hard time ever moving beyond it. But when we assume good or neutral intent, we give our minds a much stronger framework for dialogue.

10:02

The second is ask questions. When we engage people across ideological divides, asking questions helps us map the disconnect between our differing points of view. That's important because we can't present effective arguments if we don't understand where the other side is actually coming from and because it gives them an opportunity to point out flaws in our positions. But asking questions serves another purpose; it signals to someone that they're being heard. When my friends on Twitter stopped accusing and started asking questions, I almost automatically mirrored them. Their questions gave me room to speak, but they also gave me permission to ask them questions and to truly hear their responses. It fundamentally changed the dynamic of our conversation.

10:50

The third is stay calm. This takes practice and patience, but it's powerful. At Westboro, I learned not to care how my manner of speaking affected others. I thought my rightness justified my rudeness -- harsh tones, raised voices, insults, interruptions -- but that strategy is ultimately counterproductive. Dialing up the volume and the snark is natural in stressful situations, but it tends to bring the conversation to an unsatisfactory, explosive end. When my husband was still just an anonymous Twitter acquaintance, our discussions frequently became hard and pointed, but we always refused to escalate. Instead, he would change the subject. He would tell a joke or recommend a book or gently excuse himself from the conversation. We knew the discussion wasn't over, just paused for a time to bring us back to an even keel. People often lament that digital communication makes us less civil, but this is one advantage that online conversations have over in-person ones. We have a buffer of time and space between us and the people whose ideas we find so frustrating. We can use that buffer. Instead of lashing out, we can pause, breathe, change the subject or walk away, and then come back to it when we're ready.

12:10

And finally ... make the argument. This might seem obvious, but one side effect of having strong beliefs is that we sometimes assume that the value of our position is or should be obvious and self-evident, that we shouldn't have to defend our positions because they're so clearly right and good that if someone doesn't get it, it's their problem -- that it's not my job to educate them. But if it were that simple, we would all see things the same way. As kind as my friends on Twitter were, if they hadn't actually made their arguments, it would've been so much harder for me to see the world in a different way. We are all a product of our upbringing, and our beliefs reflect our experiences. We can't expect others to spontaneously change their own minds. If we want change, we have to make the case for it.

13:05

My friends on Twitter didn't abandon their beliefs or their principles -- only their scorn. They channeled their infinitely justifiable offense and came to me with pointed questions tempered with kindness and humor. They approached me as a human being, and that was more transformative than two full decades of outrage, disdain and violence. I know that some might not have the time or the energy or the patience for extensive engagement, but as difficult as it can be, reaching out to someone we disagree with is an option that is available to all of us. And I sincerely believe that we can do hard things, not just for them but for us and our future. Escalating disgust and intractable conflict are not what we want for ourselves, or our country or our next generation.

13:57

My mom said something to me a few weeks before I left Westboro, when I was desperately hoping there was a way I could stay with my family. People I have loved with every pulse of my heart since even before I was that chubby-cheeked five-year-old, standing on a picket line holding a sign I couldn't read. She said, "You're just a human being, my dear, sweet child." She was asking me to be humble - - not to question but to trust God and my elders. But to me, she was missing the bigger picture -- that we're all just human beings. That we should be guided by that most basic fact, and approach one another with generosity and compassion.

14:40

Each one of us contributes to the communities and the cultures and the societies that we make up. The end of this spiral of rage and blame begins with one person who refuses to indulge these destructive, seductive impulses. We just have to decide that it's going to start with us.

14:58

Thank you.

15:00

(Applause)

Footnotes

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Note

"Our protests soon became a daily occurrence and an international phenomenon."

While I was a member of Westboro, it was common for members to give interviews to international media outlets and documentary film crews from around the world. British filmmaker Louis Theroux made two such documentaries, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

00:12

Note

"Initially, the people I encountered on the platform were just as hostile as I expected."

The early conversations on my Twitter account are all still visible because I chose not to delete them. I didn't ever want to whitewash my history or forget where I come from.

00:16

Note

He brought me a Middle Eastern dessert from Jerusalem, where he lives, and I brought him kosher chocolate and held a "God Hates Jews" sign.

If you'd like to see this exchange from David's perspective, he wrote a [blog post](#) about it at the time. The dynamic is so surreal that it still makes me laugh.

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Note

"It took time, but eventually these conversations planted seeds of doubt in me."

In a [profile published in 2015](#), New Yorker staff writer Adrian Chen did a brilliant job of bringing light to these conversations and how they developed over time.

00:45

Note

"I wrote an apology for the harm I'd caused, but I also knew that an apology could never undo any of it."

Writing [this apology](#) and publicly grappling with the life I'd lived was terrifying – but after two decades of public protesting and antagonism, I knew hiding was impossible. Publicly acknowledging the harm I'd done and trying to make it right seemed like the only honest way to move forward.

01:00

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Note

"Given my history, it was more than I could have hoped for: forgiveness and the benefit of the doubt."

Compassionate responses like this were much more common than I would have thought. I was so grateful to see that true kindness and understanding were not exclusive to Westboro, as I had believed.

01:10

Note

"Even when someone does call for empathy and understanding for the other side, the conversation nearly always devolves into a debate about who deserves more empathy."

I've fallen into this trap a few times myself until I realized how little it does to change the dynamic of a discussion. Each side wants compassion, and we all feel that we deserve it – but how likely is it that the other side will suddenly agree that we are the ones more deserving of compassion? The question of who is "more deserving" ends up being just another point of contention – and not at all a solution.

When a conversation is as polarized and hostile as our public discourse is now, sometimes the most

effective way to get compassion from the other side is to first give it. This is non-complementary behavior, and it is both very difficult and incredibly powerful.

01:15

Note

"We just have to decide that it's going to start with us."

"f you make this choice, see the "Take action" section on my talk page for more ideas on steps to take next!