

I'm a Conservative, but I'm Not a Hatemonger

In a culture that supposedly values diversity, I'm called names simply for expressing my opinions

By Todd Werkoven

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I am a sexist. A racist. A homophobe. A zealot. It's enough to make me hate myself. And I would if I believed it. But these labels do not really describe me—they are names I've been called because I'm religious and conservative.

The funny thing is, I grew up thinking I was liberal. I was, at least compared with the other students at the Christian schools I attended. My views tended to break with the party line. I'd argue that having a free and democratic republic was preferable to a theocracy. And although I've never agreed with homosexuality as a lifestyle choice, I'd make the case that homosexuals should be allowed some sort of marriage institution (if I don't want politicians telling me who I can spend my life with, why should they be able to tell anyone else?).

Then, during my junior year of college, I transferred from my small Christian school to a public university that offered my major. Everywhere I went, I saw reminders to "celebrate diversity" and "embrace the differences in others"—from the pamphlets students passed out to promote campus events to the posters that advertised university-sponsored lectures on subjects like "Acts of Intolerance."

"Wonderful!" I thought. I love learning how people's varied backgrounds form their perspectives. I relish discussions about why others think what they think. I am even open to changing my opinions. And where better to have a free exchange of ideas than at an American university?

I quickly realized that "celebrate" and "embrace" were code words for "endorse" and "agree." On my way to lunch, I'd occasionally stop outside the cafeteria to talk to the students who were signing kids up for campus activities. When the activity was something I had ideological differences with, like a pro-choice rally, and I expressed my point of view, the conversation would come to an abrupt end. Once, the angry young woman manning the table said it was people like me who were responsible for the Crusades and the Inquisition.

Another time, at the end of a class discussion in which I expressed my doubts about the value of hate-crime legislation, a classmate compared me to the reprehensible people who killed Mathew Shepard. Never mind that I find it inexcusably evil to harm any human being because of race, gender, religious belief or sexual preference; the mere fact that I disagreed with him made me fair game.

It took only a few months of such negative interactions for me to stop speaking up and start nodding along with a vacuous smile on my face. To tell people I was a Christian or a conservative was to be the target of mean-spirited rants—by the same “open-minded” people who scolded me for not embracing diversity. I got tired of the scoffing and the dagger-eyed glares aimed at me whenever I dared suggest an alternate world view.

These experiences were good training for life after college. Once when I told a co-worker that I was a Christian, he asked me half-jokingly if I was going to tell him he was going to hell. Even my hairdresser said, “You must be one of those Bible thumpers.”

Thankfully, encounters like these are fairly innocuous, and I know the people involved didn’t mean any real harm. But I have noticed a more vicious mind-set leaching into our culture. A few years ago on “Late Night with Conan O’Brien,” Alec Baldwin condemned Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee and screamed that “if we were in other countries” we would kill their families and stone Henry Hyde to death. Why? Because Hyde and the other conservative representatives had the gall to call for Clinton’s impeachment. Even more sickening than Baldwin’s comment was the fact that it seemed to bother no one—the audience laughed and cheered.

In the last few months, I’ve received fund-raising letters from Planned Parenthood in which pro-life advocates are referred to as “anti-choice fanatics” and “religious zealots.” I can’t remember the last time I read a newspaper article that used the word “activists” to describe those working for conservative causes and “extremists” for those working for liberal ones.

So what’s my point? It’s that when we demean those who have dissenting opinions by calling them names, we discourage intelligent debate—and original thinking. Sometimes I feel like I’m one of the few who don’t simply regurgitate politically correct drivel.

So I encourage you to do what in this political climate seems truly liberal: think for yourself. Don’t believe what you hear about my “kind of people” or any kind of people. Listen to what the individual has to say. Hasn’t that been the goal all along?

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