

Common Cruelty in Lockdown Time. Allowing Hatred, Fear and Paranoia to Cloud our Judgment

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Global Research, April 22, 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

“Deer in the headlights look,” wrote someone on social media about South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem, who was shown in an unflattering photo, after workers at a Smithfield plant in her state tested positive for the corona virus. “That head would look just right mounted on my wall,” the commenter continued. Noem did not issue a state-wide lockdown order, as many states did, preferring to use a “targeted approach,” she said in an NPR story last week, issuing safety guidelines and allowing businesses to decide whether or not to close. South Dakota is one of eight states that have not declared state-wide stay-at-home orders. In an April 16 NPR story, “Data Doesn’t Show a Need for State-Wide Stay-at Home Order,” the governor said that she remains “teachable’ and talks with other governors regularly. She has said that a state-wide lockdown of all businesses may not have prevented employees testing positive at the Smithfield plant.

Media reports that many Smithfield workers tested positive for the virus, and two days ago, one died. I was stunned by the almost gleeful storm of stories across most U.S. newspapers about employees testing positive and then horrified when I read the comment in which the commenter likens the governor to a deer. adding that her head would look right mounted on a wall. This is a death threat against a public official that someone presumed he could make anonymously. We may disagree with what this elected official did. Many people throughout the country, public figures and ordinary citizens, disagree with the federal and state governments’ handing of this virus with many stating that the damage to the economy and to communities and resulting deaths from economic despair, isolation, domestic violence, suicide, addictions are far worse than infections and some deaths from a new virus. Such cruel, and even deadly, comments from people who disagree have been become much more common lately.

This governor has been described as a “Trump ally, ” which may explain the rampant hostility, even violent language towards her, as the county has become increasingly and dangerously polarized these last few years. People often seem unable to see one another’s humanity, with some seeing Trump supporters or allies as having some kind of genetic defect or as epitomizing evil. I am no fan of the guy (or most politicians) and do not listen to his inflammatory or crude speech. When co-workers or students or acquaintances have tried to sniff out who I voted for or where I land politically, as has been common cultural policing practice the last few years, my answer usually has been, “I am so independent, I don’t think I count.”

Though I vote independent, I find astonishing the often bald hatred of any idea or person close to Trump. I heard a respected peace activist say recently, while he noted abuse of whistle-blower Julian Assange, that his wife had told him before the interview to make sure

to add that Trump is the worst president in history. “No matter what else I think,” I hear often suggested or blatantly spoken by various people, independent thinkers usually on a range of controversial topics, “Trump is the worst president in history.” Really? Worse than those who destroyed the nation of Iraq for no reason? I try to remember what he has done that makes Trump or anyone near him (or anyone who does not summarily condemn him or anything he is associated with) worse than a public figure who, say, orders a nuclear bomb dropped on a Japanese city after Japan had already surrendered at the end of WWII, or another who signs off on drone bombing Pakistan, or convenes meetings to issue secret kill lists of people around the world to assassinate under the so-called War on Terror. What about carpet bombing for years the small, remote country of Cambodia? Or, rejecting Jewish refugees attempting to escape Nazi Germany during WWII?

There is disagreement about how to best cope with this virus, but hatred, vitriol, bullying, and ostracism may cloud our judgment further in a time when we need to keep reading, talking, listening, and most importantly, thinking. Shockingly, there is even disagreement about the numbers of infected people and numbers who have died or how deaths from this virus are tallied. There is disagreement about where and how the virus originated. Further, scientists and health professionals do not all agree that national lockdown is the best way to stop the spread.

Allowing hatred, fear, and paranoia to cloud our judgment harms society. In the extreme, someone on the Internet, for instance, could think it acceptable to call for shooting a public official like game and mounting her head on the wall when she did not order businesses in her state to close. She may be right. People at that Smithfield plant may have gotten infected anyway. I am not certain we know all the details. Or, she could have made a mistake. I am perplexed, however, that people commenting on social media, and even journalists, would seem almost happy that the infection spread at that plant, in order to expose that this governor deserves our contempt.

Rampant cruel speech reminds me of school yard bullying and ostracism of those who act or think differently from dominant groups. We may disagree; people get things wrong often, but the character of Internet and mainstream media speech I read and hear now disturbs me.

Some church pastors resisted state orders closing churches and held services anyway. When various church goers tested positive for the virus subsequently (I question how and why they were even tracked down for tests), media outlets and social media platforms, went abuzz with “gotcha” comments and almost happiness, it seemed to me, with the chance to portray religious people, who still wish to exercise their Constitutional right to assemble and worship, as ignorant, backwards, and closed-minded. So ignorant that they deserve to get sick and die if they dare act outside of current government controls. Comments on social media are often derisive, even vicious towards what is seen as a type — religious people, particularly Christians lately. Christians, like anyone else, can be narrow-minded and judgmental. I saw appear on a published prayer list this week, “people who do not take the virus seriously.” Religious people or church goers or believers in God, however you wish to describe them, are not all one way, are not one type, not during this virus lockdown time nor during any other time. Further, I am not converted to the notion that all, or even most, religious people are backwards and uneducated, and I find such suggestions offensive anytime and especially hurtful during this time of world-wide fear and confusion.

Additionally, as more people protest state lockdown orders, I hear those who silently conform to the lockdowns condemn protestors as ignorant — and as all one type or a couple of types. “Trumptards,” I have heard them called, angry white men with AKs, camo, and Confederate flag emblems, or people so dumb they deserve to contract the virus and die. Some protestors are stereotyped as religious zealots, howling for the Rapture they think will occur at any moment now. An inflammatory and cruel Internet meme appeared today that pictured a flag image of a snake that usually has the caption, “Don’t Tread on Me.” Instead the mocking caption said, “I Demand to Be allowed to Go to Applebee’s”. Closing the economy, causing people to not be able to pay rent or utility bills or buy food – or to lose their businesses — should not be likened to going to Applebee’s. I suspect many in economic despair, women in unsafe home situations, people ravaged by addictions as their in-person support groups have been stripped may not even have the energy or inclination to comment on social media, write letters to the editor or articles, or attend public protests. I believe we are now only seeing protest a vigorous and determined few, some extremists. I know many families at my school are suffering quietly now, especially small business owners, wage workers in service industries, or factory workers. Many do not have the privilege, as I do sitting here now, as a teacher, to still receive a state government paycheck, while working from home.

As we look closer, we may see that protestors of government-mandated lockdowns of all businesses and cultural events and sites nationwide, are not all one type or even a couple of types. I disagree that they are all “right wing” as a *New York Times* headline stated this week. In a video of a protest last week, I heard a nurse from Ohio interviewed. She had lost her job as whole hospital wings closed down because of cancellations of appointments and procedures. She said that lockdown and isolation were wrong and would ultimately make the virus stronger and last longer as people were not able to build immunity naturally and gradually. Another protestor was an immigrant who had lost his family business he spent his life building. Another thought it wrong to keep liquor and tobacco stores open, while not allowing people to go to work or church, when alcohol sales are up 200 percent. Critics and protestors of these government lockdowns around the world are from various ideological perspectives – civil libertarians, health professionals, scientists, business owners, people of faith, common workers, who have lost a paycheck and either have lost or fear losing everything. This is time for us to think independently and creatively, to transcend political party divisions, which many believe is just one party rather than the illusion of two. Maybe it is time for labels, such as “Liberal,” “Redneck,” “Trumptard,” “Libtard” to mean less and less, time to see that we have much more in common than we are manipulated into believing.

It serves us poorly to name-call, to summarily dismiss people as ignorant slobs, whether it is blatant in social media or subtle in the ways journalists cull and write certain stories in certain ways. We have been primed for this kind of vicious talk for a few years now. Not being able to see the humanity of those who are not aligned with our ideas or our version of reality has impeded our ability to solve problems like how to best care for sick people, now or in the future, or how to listen to and help desperate people, suffering through what may be a collapsing economy.

Whatever people’s views on this calamitous time in our culture or how to deal with it, death threats against a public figure doing her best to make decisions for the state she was elected to represent are a sign of serious problems overtaking us – cruelty and bullying and typecasting. Governor Noem may have a husband and children and neighbors whom she

does her best to care for. Would we want someone to call for the head of our neighbor or fellow church member to be placed on a wall like game killed? Whatever people may think of Donald Trump as a politician, he also has a wife and a teenaged son, as I have a teenaged son, home now from school, probably scared about what will happen next.

Derisive, narrow-minded language is often directed at religious leaders and church members generally, I have noticed, and now, the volume on such speech is turned way up. Religious leaders are attacked as uneducated zealots for wanting to hold services. Some have persisted anyway.

The Bishop in Los Cruces, New Mexico was the first in the U.S, to resume public masses, the Catholic News Agency reported April 15. Bishop Baldacchino said that he was called to bring hope and consolation while still following guidelines to protect people's safety. Participants received mass in their cars while the priests wore masks and gloves. When I hear cruel comments about religious people, I remember that church members and leaders, as their faith calls them, have often been firsts to go to places torn with conflict, violence, and disease. Religious people have ministered to some of the sickest and most destitute throughout history. Minnesota has a large population of Somali people because the Lutheran Church there arranged and paid for them to come to the U.S during their country's civil war. While civil war raged in Somalia, I learned that dominating, bullying countries took advantage of what they thought had become an unprotected, failed state by dumping their toxic waste, including nuclear waste, on Somali's shores, causing deaths, cancers, and horrible birth defects that continue now.

When I read or hear disparaging, hostile, even violent comments about religion and religious people, I wonder what Jesus (or other religious martyrs) would do during this reign of virus terror with governments' lockdowns of whole societies. As a nonconformist, mocked and called naive, he may protest already very rich politicians selling off stock they thought would lose them money right before this government lockdown of the economy in response to a new virus; he may not stand silent while politicians' companies made them huge sums of money in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while many men sent to fight those wars now battle daily debilitating migraines and cognitive impairments from Traumatic Brain Injury caused by explosions, injuries they may have to endure for the rest of their lives.

He may get it wrong a few times first, but I imagine Jesus would not comply silently while the U.S. now spends more on war and violence than has been spent in the history of the world when a small percentage of that money would buy food and medicine for millions. In this time of fear and confusion. I think he would reject harmful stereotypes and rigid categories to be present among the sick and suffering, the lonely and lost, would step lightly and act prudently while leaving doors open. I could be wrong, but I believe this.

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Christine E. Black's work has been published in The American Journal of Poetry, New Millennium Writings, Nimrod International, The Virginia Journal of Education, Friends Journal, Sojourners Magazine, English Journal, Amethyst Review, and other publications. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Pablo Neruda Prize.

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