

On Being Negative

As of late, some have found accusing me to be in vogue, saying that I am "so negative." I must assume, because I have few interactions that reach any other context, that my accusers find it offensive that I am driven to committed belligerence towards the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). But I ask that you and they consider: Is being negative towards evil not, of itself, a positive act? And conversely, is it not, of itself, evil to not be negative towards evil?

Perhaps our differing views might be explained as a contrast of cultural norms. Allow me to explain, if you will: Within the prison context, I am the exception rather than the rule; I am the token which provides the system with an appearance of legitimacy, though specious it may be. The leadership—White Society, as the Kerner Commission so aptly referred to it—does so like to flaunt its tokens. The sum of the purposes of the CJS and the PIC is to oppress and to repress the people that the Kerner Commission's "White Society" fears the most, that is, the financially and educationally impoverished. And though I have never been especially wealthy, neither was I financially nor educationally challenged when I became criminally accused. Hence it is that the aforementioned cultural norm disparities have come to exist.

Those persons belonging to the CJS's and the PIC's target demographic are conditioned from birth to expect condescension and abuse from "White Society," and nothing more than. I know this because I was born into this demographic. I was luckier than most; I escaped from it and was able to break this conditioning, though vivid memories of adolescence remain. Having broken the chains of poverty, and all that goes with it; having been solidly assimilated into society's middle class, I learned that condescension, abuse, and even legally sanctioned murder was only the norm in society's meanest segments. Within the middle class, where I found myself situated, after eight years in the military, the norms were respect and politeness; though, as I was destined to learn, they were subject to sudden violation.

It was from this plateau of having been groomed—a favorite term of state prosecutors—to accept, with marginal resistance if any at all, normalized abuse that most of the State's victims arrive in prison. For most of prison's

ideal population their arrival has, for all of their lives, been understood to be inevitable; never was it a question of 'if I go to prison,' but only 'when will I go to prison.' It is upon this foundation that my castle of contrariness has been built.

I beg you, provide me an alternative to feeling, thinking, speaking, and writing negatively of such evil. I would happily adopt such. Might that alternative be, say, passive cooperation with the system? Could the answer to this dilemma be so simple? Such would surely relieve my pain and anguish; my level of stress and frustration. There are those who would—and some have—jump onto this wagon; others would never do so. On this particular point, I reverently defer to the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and offer his words for your contemplative consideration: "To passively cooperate with an unjust system makes the oppressed as evil as the oppressor." I, as Dr. King was also, am disinclined to passively cooperate with evil, as I chose long ago to not be deliberately evil. Passive cooperation then cannot be an alternative to negativity towards evil. Perhaps moderation then should be entertained for this purpose. What say you, yea or nay? From the debut edition of "The Liberator," January 1, 1831, I offer the following declaration, so aptly penned by William Lloyd Garrison: "I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of a ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present." Now some might argue that mine and Mr. Garrison's causes are different, and therefore my quoting of his words are inappropriate. I would, however, suggest that our causes, though chronologically separated, are one and the same: For whatever one might choose to call it, whether slavery or prison or penal servitude, the oppression and exploitation of humans is an evil that continues, even today, to haunt us. So perhaps, in the end, there exists no alternative to negative sentiment towards the cause before us.

Is mine a sole wee small voice crying out from the wilderness, or might my detractors also accuse George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the likes of these revolutionaries of being negative? I think they might; the British

surely did so. How about Patrick Henry? Would my detractors label him, regarding his famous oratory, negative? Personally, I would label them as committed, and they express a sentiment which I heartily share: "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me [cf. Joshua 24:15], give me liberty or give me death." Might my accusers label Benjamin Franklin so disparagingly also, for having declared: "We must indeed all hang together [i.e., cooperate with one another], or, most assuredly, we shall all hang [i.e., be hanged] separately"? Maybe it is my continual (metaphorical) screaming that my antagonists find so offensively negative. Perhaps they are unaware of the abuse suffered by, say, Frederick Douglass, whose words, I would suggest, imply meaning deeper than what the words themselves say: "They will kick you until you scream." Might "kick" here have been a euphemism? Consider that which were still being used on prisoners until 1968 (see, i.e., Jackson v. Bishop, 404 F.2d 571).

We cannot hope to improve our situation by remaining silent and inert, by refusing to make a stand and oppose the system. Indeed, our greatest enemy is our own inertia: For in our inertia, we refuse to scream; we declare our willingness to purchase our breath with chains and slavery; we agree to be hanged (metaphorically) separately, rather than cooperating with one another and hanging together; we accept death, but not only for ourselves, but also for our loved ones, because in our absence, piece by piece, our family relationships and our long-lived friendships slowly perish.

Of all the men mentioned above, it could be said that they each were negative, so if indeed I am relegated to being negative I consider myself to be in honorable company. The words I have offered here, though drawn from deep within my soul, can give "only a faint shadow, a dim picture, of the anguish and despair that are, at this very moment . . . shattering thousands of families . . . Nothing of the tragedy can be written, can be spoken, can be conceived, that equals the frightful reality of the scenes daily and hourly acting on our shores, beneath the shadow of American law, and the shadow of the cross of Christ" (Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)).