

Politicizing Gabby Giffords

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By all accounts Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords is a remarkable woman: A respected, conciliatory colleague in the contentious House of Representatives long before the tragic shooting in Tucson; a hardworking politician deeply committed to the concerns of her constituents (which is why she was in a suburban parking lot that fateful Saturday morning); a supportive spouse; a faithful friend.

It was impossible not to be moved by the genuine outpouring of affection for Giffords on Tuesday evening before the President's state of the union address, and on Wednesday as she delivered her letter of resignation to Speaker Boehner and a full house in the House. On both sides of the aisle the tears flowed.

I don't question the motives of any of those paying tribute to Giffords. I take their expressions of gratitude for Gifford's friendship, their claims about her character and service as sincere and heartfelt.

And yet.

There's something about the way we tend to treat people with certain illnesses or infirmities. How we canonize them (is Gabby Giffords really "the brightest star Congress has ever seen?" What does that even mean?). How we patronize them, even infantilize them. How we sometimes regard them as objects (rather than subjects) onto which we project any number of our own feelings: pity, guilt, fear.

Certainly Giffords's recovery from the shooting has been something of a medical miracle. She's obviously tenacious, focused, optimistic, and magnanimous. (She has also, unlike many of her fellow Americans, had access to top-notch health care). But she's not superhuman. Does our

need for tidy, inspirational scripts — innocent victim becomes national hero — deprive people like Giffords of the capacity to be what seems more believably human: by turns tenacious *and* wavering, focused *and* fearful, optimistic *and* anxious, magnanimous *and* selfish? Have we burdened her with expectations that serve our needs more than her own?

And if Giffords can bring together Democrats and Republicans who unanimously praise her as an example to follow, a model of political magnanimity to emulate, why don't they just do that — follow her example, model her magnanimity? Even while meaning what they say about Giffords, their subsequent actions (back to squabbling about taxes, tearing down opponents) reveal them to be the masters of doubletalk who continually leave us weary and cynical about all things political.

And we're back to Gabby being unintentionally used as a prop, as a way to garner goodwill. But the politicians's walk doesn't match their talk. And the very human Giffords, whose gait is unsteady and whose speech still unsure, but whose witness profoundly affected all who worked with her, has left the building.

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