

A frustrating performance by Dan Savage

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May 3, 2012

*Below is a guest post by Ben Dueholm, who wrote the Century's 2011 [cover story on Dan Savage](#). A version of this post appeared on Dueholm's blog, [The Private Intellectual](#). --Ed.*

On Sunday night I went to hear Dan Savage speak about the [It Gets Better Project](#). The last time I saw him was 2003, if memory serves, in front of a crowd of perhaps a hundred. At one point Savage took a break from promoting his new book *Skipping Toward Gomorrah* to refer his audience to the now-famous *New Republic* cover story "The Liberal Case for War" (against Iraq).

It was a good talk, funny and engaging, and it made a striking contrast with his Sunday appearance. This time, the room was packed with well over a thousand people from all over the region. The heart of his talk was something much graver than his old book's subtitle ("The seven deadly sins and the pursuit of happiness in America"), though not graver than the matter of invading Iraq. It was about how he came to start, with his husband Terry, the viral-video campaign to reach out to hurting, bullied and suicidal LGBT kids with the message that their adult lives will be worth living. The [column in which he publicly launched the project](#), in response to the suicide and subsequent post-mortem cyberbullying of a child in Indiana, still makes for very moving reading.

By his own account, Savage expected maybe 100 videos to be added to the one he made with Terry. In fact, the YouTube channel currently hosts more than 50,000 videos from all around the world.

Savage speaks beautifully on bullying, despair and hope. His rage at the bullies and the cultures that enable them is obviously genuine, and even when he slips into demagoguery--as he does often and seemingly without thought--he does so with something that seems very much like innocence. He reports that the It Gets Better Project has touched and even saved many lives, and who would doubt it?

Adolescence is hard enough without the stigma of sexual or gender nonconformity.

The IGBP's brilliance is demonstrated by its obviousness in retrospect. The technology to do this has been around for a long time (though it's certainly accelerated in the last couple years). The need is hard to miss. Yet no one thought to do it until Dan and Terry, and as a consequence the full-time sex-advice writer and part-time gonzo journalist became a cultural figure of considerable stature.

But the event Sunday, which was suffused with good feelings at first, took what struck me as some dark turns as it went on. A digressive tirade badly mischaracterized the pope's words in January about the family and the threats to it. (The pope's every public utterance is recorded and put online, so anyone with a modicum of curiosity can read both [the statement](#) at issue and [the prior statement](#) it refers to.) Now that's not to say that Benedict doesn't deserve criticism for the role of anti-gay-marriage advocacy in his papacy, but the fact that he never mentions same-sex marriage in the statement--and that it is primarily referring to the economic developments that assault family life--might be noted.

Instead, Savage spiraled into a harangue about papal words and intentions largely of his own imagining. And the crowd, which congratulated itself on its own broad-mindedness, jeered right along. An additional harangue about the Bible and slavery was totally uninformed and tediously moralistic. And when, during the dreadful Q and A, a few foolhardy conservative Christians decided to challenge Savage's views and conduct, he did not respond as befits someone on a podium before a rapturously sympathetic crowd. To Savage's credit, he did thank the last evangelical questioner for engaging him in a hostile environment. "This was the lion's den for you," he acknowledged. Of course, this wouldn't be necessary for a speaker who maintained an atmosphere of respect rather than self-celebration.

In fairness, this is a lot to ask. Savage is right that there's a double standard at work when people take him to task for his [santorum campaign](#) or for his stern words about conservative Christianity: some people are allowed to say anything at all about gay people, even the most appalling slander, while gay people themselves are expected to respond with restraint and decorum. And Savage is just a human like anyone else--in his case, a somewhat thin-skinned and defensive human who seeks only total victory and annihilation in a debate.

But I don't think that people with liberal convictions--that is, the sort of commitment to fairness of process that people like Stanley Fish think is stupid and weak--should be satisfied with this sort of display. It's fair to criticize the pope for things he

actually says. Making things up--and reading secret motives into these made-up words--is uncharitable and unnecessary. And I can't think of a single good thing to say about Tony Perkins, but to say that he revels in the suicide of gay teens is at best unsupported by evidence and at worst the sort of slander that no one would credit when aimed at oneself or one's allies.

The principle of charity that I am invoking here is not just a matter of manners and tactics. The pope might be wrong about gay marriage, but he (and his predecessor) were right about the Iraq War when Dan Savage (and I) were very badly wrong. It's surprising how quickly Savage has embraced this unearned sense of sanctimony, given that he discovered life-saving activism all of 19 months ago. A little humility is in order, for him as for everyone else.

The Bible says plenty of things that we don't easily understand and that we quite rightly reject today (leaving aside the rhetorical trick whereby a law commanding the stoning of non-virgin brides is used to abrogate a law commanding the stoning of people engaged in same-sex intercourse, which also no one wishes to enforce). But what will our society look like to the future if humanity manages to endure another 2,000 years? What will people think of meat-eating or wage labor or our extravagant levels of resource consumption? No one stands at the pinnacle of history. (Well, there was one guy, but he got crucified.) No one fully escapes the sins they so readily diagnose in others. We are obligated to temper justice with mercy not just because mercy is a virtue, but because we all end up needing it some day.