

A curriculum for radicalization

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Radicalization is the buzzword of the day.

We're hearing that the couple who killed 14 people San Bernardino were "radicalized" before they even met and married. Many are wondering what exactly makes someone become similarly radicalized. Others are anticipating that Donald Trump's inflammatory proposals would not make us safer, but in fact give a great boost to ISIS's effort to radicalize recruits to their cause.

Doubtless there's a technical definition for radicalization in the literature on terrorism. But I wish they'd settled on a different word. Because the thing about fundamentalists and extremists—whether bomb-wearing terrorists, or a university president urging students to start packing heat, or a political candidate with fascist ideology—is not that they're radical. **It's that they're really not radical at all.**

They may dominate the news, and strike fear in our hearts, and inspire vehement denunciations on our part. But they are still playing by the rules of the world, and there's nothing radical about that.

There's nothing radical about using violence to make a point. There's nothing radical about rank tribalism that pits people against one another. There's nothing radical about whipping up fear and intimidation to get your way.

Such has been the way of the world for a long, long time. It may not always be cloaked in the language of holy war, but "I'm right and you're dead" is an all too familiar refrain in human history.

Such violent acts are better labeled not as radical, but as the antonym of radical, which is superficial. Shooting up a room full of defenseless people is a cheap and shallow attempt to advance an agenda. And demonizing an entire religion of people because of the actions of a minuscule few is similarly cheap.

I don't know whether our generation's challenges are tougher than those of past generations. But I know the next several decades will test us in profound ways. Right

now it's the demonization of Muslims in the United States, despite the fact that they're better educated than the general public, are largely accepting of gender equality despite stereotypes to the contrary, and have rooted out more terror suspects than U.S. government investigations. ([Read more here.](#)) But pick your issue: wealth inequality, racism, a broken political system. Global climate change may be the most looming challenge, with ripple effects in the areas of health, ecology, justice, economics, and, yes, security and terrorism.

What we need are people who are truly radicalized—who don't accept the rules of the game we've been conditioned to play ... who care more about doing right than being safe and comfortable. Who are ready for bold, maybe sacrificial action when the moment presents itself. (Radicals will not sit quietly by [while a Muslim woman is spit on and abused on a city bus](#), for example.)

Since I follow Jesus, he's the one I look to for inspiration and guidance, but there are many places people might turn for such inspiration. Regardless of our various religious or philosophical perspectives, people of good will need to suit up.

It's good to be kind, to give to the food pantry, to pay for the Starbucks order of the person behind you. But those actions, too, are rather superficial—and remember, the opposite of radical is superficial. That's not the game-changer we're after. So what does it mean to be radical, right where we live and work and play and serve?

I've been pondering that question a lot. I'm thinking we need a curriculum for radicals, but I need your help. Here's what I offer as the most basic starting point for such a curriculum. What should we add?

Learn how to say “peace be with you” in at least five languages. I suggest two of them be Arabic and Farsi. Use them when the situation arises.

Seek out places where you are in the minority. As tribal people, we are most comfortable with people who look, think and act like us, and when we're not, our lizard brain can kick in and we can feel threatened. But as our society gets more and more diverse, we (especially those of us who are white) need to be able to seek out different voices and see diversity as a strength.

Find beauty even in terrible circumstances. Being a radical for goodness will be long, grueling work, with more defeats than victories. We need the vision to see beauty even amidst struggle.

Create a catechesis for radicals. What are the stories we need to be steeping in as radicals? I nominate *Eyes on the Prize*, the documentary about the civil rights movement. In high school, my government teacher arranged for us to watch it after school, and if we made it through all fourteen hours, he gave us two extra points on our final grade—not our grade on the final exam, our grade for the *semester*. That’s how important it is.

All right, fellow radicals—what am I missing?

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