

The danger of the crowd

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When I was in middle school and high school I wanted to go to one of the service academies. In order to help secure an appointment, I joined a military cadet program in seventh grade. In many ways it was a good experience, and so I am not naming the specific program here, as I believe it does teach many young people about leadership, self-discipline, and teamwork. But it was also through this program that I had an experience that taught me a lesson I have never forgotten.

Each summer we would go to encampments on a military base. It was a little like a short, less intense version of boot camp. We were up early in the morning for uniform inspections, we marched to training events and meals, and we spent the evening doing physical training. It was a tough week, but I loved it. And when I was offered the chance to command a small unit of more junior cadets through the week, the summer before tenth grade, I jumped at the chance.

One summer night we were standing on the hot Florida blacktop at an Air Force base in the Panhandle. We were going through the nightly round of physical training: eight count push-ups, sit-ups, and more. But the real challenge was the yelling. We were constantly encouraged to yell cadences and responses louder, and harder, than we thought possible. The higher ranking officers called it being motivated.

That night one of the older cadet officers yelled a new chant at us: "Kill, Kill, Hate Hate. Kill, Kill, Hate, Hate."

And being the well-disciplined, obedient, trained-to-follow-commands young people we were, we all yelled back: "Kill, Kill, Hate Hate. Kill, Kill, Hate, Hate."

I'm not even sure who we were supposed to be killing or hating. It was the last days of the cold war. Maybe the Soviets? No one ever told us. But it didn't matter; we cheered back anyway.

Thankfully an adult heard it and put a stop to it. And immediately the question hit me like a ton of bricks: why in the world did I ever join in that cheer?

Over the past several weeks, as a private citizen, I've been growing more and more concerned with the explosive and hateful rhetoric that surrounds Donald Trump's campaign. I don't understand how people can participate in the xenophobic, fearful, and sometimes downright violent rallies that Trump holds.

I used to laugh at Donald Trump's candidacy like it was some sort of sideshow. Then I stopped laughing and started saying "he's so dangerous." Now I'm watching TV and thinking to myself that it's all of us who are dangerous.

We should be able to see through the super-inflated ego of a malignant narcissist and dismiss him outright. We should be making him inconsequential. Somehow that hasn't happened.

The wave of Trump supporters that is sweeping him to a GOP win will be there, regardless of what happens to Trump in the general election. That should be causing us all to lose sleep at night.

This is about far more than political differences. There are plenty of conservatives who are deeply appalled and disturbed by these developments. And, were this same phenomenon to be happening on any other side of the political arena, my guess is the response would be the same from those quarters.

The problem is also not Donald Trump. His narcissistic, ego-driven personality is troubling, but without his followers these are essentially just the rantings of a disturbed man. Without his wealth and influence, he would just be the guy who sits at the end of your local bar complaining about the government.

The trouble is that Trump does have influence, and ready access to podiums and TV cameras, and so he has found followers. Trump's candidacy has tapped into the anger, disillusionment, and xenophobia of a crowd that has been losing power for years. He is the best hope for many of them to reclaim (or for the first time claim) any power.

But this isn't really about hope. Not at its core, anyway. This is about fear. This is about whipping up the fear of others, giving them a community of fellow fearful people, and not-so-subtly approving of whatever happens next. The videos from Trump rallies showing physical violence seem to come at regular intervals now.

Watching them I realize that it's not Donald Trump I'm scared about. It's the crowd. It's people who are angry about their lives and the world around them, and who feel like they have no better recourse than to place their hope in a man with whom they have nothing in common with other than the fact that they both feel entitled to more. Ironically, they believe this while all the while thinking others are entitled to less.

I don't know what will happen in the next few months. I don't know what will happen in the general election. But I do know that, no matter what happens, the anger and disillusionment will exist long after November. That makes me more scared for this country than perhaps anything else that has happened in my lifetime.

With each day, I start to understand John Calvin's ideas about "total depravity" just a little more.

When I was eight or nine my mother gave me a copy of Anne Frank's diary. As I learned about the Holocaust, the question I kept coming back to time and again was "How did people let that happen? How did no one step up and stop this from happening?"

That night that I joined in on that hateful cheer, as I stood there on the hot blacktop, I started to understand.

That was the year I quit the cadet program. My problem was not with the program itself, or the military, but with who I had become. I started to rethink everything I knew. I read the Gospels. I decided to be baptized. I headed down a different path.

But I have never forgotten that night when I so clearly forgot who I am.

I know that at least some of those in the crowds at Trump's events are Christians. I am making no judgement on their claim to that name. But I will say that all of us who are people of Christian faith, myself included, have sinned at times by following the crowd instead of the Gospels.

And so, I am asking all who would cheer on, or even just ignore, the rhetoric and violence that has come to define Trump's candidacy to consider that if you are letting your allegiance to a politician, any politician, trump your allegiance to the gospel that proclaims Christ's love, you may want to examine whether how long you would remain enmeshed in an unjust crowd that proclaims the exact opposite? And

even if we are not a part of that crowd, if we are standing by afraid while that same crowd incites discord and violence, what does that mean about our faith?

In the end, not even our greatest fear could destroy God's love for us. Resurrection happened. But our greatest fear could destroy our very democracy by causing us to choose hatred and violence over understanding. For those of us who would declare "Christ is love," we can never let that happen to other children of God. Not here in our country, and not anywhere else in God's good creation.

If we let this happen then, truly, we have forgotten who, and whose, we are.

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