

# Isolation and segregation not a good combination

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Mr. Casey, my high school English teacher, was fond of proclaiming, "From suffering alone comes wisdom." There seems to be plenty of suffering around, but insufficiently distributed wisdom to protect our nation from the alarming triple threats to our democracy from escalating authoritarianism, inequality and divisiveness. I wonder: What is it that turns the banality of suffering into wisdom? Why do some people turn against one another in tough times, while others toward one another? Moreover, what can be done to transform the wisdom of observers into mass engaged action?

As a teenager with a typical level of angst, I thought Mr. Casey was especially insightful. After all, maybe I too could be wise. His gift was to help to nudge natural self-centeredness toward empathy. But it was the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s that connected my self-absorbed worries with deeper struggles in the world around me and gave me a lifelong sense of belonging and purpose.

Personal suffering may sensitize people to the plight of others, but that is insufficient for a successful organized resistance. That requires empathy and a sense of belonging, shared experiences with common goals across typical divisions, and development of agency.

Elected officials will not address current threats to democracy and equity on their own. They never have. In the short-term, that responsibility rests on the shoulders of community activists. It always has. For the future, that obligation falls to educators. They have always been the hope.

Globalization, pervasive information technology, and escalating automation provide new contexts, but today's threats are not unique. U.S. History is replete with examples of how the empowered have fostered divisiveness to protect their privileges: Poor whites against freed slaves and their descendants; Men against women; old immigrants against recent arrivals; previously persecuted religious sects against new religious minorities; underpaid American workers against more exploited foreign workers in developing countries. The list is endless. Alternatively, the potential for unity across these groups to challenge power and insist on a more equitable future is monumental.

Historically, authoritarianism, lies, and repression have been the turn-to solutions when elites perceived a challenge. Today, the empowerment and collective action of women, voter participation of non-whites and newer immigrants, and organized workers pose such threats. They challenge those who rely on dark American myths of a dog-eat-dog competitive meritocracy and self-reliance to justify their position.

Isolation breeds ignorance of the unknown other. Isolation makes us stupid. I use the term stupid purposefully. I do not mean intellectually limited. Rather, I mean committedly ignorant about matters of personal and social consequence. Such ignorance and stupidity are enabled when selfishness is exalted over empathy in the context of competition for structurally limited resources. Such ignorance and stupidity are promoted when the empowered encourage the disempowered to distrust each other and reject reason and evidence.

Trump offers narrow tribal fear as a unifying counterpoint to the erosion of community cohesion in a society of changing demographics and cultural norms, increasing wealth disparity and job security. The essence of the authoritarian appeal is, "You are powerless. You cannot trust others. Only I can solve your problems. Be out for yourself."

Fortunately, many Americans do not accept or identify with a disempowering dystopian mindset. Let us not forget that a minority of voters elected Trump. They were but a minority of all eligible voters. His disapproval ratings in polls are strikingly high. Those facts have several strategic implications. First, there is a large potential constituency for oppositional action. Second, there are many untapped yet-to-be engaged activists among the roughly half of American voters who didn't vote—out of anger and apathy.

And, I am not ready to write off every Trump voter.

**Shared experiences enable belonging, empathy, common goals, and action**

The good news is that we know the antidotes. We know what brings people together.

Shared experience across perceived differences combats the stupidity that isolation fosters. Community activists and educators can lead front-line push back, engaging citizens and students across traditionally divisive lines in explicitly designed shared experiences.

A disciplined resistance movement can provide an alternative sense of belonging by organizing around shared unifying concerns, such as health care, fair wages, equitable local, states and federal taxes, high quality public education, protecting Social Security, expanding Medicare, protecting the environment, and sustainable development. Purposefully, doing so across neighborhood boundaries and workplaces enables empathy and identification with the suffering of others and structures for action.

Similarly, integrated schools that emphasize academic, as well as social and emotional learning can build trust and a common sense of belonging. Curricula that infuse personal and social meaning into daily instruction offers the possibility for young people to see past selfish concerns.

I imbibed the lessons of Mr. Casey's English class in 1967, a time of suffering but also an era of hope. The wisdom that carries forth and provides a guide to action is that isolation and segregation make us stupid. Belonging and integration make us smart. Common struggle makes a difference.

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