

Why De-Other the Other?

Greetings. Thank you Dr Irfan Omar for inviting me to your class. It's always a pleasure to be back at my alma mater. I was 21 when I attended my MBA graduation at Gesu and went to work in IT at Milwaukee County Courthouse. We called it Productivity Improvement in those days. I returned to my birthplace, Canada for a couple of years after that, worked for a management consulting firm... but then there was this guy with the blue eyes, and I returned to Milwaukee in 1986 – and have been here ever since. But always, I delight in walking across campus and meeting Marquette students like you.

Dr Omar wanted me to discuss a speech I wrote for a symposium on the Partition of India a couple of years ago. It's called *De-Othering the Other*, and I believe you have read it?

It was interesting for me to reread that essay in preparation for today's discussion. The whole essay rests on the premise that we want and need to prevent a repetition of the violence of Partition and to that end, we should try to de-other people we believe are “not us.” We should learn more about the beliefs and attitudes of strangers and try to expand our definition of the word Family and Apne (our people).

You see, during the 1947 Partition the British created three new countries, putting everyone into preemptive offence mode. But when it became existential, neighbor turned on neighbor. Afterwards, people could not blame the state for their own vile cruelty — the British were the cause, but people of every faith had only themselves to blame for responding. Whole villages were held accountable for being of a different religious heritage, a different ethnicity. It was a civil war in which no one wore union or confederate blue uniforms so people could know friend from enemy, military from civilian. My novel *What the Body Remembers* is set in that horrific time... and shows the preemptive violence done to women to save them from dishonor by the Other.

But the premise of my essay, that we don't want a repeat of such violence, seems highly ambitious to me today. Maybe even delusional. Because it seems to me our leaders are heading worldwide towards making others out of every group. That we are making strangers out of friends, enemies out of allies. And in this, my chosen country, the country of my husband, we are reverting to a caste system where the Brahmins are white and the rest are Othered.

But we know from history where this process leads. We know from the American Civil War that it can lead to the deaths of 620,000 to 750,000, including both Union and Confederate soldiers. We know from WWII it can lead to battle deaths of nearly 15 million military personnel and more than 38 million civilian deaths. We know from the Partition of India that the objective of purity of race or religion can lead to the deaths of anywhere from 2-5 million people. We study history in the hope of learning from the mistakes of our forebears.

From time to time, we have what we Sikhs call a rise of Haumai or ego in a few people. My novel *The Tiger Claw* is set in World War II and it's about people trying to counter the havoc that an outsize ego can perpetrate on our planet. That outsize ego looks down on all the rest, believing itself to be above all others. For a while -- until the rest get tired of looking upwards. In our century, that ego leads to forgetting the revolutionary words: "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal..." In so doing, Haumai or Ego causes societal meltdown — and societal meltdown, my friends, leads to unimaginable suffering.

Let me dwell on the word *unimaginable* for a moment. Five years ago, we all retreated into solitude because of a virulent virus. We learned to distrust the very presence of others. Do you remember where you were five years ago, and how the world changed in an instant? Think back. Feel those *unimaginable* unprecedented moments again. For me, it was the moment I went down to the

restaurant my husband and I owned till 2015, The Safe House and found it was closed on St Patrick's Day — and so were all the other bars on Water Street! Things changed so fast that after a few weeks of lockdown we could not imagine going to a grocery store. We went behind our phones and computers in a way that was *unimaginable*. The virus taught us disgust of others, fear of proximity, touch, bodily fluids. The caste system of the USA reared its ugly head and reinforced itself during every instacart or Amazon delivery, and at every ICU shift -- even as signs went up calling those essential workers heroes.

But then, thanks to science and the cooperation of thousands of scientists across borders, and manufacturers in multiple countries, a previously unimaginable vaccine was created at previously unimaginable speed.

Let me dwell on the words *created* and *cooperation*.

Creation and cooperation are only possible when we successfully de-other the Other. Why? Because when we create, we begin from the ideas of others, add our own unique experience and heritage and build something new.

Do any of you play an instrument? Well, then you know the joy and power of jamming... how a new experience is created from improvisation on the spot. Some new thing is created that could not have happened without that cooperation.

Long covid is a medical condition, but also a mental state. Today there are many politicians who would take advantage of the mental effects of covid to further atomize us and create others of our neighbors. The logic they want us to apply is the same we employed against the virus: stay six feet away. Keep the generations apart. Survival of the fittest. Me first. Their objective is to foment chaos and destroy institutions. Some of them invoke the philosophy of Ayn Rand to destroy compassion and kindness, which they consider weakness.

Let me dwell on the word *destroy*. Think how much faster and easier it is to destroy than to create. I used to write disaster recovery plans for computer companies. I remember bringing in a Vietnam vet to talk to us about how he might destroy our data center. An underground fortified bunker in New Berlin that processed transactions for 1500 banks and credit unions across the country. He told us it would take him about 15 mins to destroy what had taken my client 20 years to create. Look around you and know that Bishop Henni's creation, Marquette University, a university financed by a Belgian, named for a Frenchman, a university going back to 1881, could also be destroyed in 15 mins -- just as buildings have been destroyed in Gaza and Ukraine.

Before I came to Marquette, I attended missionary schools in India. They were run by well-intentioned nuns of the Jesus and Mary and Loreto orders. However, I came out of there knowing nothing about my Sikh faith -- but I knew and know a lot about Christianity! Particularly Catholicism, a fact that endeared me to my Irish in-laws.

My dear sweet nuns believed it was a sin to even think about other ways of thinking. One nun was so willfully ignorant, she wished all the Muslim girls in college a Happy Muharram. Which is kind of like saying Happy Good Friday. I hope they have come a long way since then.

Because sometimes it doesn't take a bomb to destroy an institution, organization or brand. It just takes an urge for purity, exclusivity and superiority, a mindset built on Haumai or ego, that leads to fear and loathing of the Other. It just takes willful ignorance to destroy years of accumulated goodwill.

So, what is the opposite of the word *destroy*?

Back to the word *Create*. If we want to become creative again, we have to learn to cooperate again. If we ever want to cooperate again, we must begin

the hard work of De-othering the Other. If we want to cooperate, we need to find curiosity and empathy across divides of every kind.

Having studied WWII, I can tell you the Nazis tried to instill fear to destroy curiosity, and empathy throughout Germany, then Poland and France – but every story of survival and resistance tells us they were unable to do it. Every faith believes in the golden rule and that leads to compassion.

Now we can return to discussing my essay *De-Othering the Other* – which is about **how** we can de-other when we return to valuing the goal stated in the American Constitution.

Thank you.

Shauna Singh Baldwin

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