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••OUR INCREDIBLE SHRINKING DISCOURSE

JACOB APPEL
2010 MONTANA PRIZE IN
CREATIVE NONFICTION

I received my first death threat on March 5, 2009. I'd logged into my home computer after a long workday at the hospital, hoping for an email message from the comedic actress who was my crush *du jour*. Instead, I discovered a flurry of symposia announcements and reprint requests and—at the very bottom of my screen—a personal message from an unfamiliar email account. The content contained a reply to an article that I had recently written for an obscure website, in which I had argued that couples using taxpayer dollars to fund in vitro fertilization should be required to test their embryos for potentially fatal genetic diseases. That's a relatively controversial viewpoint in my professional field, bioethics, yet not exactly a *casus belli*, or even a voting issue, for ordinary Americans. My correspondent,

"Hazmanx99," cogently expressed his (or her) concern that mandatory genetic screening was the moral equivalent of Hitler's efforts to euthanize the disabled. There was no mistaking, or forgetting, Hazmanx99's animus: I rarely receive messages that begin with the salutation, "You Nazi Fuck," and conclude with vivid descriptions of my impending dismemberment.

My initial instinct was to answer Hazmanx99—to explain that, far from wishing to kill off those with disabilities, I have for years advocated on their behalf. After all, I did not relish the prospect of a total stranger believing me a genocidal maniac. So I penned a friendly missive, intending to disarm my mysterious nemesis with a blend of logic, humility and good cheer. I confess that, in my naïveté, I fantasized that we might eventually achieve a rapprochement in the spirit of Norman Mailer and William Styron. I even included a light-hearted postscript: "Why '99'? Are there ninety-eight other 'Hazmanxes'?"

And what is the plural of ‘Hazmanx’ anyway?” I never heard back.

I wish I could report that my “encounter” with the ninety-ninth Hazmanx was an isolated incident. Instead, s/he proved to be a pioneer. When I started publishing a regular ethics column in the *Huffington Post* later that spring, I found myself inundated with email—and occasional “snail mail”—distinguished by varying degrees of hostility. Some of these messages seemed genuinely amusing in their irony, such as a short note I received from a “pro-life” abortion opponent named Mike Kanavel who wrote that “I hope you fucking choke on your own vomit in your sleep.” Others were more alarming, primarily because their authors should have known better, such as a diatribe from disbarred attorney and perennial Washington state political candidate Stan Lippmann, entitled “Nazi Moron Scumbag,” who cautioned that “half of all Americans” were ready to string me up as a “genocidal War Criminal”

(sic). Admittedly, the topics that I address can be contentious: not merely abortion and assisted suicide, but fetal organ donation and bestiality and reproductive cloning. However, only a minority of the nine *bona fide* threats of physical violence that I’ve received actually relate to topics that I would ever have expected to inflame passions. By far the most frightening message to appear in my inbox—and the only time that I’ve seriously considered contacting the police—came from a man irate that I’d opined in favor of fluoridating the water supply.

I have made a point of keeping these threats in perspective. I am an utterly minor intellectual, after all—or possibly even, as one ex-girlfriend pointedly informed me, an utterly minor *pseudo*-intellectual. If someone truly wants to strike a blow against entrenched liberalism, they’re going to go after Noam Chomsky or Gloria Steinem—not an armchair philosopher who publishes jargon-laced articles in the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*

and the *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*. One of my dearest friends, an authority on Iranian-American relations, encouraged me to expunge my apartment's address and telephone number from the Internet before some unhinged lunatic appeared upon my stoop. *If you're not willing to protect yourself*, he warned, *consider your innocent neighbors*.

Needless to say, such excessive privacy has a downside. It is not that I fear "letting the terrorists win," so to speak. I am fully reconciled to my own cowardice, deeply proud of my preference for self-preservation over principle. What I am unwilling to do is to forgo the letters that I receive from individuals who *agree* with me or, more importantly, who have sincere questions about my views. These have included, on two occasions, hand-written queries from elderly correspondents who have read my articles in the public library, but lacking computer savvy and email accounts, have asked the librarian to

look up my postal address on-line. This pair of notes was worth all the stress of being ordered by an irate correspondent "never to show [my] ugly face" in the state of Kentucky. Besides, I reassured myself, threatening someone over the Internet isn't *really* threatening them, is it? It's more akin to online sex—which an increasing number of spouses do not appear to view as cheating. After all, cyberspace envelops a person like an alcoholic stupor, simultaneously inflaming and disinhibiting. Who hasn't written something in an email message that he would never have uttered face to face? For all I knew, the ninety-ninth Hazmanx, whose tag-name increasingly reminded me of an apocalyptic prophet, was verily an elderly, church-going widow on the Isle of Man...about to celebrate her centennial.

Then the package arrived: a box the size of a toaster, wrapped in brown paper. I returned home from a New Year's party to find the nondescript parcel resting on my welcome

mat. No card. No return address. Just my name, scrawled with black magic marker across the side in the bold lettering of a child or a psychopath. I carried the parcel into my apartment—it felt too heavy for its bulk, like a dead cat—and I was on the verge of opening it, when I noticed a strand of wire poking through the side. I inspected the wire momentarily: it was a twisted, copper-colored strip of metal—how the end of a coat hanger might appear after being unfolded to open a locked car door. Or, it suddenly struck me, this was what a makeshift explosive might look like.

I had written a column earlier that day in which I urged that the “age of consent” be reduced to the age of sixteen. I now wondered: Had some deranged opponent of teenage sexuality left me a “parting gift” in protest? Or was this payback for my earlier defense of an open-borders immigration policy? Simultaneously, another portion of my brain insisted that I was reacting irrationally, that the package might just as easily be a gift from

a neighbor or a forgotten purchase from Ebay. I didn’t have the confidence to call the police and report the parcel as suspicious, but I also lacked the courage to open the box and risk losing a hand. So I chose a middle course: I hurled the package across my apartment with full force. If it were a bomb, I reasoned, a collision with the far wall would either incapacitate the device—or the ensuing explosion, at the opposite end of the room, was less likely to injure me. That was utterly asinine, of course. As I’ve subsequently learned, a well-made bomb that size could easily have taken down the entire ceiling. But, to my relief, the package did not detonate.

I tentatively retrieved the package. A pungent liquid seeped through the gash around the wire—and I recoiled at the smell. I will never shake the indelible memory of realizing that, instead of a bomb, I’d been sent acid. Wasn’t that the weapon of choice that fundamentalists used against women in Iraq and Pakistan? Seconds

later, of course, I recognized the aroma. Wine! Closer inspection of the now-dripping package revealed shards of glass and a sopping card. One of my former writing students had hand-delivered two bottles of cabernet in a wire basket.

Our intellectual discourse is contracting.

What I mean to express by this expansive declaration is actually two distinct phenomena that are all too often conflated by free-thought advocates. The more obvious concern is that the robust exchange of conflicting ideas, so essential to social progress, has been dampened by the rise of *ad hominem* attacks in nearly every academic and cultural discipline. Increasingly, we engage only with people who agree with us. Those who disagree are not merely mistaken—but downright evil. Technological advances, such as the Internet, which in theory offer the potential of increased dialogue, have instead largely become forums for polarized attack and vitriolic counterattack. As

soon as our mouths open, our minds close.

A second concern—one largely ignored by the media—is that the actual breadth and variety of ideas acceptable in public conversation is beginning to narrow. After a half-century of liberalization in the United States and Western Europe, during which previously taboo subjects entered the forum of debate, particularly in the fields of human sexuality and bioethics, our range of discourse now actually appears to be contracting. Having broken down a millennium of moral barriers in the course of one generation, we increasingly seem to have accepted that certain remaining barriers should not be broken. On subjects ranging from neonatal euthanasia and eugenics to child pornography and Holocaust revisionism, we have concluded—to our own detriment—that some ideas should not be expressed at all.

The demonization of Princeton University's Peter Singer, and his response, offers

a case study in how these two distinct phenomena can coalesce. Professor Singer, whether one admires or abhors his uncompromising utilitarian outlook, is the most significant philosopher of our era. I do not think it's a stretch to contend that one must look back several centuries—before Freud, before Marx, possibly as long ago as Immanuel Kant—to find a thinker who reshaped the intellectual landscape of his age so rapidly and so comprehensively. Singer has written passionately for the rights of animals and traveled the globe crusading against poverty. However, he may be best known for what is arguably his most controversial view, first announced in *Practical Ethics*, that terminating the lives of severely disabled newborns may, under certain circumstances, be both ethical and desirable. The outcry against Singer that has followed him since he first expressed this view in the late 1970s has been intense, personal and often violent. Its most dramatic moment, which Singer has

himself written about extensively, occurred at the University of Zurich in 1989, when enraged disability rights advocates forcibly prevented him from delivering a lecture. Rather than challenging Singer's ideas with their own, which he welcomed them to do, these protesters sought to drive his ideas underground. Neonatal euthanasia is a concept so dangerous, they believed, it could not be tolerated long enough to refute its justification on the merits. In short, by refusing to engage in debate, Singer's opponents attempted to shrink the public discourse.

Much has been written about the ugly campaign against Professor Singer. I say against Singer—not against his ideas—because figures as diverse as libertarian publisher Steven Forbes and Marc Maurer of the National Federation of the Blind argued against his appointment to the Princeton faculty and sought his intellectual ostracism. What has been largely overlooked is the subtle success of this campaign. Singer

has not retracted his opinions nor has Princeton retracted his tenure. At the same time, he no longer hard-pedals his views on personhood. Instead, he has devoted his later writings to charitable donation and the horrors of poverty. I doubt Professor Singer would agree that he has been “silenced.” As an independent (and admiring) observer, I cannot help believing that he has been “tempered” by his detractors. That moderation is certainly understandable: As a practical matter, emphasizing this one controversial view threatened his opportunity to champion other causes of great value. (Lost to many of his opponents was the possibility that they might disagree with Singer on one issue, but agree with him on others.) Alas, the result is that neonatal euthanasia lost its intellectual champion. Equally disturbing, others in the field of moral philosophy have been reluctant to embrace Singer’s views on the matter—at least publicly. I know of several bioethicists who have privately

expressed to me their sympathy toward Singer’s theory of personhood—but refuse to do so openly, for fear of the backlash.

I do not mean to suggest, in highlighting Singer’s case, that only ideas of one particularly ideology have been driven from the communal square. When I first started teaching at Brown University a decade ago, an uproar ensued over the decision of the student newspaper to publish a highly controversial advertisement by conservative provocateur David Horowitz entitled, “Ten Reasons Why Reparations for Blacks is a Bad Idea for Blacks—and Racist Too.” Among the premises advanced by Horowitz was the argument that “trillions of dollars in transfer payments have been made to African-Americans in the form of welfare benefits and racial preferences” since the 1960s, eliminating any need for affirmative action, and that African-Americans should be grateful to whites for their freedom and “high standard of living.” Several student groups responded

by “appropriating” (some might say stealing) the entire run of the *Brown Daily Herald*. As someone who disagrees with all ten of Horowitz’s *Reasons*, and his worldview more generally, I found this act of civil disobedience appalling. Not, as many of my colleagues did, because theft is inherently wrong or immoral. Rather, my concern was that by removing Horowitz’s ideas from the public debate—however misguided I might think them—one ceded the intellectual and moral vigor that would have come with refuting them. In other words, those who sought to silence Horowitz, rather than challenging his case on the merits, were also silencing themselves. Unlike Professor Singer, Horowitz has not since been tempered in his views. At the same time, he has drifted from the “mainstream” to a position where he now attacks the liberal intelligentsia, rather than attempting to engage with it. That is our loss as much as his.

Unfortunately, ideas are dangerous. The

judges who voted to execute Socrates understood this, as did the Genevese elders who expelled Calvin. Our better selves would prefer to believe in the efficiency of the “marketplace of ideas”—that idealistic notion, often attributed to Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., that if philosophies and ideologies compete freely, the most worthy thoughts will gain acceptance. At the same time, in our more cynical moments we recognize the Orwellian truth that, if you can take away the words for expressing an idea, and the public forum in which to promote it, you can eventually eradicate the idea itself. In free societies, that is the inherent tension that governs disputes over the right to uncensored speech. What if the “wrong” ideas prove persuasive? Can we risk allowing the Holocaust deniers or the Flat-Earthers their say? Should we allow those who oppose free expression to use our liberties against us? Increasingly, over the past two decades, we have answered NO. Occasionally, western nations

have resorted to raw political force—such as Ireland’s new blasphemy statute or the nineteen-year-old French ban on “inciting religious and racial hatred” that has repeatedly been used to fine Brigitte Bardot. Far more often, however, legal action has been unnecessary. All that has been required is an increasing unwillingness—in the universities, in the media, in our daily lives—to engage with ideas that we do not like. We no longer need *fatwas* or royal edicts to tell us not to speak or think subversively. Most of us manage to avoid doing so with little effort.

In his path-breaking and ingenious book *How We Decide*, Jonah Lehrer—who is rapidly becoming for neuroscience what Carl Sagan once was for astronomy—summarizes a moral scenario first created by psychologist Jonathan Haidt:

“Julie and Mark are siblings vacationing together in the south of France. One night, after a lovely day spent exploring the

local countryside, they share a delicious dinner and a few bottles of red wine. One thing leads to another and Julie and Mark decide to have sex. Although she’s on the pill, Mark uses a condom just in case. They enjoy themselves very much, but decide not to have sex again. The siblings promise to keep the one-night affair secret and discover, over time, that having sex brought them even closer together. Did Julie and Mark do something wrong?”

According to Lehrer, most people *do* believe the siblings to have acted wrongly. However, the reasons that they offer to explain this judgment—“the risk of having kids with genetic abnormalities” and “that sex will damage the sibling relationship”—are overtly incompatible with the stated scenario, which includes multiple forms of birth control and a closer familial bond. The problem revealed here is not simply that

people don't read as carefully as they should. What is alarming is that, because the ethics of consensual incest are largely outside the bounds of polite discussion, most people who oppose such relations cannot explain why they hold their views. I do not intend to endorse brother-sister sex. Nor, for that matter, am I staking out a position against it. My concern is that enlightened adults should be able to debate the question intelligently. Otherwise, we risk mistaking the familiar for the moral.

The most dangerous ideas are not those that challenge the *status quo*. The most dangerous ideas are those so embedded in the *status quo*, so wrapped in a cloud of inevitability, that we forget they are ideas at all. When we forget that the underpinning of our society are conscious choices, we become woefully unable to challenge those choices. We also become ill-equipped to defend them.

Euripides exhorted his audiences: "Question everything."

My favorite exercise, when teaching bioethics, is to ask my students to list ten questions that "cannot be asked" in contemporary America. As an example, I write on the chalk board: "Why shouldn't admission to elite colleges and universities be auctioned off to the highest bidders?" I have found that the very question infuriates some Ivy Leaguers so much that they want to debate it immediately, rather than listing other objectionable inquiries. Soon my most promising students are formulating questions of their own: "Should smart people be paid to have more babies?" "What's wrong with exposing children to pornography?" "Is patriotism immoral?" I am consistently amazed and impressed with the ability of my students to challenge social norms and moral conventions—when doing so as part of a classroom exercise. I am not confident that many of them continue to

pose such questions over the dinner table.

Which leads me back to Hazmanx99. The real harm done by the Hazmanxes Mike Kanavals and Stan Lippmanns of the world is that they inevitably make me less likely to engage with those who share their views and disagree with mine. The automated reply to Peter Singer's email reads: "Many people send me messages with questions about, or comments on, my views. Although I read all such messages, I regret that I rarely have time to reply to them." I suspect, after enough overt threats, he also lacks the inclination. At the same time, much as a person never forgets his first love or his first job or his first encounter with illness, my first authentic death threat will always hold a special place in my heart. To me, it is a reminder that, unless we continue to pose indecent questions and to raise taboo subjects, we are liable to find ourselves thinking "outside the box" of acceptable thought—without having moved at all. That is a far greater threat to our

moral welfare than all the radical bioethicists and right-wing provocateurs and anonymous cyberspace bullies combined.

Or I could be wrong.