

Trump's words are cruel, hateful – and infectious. We must resist

Francine Prose

Language is a kind of virus, and history has shown many times that this virus can be lethal

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In the lead-up to the 2016 election, after Donald Trump referred to Mexican immigrants as “animals” and his supporters began chanting “Lock her up” about

I Hillary Clinton, it seemed as if a malevolent genie had been let out of a bottle. Now, almost three years later, it has become painfully clear just how cruel, powerful and destructive that hateful spirit is, and that the survival of our country, our culture – indeed of our humanity – may depend on resisting its demonic influence.

Each time the president lashes out at his critics, each time he escalates the language of racism and hatred, it becomes harder to persuade ourselves that we live in a society that values civility, compassion and tolerance, a nation that respects the principles and ideals that inspired our founders. Each time we behave as if the best way to resolve our differences is not with debate and discussion but with death threats, exhortations to violence and demands that Americans leave the country they love enough to want to improve, we are damaging our sense of who we are, of who we want to be. And each time our children observe that a bully is in the White House, it gets harder to persuade them that bullying is unacceptable.

Language is a virus, wrote William Burroughs, and history has shown that this virus can be lethal. During the Rwandan genocide, a Hutu leader compared the Tutsi to cockroaches. The Nazi propaganda machine referred to Jews as vermin, and during the war in Bosnia, the Serbian media portrayed their Muslim neighbors as being less than fully human. Now our president calls the entire city of Baltimore “rat-infested”. It’s a terrible and dangerous thing to refer to human beings as animals and insects, to cage children as a warning to would-be migrants and to viciously malign one’s critics, particularly when those critics are people of color. Perhaps all those Maga hats should be refashioned as Mava hats: Make American Violent Again.

Because it’s not simply speech. Speech has very real consequences. Research by political scientists at the University of North Texas has found that hate crimes increase by 226% in a community after it hosts a Trump rally. That’s more than twice the incidence of murder, beatings, arson and racist graffiti, a statistic that presumably doesn’t include the spike in online threats and malicious trolling.

Meanwhile violence pervades the culture in more subtle ways. Surely I’m not the only person who has noticed that traffic is nastier, as are the small, hostile face-offs that erupt during an ordinary day: riding on public transportation or just waiting for

our orders at the coffee shop. Surely I'm not the only who feels a jolt of pure rage when someone jumps a line, bumps into me on the street or cuts me off in traffic. And it's misdirected rage, like the anger of those students who imagine that the real culprit is their college dean and not Trump, the Koch brothers and Mitch McConnell.

According to a recent essay in the Christian Science Monitor, Republicans and Democrats widely report being frightened and alienated from one another. I have read and heard Trump supporters and Trump critics alike say terrifying things about the opposite camp: online, in print and in "real life", when no one knew I was listening – or cared.

That these disagreements can easily turn violent is a threat that history bears out. A few years ago, I taught a college course on the literature of totalitarianism. In every society we studied the common denominator that paved the way for authoritarianism was resentment – and a would-be dictator's ability to transform that resentment into hatred of the other, into mass incarceration and slaughter.

Schoolyard fights can be rapidly settled and forgotten, but adults take longer to make peace. Ill will and hard feelings linger. Our votes in the 2020 election will partly be about our desire – our need – to defuse this atmosphere of rage. Until then, the best we can do is to support those who are trying to calm, rather than stoke, the hostility, and not wall ourselves off from our relatives and neighbors in individual bubbles of aggression and fury.

If we're angry, we can put that anger to some positive use. Let's start by campaigning to close the camps, to make our voting machines more secure – to preserve our fragile democracy. Let's channel our discontent into some higher purpose that rises above divisiveness, contempt and the chaotic and accelerating whirlwind of verbal and physical violence.

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