

To Those Who Mistake Certainty for Strength,

I know you're comfortable believing what you do. I am the same way. Our accepted and assumed opinions—our “truths,” our personal facts—give us shelter from the discomfort of being challenged and the vulnerability of being wrong. There is a kind of safety in certainty. But with safety comes complacency. In this complacency, disagreement feels like personal attack, the presence of another perspective demands defense rather than reflection, and avoidance or dismissal are easier than understanding.

This is not theoretical. I too have tried to correct before I've listened.

When faced with opposing views, far too often we find ourselves waiting for our turn to deliver the truth instead of attempting empathy. Instead of asking, we assert. Instead of considering, we counter. And as a result, we miss out on an opportunity, one we claim to value: to learn from each other.

We like to think our defensive arrogance is harmless. It's not. It conditions us to see any who challenge our entrenched certainty as misguided, hostile, and alien. A study by Kalmoe and Mason quoted in the New York Times found that 60 percent of Republicans and Democrats believed that the other party was a “threat”; 40 percent believed it was “evil”; and 20 percent believed its members were “not human.”

When you dehumanize a person, dismissal of them and of their beliefs is perfectly justified. But the mindset doesn't begin with dehumanization and abandonment of reason, it begins when we assume the worst before asking a question. Studies on political behavior confirm this pattern: "Recent research has pointed to the increasingly pervasive affective dimension of polarization—the outright dislike and animosity that partisans feel toward their political opponents." If you have labeled the other person as a threat, unintelligent, or evil, you feel no obligation to consider what they say.

Many people today, including myself sometimes, take the easy path, choosing to disregard the people instead of engaging the arguments. I believe, however, that we can revive humanity through the integrity of honest conversation. You have the knowledge and ability to improve your understanding, and the courage to place your fortress of conviction on more stable ground. It's not easy, but the reward is worth the process.

You can continue protecting your certainty.

Or you can build the resilience to survive being wrong.

Sincerely,

Your Anonymous Friend