The Internet Hate Machine

Saede Riordan   June 24, 2019

I've been trying to make myself write again. I used to love writing, I used to love sharing things I created and watching the numbers tick up on my page views. I still love those things, but lately, whenever I try to sit down and write, I'm gripped by this new fear that wasn't there previously, which makes it very difficult to put anything out there.

There's so much I want to say, but I feel myself letting a silencing effect take hold. I tried to make writing and publishing my stories again my new equinox goal, but even that has thus far not gotten me anywhere. I think in the place I'm at right now, the best thing for me, the healthiest thing, would be to talk about that fear directly.

Katie Herzog is a staff writer at The Stranger, a newspaper in Seattle well known for frequently writing in a campy gay aesthete voice and presenting itself as Seattle's "real" newspaper, contrasting the very self-serious and old fashioned Seattle Times.

Katie Herzog is most known at this point, for writing a controversial piece last year called The Detransitioners. Which is…well I will let my readers make their own judgments about it, but I personally feel it's a good piece and is unfairly maligned.

Katie put out a response a month after the piece was published defending herself as a journalist against accusations of transphobia. This, of course, did nothing to stop her detractors from going as far as making stickers calling her out and putting them up around town.

And that's what scares me. That intense, hateful, sneering, condescending force that is moral discourse according to twitter outrage and leftbook callouts. The desire to judge and then force consequences onto those judged, advocating for the utter social destruction of the unworthy. The toxic, identity-based, cancel culture.

Katie Herzog herself wrote about this back in January. When the internet decides it doesn't like someone, or that someone has done something immoral, it sees itself as judge, jury, and social executioner. The mob claims the right to try and utterly destroy someone's life and future in their pursuit of justice.

As a result of a close encounter with one of these internet mobs, the last year of my life has been an exhausting, harrowing, traumatizing, and winnowing experience. I wasn't even the direct target of the mob's ire at any point, I just happened to be trying to support someone I cared about who had been unpersoned and I wasn't sufficiently charismatic and diplomatic to avoid the landmines which trying to do that entailed, thus I ended up stepping on them and also being labeled a toxic, manipulative, abusive, problematic person.

I'm not going to talk about the specifics of that situation. Come find me in person if you really want to talk about it, but it's been talked about to death at this point and I'd rather just get on with my life.

But what I want to talk about here, is the fear the comes from being the target of one of these mobs, what it actually does to a person. Having someone willing to pick through hundreds of old Facebook posts for problematic things they can snip out of context and use as ammunition in the process of agitating for your ostracization, going from being able to speak freely, and just apologize if you made a mistake, to suddenly every error from high school going forward becoming potential evidence that you suffer some fundamental defect in personhood that makes you dangerous and untrustworthy. The sudden appearance of people willing to narrativize you as "problematic/toxic/abusive/dangerous" in a way that those traits become your core features, and the rest of your humanity is discarded so you can be treated like a monster to be defeated, (in return for social capital for the monster slayers of course).

"But Shiloh, actually bad people are *actually bad*, and we shouldn't let them exist in our society of good people who would never do such things, that would just let them prey on good people."

Ahem going for the eugenics angle I see. Okay, but people who do bad things are still peopl–

"And the only reason you'd be defending abusers is if you're secretly abusive too."

And then we come to the second part of it, which is the transmissibility of sin. Something fascinating I watched happen was a sort of *six degrees of separation from sin* game played, where not only was the abusive person I was defending unpersoned, but for defending them I was, and then people who *defended me* also became potential targets. This transmissibility factor, which was sometimes described as a 'memetic contagion' was often ascribed to the people being targeted, which said we had some sort of memetic virus with which we were manipulating people's morals and ideals to our benefit, and that anyone who spent a good deal of time with us, or who saw our perspective, was potentially infected with these bad memes as well. Disagreeing with the mob about who to unperson meant you also should be unpersoned.

I well don't want to unperson anyone. I don't want to describe anyone as

> "a limp vessel through which some dread spider is thrusting its pedipalps"

The easy way out of the moral situation when you find yourself near to someone who did something *actually bad* is to just stop actually viewing them in the same category of personhood, thus protecting the category itself, and you, from wrongdoing. But doing this has potentially really dangerous consequences.

First, it makes it really easy to do horrifically fucked up things to people while claiming they deserve it because they're *bad*. With very few exceptions, every genocide, hate crime, and purge of undesirables that has occurred historically has been motivated by the idea that the people being targeted are *actually bad* and thus whatever you do to them, whatever you inflict upon them, is justified on the grounds of justice and utilitarianism. You're *protecting people* from them.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it destroys our concept of universalism and promotes a sort of self-reinforcing no-true-Scotsman-esque standard of humanity that makes it very hard to acknowledge and address wrongdoings of members of the tribe until they've become completely egregious and outrageous, at which point the tribe is exonerated and the offending party is ostracized on the grounds that the exiled member is clearly not actually a person but a limp vessel through which some dread spider is thrusting its pedipalps. By creating standards like these, it becomes impossible to have any sort of spectrum of accountability between "exile the spider" and "lovingly accept the human."

It's much harder to acknowledge someone's sin, and still see them as a person. Newsflash, humanity is far from perfect. There's lots of sin everywhere. People are being murdered and tortured and raped and killed *right now,* as you read these very lines, and *people* are the ones doing the murdering and torturing and raping and killing. <u>There is not a separate genus of dread spiders wearing human skins committing all the atrocities, there are *just people.*</u> There is no categorical protection which you can invoke to protect yourself from the possibility of ever becoming them and by *trying* to create that categorical protection you shield yourself from the possibility of noticing that what you're doing might itself be wrong.

Anyway, that's my long rant against unpersoning and exile as solutions in general. I think it's telling that I still feel the need to defend my past actions to some degree like that and to be honest I'm fairly sure some people will still just see me as one of the spiders regardless. Too much spider empathy, clearly an arachnid.

I shouldn't have to justify my desire to not unperson people, but here we are.

That's the fear though, the fear is *why* I feel the need to justify myself, even though I know that no one really cares what I have to say on the matter. I certainly don't think this post is going to *convince* anyone to stop doing unpersoning if they've gotten in the habit of doing it. But it's still important for me to say that I have *actual reasons* for what I do, for how I act morally and I stand by those reasons. Because I'm afraid if I don't, and potentially even though I do have those reasons, I will be lumped in with the monsters for not falling in line against them.

Being unpersoned, being treated like some dangerous thing to be disposed of like radioactive waste, is a horrifying thing to experience, and just being near to the blast when it happened was enough to leave mental scars in the form of this new fear. The

fear of the mob coming and putting stickers up around town saying I'm abusive, and calling my workplace and trying to get me fired, and losing many of the people close to me.

Up until things finally began stabilizing into a new equilibrium within the last few months, I had basically been experiencing constant if low-grade trauma, locked into a state of fear and threat. During that time, I've been hurt deeply and have hurt others as I flailed around in pain. I've been desperate, and needy, and clingy, and ended up developing a lot of bad habits and coping mechanisms to deal with the long-running trauma and pain I was experiencing, which I am still in the process of stripping back out.

Enough things happened that if someone wanted to, they could make a case that I too am some sort of dread spider thrusting its pedipalps. Dangerous, untrustworthy. Someone better off removed before I did something *really* egregious.

And sure, I'm not the person I want to be, and I'm probably not the person I depict myself as. I haven't been as good, as kind, as mindful, as empathic, or as respectful as I aspire to be. But still, I aspire. To do good, to be good, to spread good in the world. Despite everything, I still think the world is beautiful, and I want it to survive, and improve, and endure. I want humanity to survive and thrive and win the cosmic inheritance hanging nightly above our heads. I want us to spread to every corner of the sky and outnumber the stars. I don't want to hurt anyone, I don't want to compete with anyone, I want us all to make it.

I don't want the fear to win, I don't want to let it clip my wings. The desire to help build a better world feels like a part of me, the desire grows out of emotion, not out of calculation. When people are in pain, it hurts, and I want them to not be in pain.

All I can do is keep trying my hardest, and so that's what I intend to do, come what may of it.