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Unity through unexpected means

Not many can say that they befriended a Klansmen, even fewer can say that they were the reason a Klansman abandoned their racist beliefs. Meet Daryl Davis, a Black jazz musician who goes around befriending KKK members and collects the robes of those who decide to leave the Klan; however, that wasn’t Daryl Davis’ goal. He initially just wanted to understand how anyone could hate him without even knowing him. He couldn’t comprehend how a person could be deemed lesser from another person based solely on the color of his skin. From that point on Daryl Davis began learning as much as he could about the history of white supremacy and the KKK until he decided that there’s no one better to ask than a KKK leader. Davis treated the Klansmen fairly with respect when no one else would, as a result he earned their respect. His goal is that we all could live together in harmony, despite our disagreements. I believe that Daryl Davis is motivated by achieving fair treatment between people, so that a common understanding and respect between everyone can be established

Before I delve any deeper, I should introduce Daryl Davis by talking about his early life and understanding what motivated him to start his journey. Daryl Davis was the son of a foreign service agent, therefore he spent most of his childhood outside the US, going to a school with other ambassador children from all over the world, however when he returned to the US things changed from multicolor to black and white. His first encounter with racism happened when he participated in a parade march as a boy scout where he was the only person being hit by rocks and empty bottles. Daryl Davis didn’t believe the explanation his parents gave him, that some people hated him purely because the color of his skin, since he was raised in a setting with people of all colors getting along, so the concept of racism was incomprehensible to him. This encounter planted the seed that will later motivate him to begin his journey with the question, “How can you hate me when you don’t even know me?”. Throughout the years Daryl Davis has met numerous KKK members, attending their rallies, and in some cases, he even helped them out when no one would, like testifying for them or lending them his bus. It takes a lot of courage for Daryl Davis to walk in the dragon’s den and do what he does, but by doing that he has a earned their respect. Daryl Davis has mentioned before that his main goal was never to seek out white supremacists and change their beliefs, he wants to communicate with them and understand why they disagree with him, he listens to them and treats them with respect. Its only after befriending him that they understand he is not much different from them; thus, abandoning their old ideals.

Currently, Daryl Davis continues to travel around the country and give out lectures, talking about his experiences with the KKK and how to “convert” a Klansmen. Daryl Davis’ lectures share a common theme which involves understanding and respecting your adversary. He is a firm believer of free speech, so he thinks everybody should have the right to speak their mind, further explaining that “When two enemies are talking, they are not fighting”. Daryl Davis wanted to emphasize that if you disagree with a group, no good would be achieved by preaching to people who already agree with what you say, you have to communicate with those who oppose you to understand each other and find a common ground, without necessarily having to agree with each other. Daryl Davis believes that hate stems from fear of the unknown and by achieving the mutual respect and understanding, that unprecedented fear can be eliminated .Not only is Daryl Davis motivated by achieving the fair and equal treatment between races, he also feels motivated by giving people a fair chance to express their opinion, no matter who they are.

During my research on Daryl Davis I got exposed to a lot of KKK material, having watched documentaries and read multiples articles about them, I’ve learned that there is more to the KKK than I initially thought. There are multiple sub-groups of the KKK with considerably different beliefs, for example the traditionalist American knights (TAK) lead by the imperial wizard Frank, don’t condone violence against other races and they distance themselves from Hitler and Nazism; on the other hand, throughout the documentary accidental courtesy we meet KKK groups who want to start a “Race War” and believe in everything Hitler stood for. However, all KKK groups and white supremacists have one thing in common which a strong sense of nationalism and tradition, believing that the white race is in danger because of the racial mixing. I’d argue that they are motivated by their sanctity moral foundation, because they want the white race to remain pure, untainted by the other “inferior” races. So how does Daryl Davis, a man married to a white woman, approach these people? I think he used the divide in ideology between the white nationalist groups to form bonds with some of the Klansmen, thus enabling them to see how unjust and unfair their beliefs are, ultimately breaking the ideals that have been cemented into their mind. However, Daryl Davis did mention those who would “go to their grave being hateful” which Pete Simi explains in his research paper “Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists.”. He talked about the difficulty past white supremacist face in abandoning deep cemented ideologies of white supremacy. Simi described it as an addiction, a lingering unwanted feeling that’s triggered by environmental factors.

There are multiple arguments that can be brought up against my topic, one of which suggests that Daryl Davis might instead be motivated by the Sanctity foundation. Daryl Davis undoubtedly appreciates the equal treatment of people; therefore, he’d want to protect the sanctity of human life and dignity. Daryl Davis could’ve also been appalled by the degrading treatment black people have suffered throughout America’s history, leading him to search for an answer as to why anyone would do this. This argument can be backed by the fact that Daryl Davis care’s a lot about US history and the need to preserve it. He once stated that “We don’t burn our history, the good the bad and the ugly.” He even wants to start a museum using all the KKK memorabilia that he collected over the years, because he wants future generations to learn about their past so that history doesn't repeat itself.

Another major argument is that by going around and be friending KKK members, Daryl Davis could be aiding the cause he claims to oppose or that methods aren’t efficient enough. Mark Potok, who appeared as a Mount critic in Daryl Davis’ documentary, argued with Daryl Davis That the progress he's making is far too slow and sometimes we can't afford to wait that long. Mark Potok later wrote in article for The Daily Beast discussing the actions of Daryl Davis. he emphasized that Daryl Davis shows support to KKK members who have murdered people and show no sign of redemption. Potok even brought up the case of Frank Ancona, the KKK leader who gave Davis a “Certificate of friendship” for helping the Klan. Davis commented that he thinks Ancona will leave the Klan soon; however, he was murdered in early 2017. Daryl Davis has also faced a lot of criticism for trying to challenge Klansman’s racist beliefs without antagonizing them. His mellow approach has also garnered the attention of black lives matter activist, Kwame Rose. The exchange between Rose and Davis was the most heated in the documentary, Rose accused Davis of celebrating white supremacist past and argued that his effort over the years would have been put to better use if he had helped his own community.

Even though some of these arguments are valid, they left out key components making their argument in complete. You can raise an argument that Davis could be motivated by any of the moral foundations, yet him being mostly motivated by the fairness foundation holds the strongest grounds. Davis has stated he believes that music has the power to bring people together. it's a point that he brought up many times during his documentary and lectures. Meaning, Davis wasn't only interested in achieving equality between the races, he also wanted to unite them. He advocated that for us to move forward as a nation, we all need to work together and get along with each other. Mark Potok brings up valid points that there are some people who are unsalvageable, and Davis agrees with him, But Daryl Davis isn't wasting his time. He has showed multiple instances of people abandoning their racist beliefs, one of whom is Bob white, a man who has served a total of 7 years in prison on different occasions for assaulting and conspiring against black people. Davis reached out to him in prison and they became friends, White later attended Davis’ wedding.

The tension that arose Between rose and Davis is understandable, since at first glance they saw him as a traitor; however, the two men got to know each other and were able understand each other’s point of view even if they don’t agree on everything. This was Daryl Davis’ approach throughout his journey. He never set out to change anybody, he only wanted to find an answer to his question, and those who couldn’t answer it ended up converting by themselves. You can summarize his message in a beautiful quote from him “We are living in Space Age times, but there are too many of us still thinking with Stone Age minds.” We are plagued by the same issues we had in the past and no amount of new technologies would change it. To break the cycle, we need to learn to coexist with each other, one step at a time.

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