

Break out of groupthink to embrace freedom of speech

Written by



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Free speech is a basic tenet of freedom in our country and sets us apart from many other societies in the world.

However, a disturbing trend has been emerging. Students at several colleges across the country are resorting to unruly protests, shouting down learned speakers and even resorting to violence to shut down free speech.

Let's face it, we don't want to hear from people we don't like or with whom we disagree. Yet they have the right to speak their minds without facing bullying behavior or even violence.

Historically, many colleges, such as the University of California, Berkeley, have been the ones fighting for free speech. But the anti-free-speech activism at these same colleges is headed down a troubling road. Disruptive and violent protests are sparked by activists with questionable intentions and enabled by people willing to follow their lead — in other words, groupthink.

To be clear, groups themselves are fine and a great way to organize people for a common purpose. The problem arises when people blindly follow the lead of another person, especially if the underlying motivation of that person is anger, fear or hate. The followers in this group don't question the actions of the group at large. If these groups are allowed to grow and get bigger through groupthink, society will suffer.

So, what can we do?

First, we have to accept and see ourselves and others as individuals, not broad labels based on our appearance or beliefs, or anything else for that matter. People are individuals, with their own experiences, thoughts and ideas.

As a scientist and engineer, when a problem seems overwhelming and complex, I always look for foundational reality in nature. It is nature's reality that humans were never designed to be the same. Not by the color of our skin, not by our religion, not by our wealth, not by our job and so on. The proof comes in the form of a simple fingerprint, each unique.

How much more complex is our brain neurology and our cultural and personal experiences, compared with our simple fingerprints?

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The second reality is that we are all flawed in some way, or many ways. No human being is immune from this reality. Some would have us believe they are all-knowing, but we know better.

The third reality is that we all have free will. Some believe that we are trapped by our surroundings and culture and are not allowed to exercise our free will. But the truth is we U.S. citizens are free to think for ourselves and do what we think is right, or wrong or anywhere in between, assuming we don't hurt others.

Thus, all human beings have three things in common: We are all unique, we are all flawed and we all have free will. These are the most basic realities about human beings, regardless of circumstances or beliefs.

We have the right and the duty to question the actions of ourselves and the groups we choose to associate with because they are led by human beings. Even loving, well-intentioned leaders can unintentionally blur the line between love, anger, fear and hate.

So, what can we do?

Thinking for ourselves, and not getting caught up in groupthink, is a good start. We can overcome this anti-free-speech challenge by building on one of the great principles of our society: to speak freely without being harmed.

Wouldn't it be interesting if the individuals supporting the anti-free-speech movement began questioning themselves and their leaders, and decided that free speech is essential to an open, democratic society? I hope this happens, because the very future of America depends on it.

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